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Regarding the 2018 Grand Targhee resort expansion plan,

The USDA Forest Service should of course examine the immediate environmental and recreational impacts of the proposal plan, including wildlife habitat displacement, water consumption and sewage treatment, viewshed concerns in Teton Canyon, and the effects on human-powered backcountry recreation. However, it needs to also carefully analyze and anticipate the larger socio-economic impacts on the residents of Teton valley, Idaho.

Based on the scale of the permit area expansion and infrastructure development proposed, it seems obvious that Grand Targhee management is making a bid for true destination-resort status. A 50% or more increase in developed skiable terrain and seven additional chair lifts, along with the previously approved base area and lodging / housing development, could more than double skier numbers and turn Grand Targhee into a resort comparable to Jackson Hole Mountain Resort. With the recent marketing of ski industry discount “super passes” (Ikon, Epic, Mountain Collective), Targhee will likely become another major stop on the Wasatch-Jackson Hole-Big Sky circuit.

Already, Teton Valley, Idaho is facing a labor shortage, made worse by increasingly unaffordable housing. A just-released real estate marker report states that home prices are up 22% over this time in 2019, with the average home price now more than $500,000. Rent on a one-bedroom apartment regularly exceeds $1,000 / month. Historically low Idaho wages, especially for tourism-based service jobs, have not come close to keeping up. More and more service, retail and even local government workers are commuting to the Valley from Rexburg and surrounding towns, while half of Teton Valley workers commute to Jackson, Wyoming seeking better wages. Retail businesses sometimes shut down due to a lack of staffing. A speculative real estate boom, triggered by a huge Targhee expansion, could wildly exacerbate these trends.

Grand Targhee ownership has been unable to finance already approved infrastructure--such as the Peaked lift, base area redevelopment, or improved lodging facilities--for more than a decade. Clearly, they are hoping to enhance the value of the resort, with the intention of either selling it to larger corporate interests or attracting deeper pocketed partners. BDT Capital Partners, a multi-billion dollar investment firm, recently purchased Tributary Residential Resort and Golf Course in Driggs, hinting that well-funded interests are bullish in local property investment. A destination resort-level ski area would be a boon for such speculation, but would inevitably push housing costs further out of reach for local workers.

Teton Valley locals regularly see the familiar signs of ski-town gentrification already: crowded trailheads, more private jet traffic at the Driggs airport, high-end SUVs and RVs with out-of-state license plates, and a proliferation of short-term rentals at the expense of long-term housing. An expanded Targhee will accelerate those trends, while necessitating new public infrastructure that local taxpayers cannot afford. While some will see this expansion as good for business, it could be disastrous to the fabric of the Teton Valley community. Appropriate housing and transportation resources--along with adequate revenue-sharing between Teton County, Wyoming and Teton County, Idaho--should be required as conditions of approval.

Ski resort boom-town development is hardly a new phenomenon, so if Grand Targhee become a corporate player, the future trajectory of Teton Valley is not hard to predict. A detailed examination of likely community impacts should be integral to the Forest Service's analysis. Housing, labor and infrastructure impacts must be adequately addressed. Forest Service lands should not be used as a tool to privatize ski industry and real estate profits while socializing the costs of resort development.