

Ski Valley decision upheld; bike trail is first priority

By Matthew van Buren

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Taos Ski Valley Chief Operating Officer Gordon Briner said employees are preparing for a busy summer following news that proposed projects will be allowed to proceed.

Carson National Forest's decision to allow a variety of projects to go ahead at Taos Ski Valley has been upheld, according to information from the Forest Service. The approved projects aim to make Taos Ski Valley more competitive. They include new lifts and gladed areas, a snow tubing center, a snowshoeing "Adventure Center," mountain bike trails, lift upgrades and parking lot reconfiguration.

Briner said the Ski Valley's "first and primary focus" will be completing a mountain bike trail from the top of Lift 1 to the bottom of Lift 1.

"Our hope is to have that rideable by July 4," he said.

Briner said the second priority will be the snow tubing area outlined in the Master Development Plan.

"We would do that later in the summer, after the mountain bike trail was completed," he said.

Taos Ski Valley's third priority will be to "start the glading process," Briner said. The plan calls for thinning to take place on 72 acres in two areas known as the Wild West and Minnesota glades.

Briner said staff will be doing some test skiing and surveying terrain in the areas this winter, and decisions about where to begin the glading projects will be made based on that information. He said a snowshoeing trail could also be ready by the winter of 2013-2014, depending on the progress Ski Valley employees are able to make on other elements of the plan.

Briner said the mountain bike trail is expected to take much of the trail crew's time and effort next year, and other projects will likely commence after the trail is complete.

The proposals that have proven most controversial among members of the public are proposed chairlifts to Kachina Peak and the West Basin. Briner said the Ski Valley is looking at the Main Street Lift to Kachina Peak "in a fairly specific way," in terms of getting cost estimates and having survey work done. He said decisions about the proposed lift will be made as that information becomes available and will also depend on how this winter goes.

Then-acting forest supervisor Diana Trujillo signed a record of decision approving the projects in August. The Forest Service subsequently received three appeals, which were reviewed by its Regional Office in Albuquerque.

The appeals focused primarily on potential impacts to wildlife and adjacent wilderness areas. Appeals filed by El Prado residents Patrick Grace and Emily Sadow were withdrawn prior to the Regional Office's order upholding Carson National Forest's decision.

Joanie Berde, with Llano based group Carson Forest Watch, filed the third appeal. She said the Regional Office's decision is disappointing and threatens to take "one more bite" out of Northern New Mexico's backcountry.

"It's just discouraging," she said.

Berde said she is particularly concerned for species such as the white-tailed ptarmigan and the pine marten; she said the approved projects — particularly the new lifts — could negatively impact their ever shrinking habitat.