﻿

﻿October 15, 2020

Mel Bolling

C/O Jay Pence, Teton Basin District Ranger

Teton Basin Ranger District

P.O. Box 777

Driggs, ID. 83401

Re: Grand Targhee Master Development Plan Projects

Thank you for this opportunity to provide comments regarding the Grand Targhee Master Development Plan Projects. Please consider my comments during the scoping period. As a long time, Teton Valley Idaho homeowner and Grand Targhee Skier I am opposed to the Grand Targhee Development Plan Projects. 

I'd like the Caribou-Targhee N.F to address and answer the many questions regarding the proposed Grand Targhee Development Plan Projects. I'm concerned about this Major development proposal that will have a wide range of impacts. I'm concerned about a range of impacts that would occur within the proposed Special Use Permit boundary expansion area and within the current Special Use Permit boundaries. I'm concerned about an effect on natural resources and visitors within the nearby Jedediah-Smith Wilderness and Grand Teton National Park. This GTR proposal will undoubtedly affect the surrounding communities (Alta, Driggs, Victor, Tetonia) and the region it serves.

To be more specific, I'm asking that these questions be answered, and these concerns be addressed during this scoping process;

In a September 22, 2020 letter to GTR regarding the Master Development Plan projects, the Caribou-Targhee N.F. points out that a Special Use Permit area expansion is not possible without first amending the 1997 Forest Plan. Please explain how this can be done simultaneously. How can a change to 1,200 acres be made from 2.1.2: Visual Quality Maintenance to 4.2: Special Use Permit Recreation Sites without first updating the forest wide Caribou-Targhee N.F. Master Plan? What is the compelling reason to proceed in this manner?

I feel additional information and public review is needed before amending and approving a GTR Special Use Permit boundary change. Additional information should include, a 3-5 year snowpack and weather conditions analysis of the Mono Trees (base elevation approx. 7600') and the South Bowl area, prior to requesting terrain expansion. I’m asking that GTR annual skier use data from the past 10 winters including winter 19/20 to explain the "address growth" statement (page 9 -GTR MDP). GTR skier use survey data is also needed to explain the "shortcomings in their terrain offerings" and, "must continue to develop and improve its terrain" statements. (Page10 GTR-MDP, major opportunities identified) Has a skier use survey been conducted? Please provide the past 3-5 years of written visitor comments, suggestions and complaints that would have supported GTR planning efforts. Upon reviewing the 2018 GTR-Master Development Plan, I've not seen evidence to support the SUP Boundary change to add the 1,200 acre, South Bowl and Mono Trees area. The data shows (page 8-GTR MDP) a slow increase in skier use. (Up 33,426/140 user days=239 skiers per day increase in 5 years). 

Compel Grand Targhee to demonstrate full use of their existing permit area. Since 1995, GTR has chosen not to expand and build the Peaked Mountain lift. Rather, GTR has chosen to offer an exclusive Cat-Skiing operation for decades. First compel GTR to build the Peaked Chairlift and open the 600 acres of advanced-intermediate and expert terrain. Then add the North Boundary and Crazy Horse lifts to improve the skier flow and experience.

Interim Cat-Skiing in the South Bowl would only serve to exclude public access into the Caribou-Targhee National Forest. The current Peaked Mountain Cat-Skiing operation is a prime example of what has essentially been a closed to public area for decades. A much better approach is an Open-Boundary policy on Peaked Mountain that would provide side-country skier access into the South Bowl, Mono Trees and the nearby North Fork areas, without the need for chairlifts, roads, heavy machinery or a SUP boundary change. GTR could seek a guided skiing service into the South Bowl area not do Cat-Skiing. (Page 28-GTR MDP, Terrain Variety and Natural Environments)

If the newly opened Peaked Mountain and its steep North cliffs, access to Mary's and the Out-of-bounds side country is not enough for skiers of all abilities, then there are many other nearby options. Jackson Mountain Resort, Snow King, Big Sky, Bridger Bowl, Sun Valley all offer different skiing opportunities that Grand Targhee may not. 

Does GTR have data supporting the need for beginner and terrain park night skiing? How many visitors have commented about the lack of on hill restaurants? Very bright night skiing lights will Impact the night sky and restaurants on ridge lines will impact the visual quality of the mountain. This is a major concern. It's a fact that our night sky is a rare resource so it must be protected. Buildings could be placed below ridge lines at mid mountain or near the base of lifts where more construction space may be available, and where water wells and septic systems can be viable.

What other adverse impacts will occur if the SUP boundary is allowed to expand into the South Bowl and Mono Trees area? What will be affected when adding 4 new chair lifts with an 1800 person per hour capacity? What will be affected by heavy construction machinery, grooming machinery and Cat-Skiing operations? To open the South Bowl area to the public, Avalanche Mitigation will be needed each day it snows (500" on avg. each season). What effect will detonating explosives on a regular basis have on the surrounding public use area within wilderness? What animals will be affected by explosives within the North Fork of Teton Canyon and within the Jedediah-Smith Wilderness? (See page 20 GTR MDP- Northern Rockies Lynx Management. See Jackson Hole Alliance website- Bighorn Sheep winter habitat. See Greater Yellowstone Grizzly Bear management).

I'm also concerned that Mule Deer migration corridors may be affected. Do Mule Deer currently and/or historically migrate within or adjacent to the proposed South Bowl expansion area or within the North Fork of Teton Canyon? If so, what effects will this have on this critical wildlife corridor? What adverse effects will this have on Bighorn Sheep. Past studies (Jackson Hole Alliance - Bighorn Sheep Studies) of potential winter habitat indicated that this is Bighorn habitat. Where are Bighorn Sheep wintering in or nearby the North Fork of Teton Canyon?

I also want an explanation provided for wildlife winter use area closures. Why are certain south facing slopes closed (required or voluntarily) to protect wildlife in Fox and Darby Canyons and Mill Creek but not in others? Why isn’t the same public use closure prescription applied to all of Teton Canyon? What other closures are in effect?   
Do deer, elk, moose, bighorn sheep, Lynx and an occasional wolverine utilize the winter grazing and travel corridors of the South Slopes of Teton Canyon? How would these animals be affected by noise, tree cutting, people and vehicles?

Insufficient Parking. What is the long-range parking plan? Parking is not made clear in the 2018 GTR Master Development Plan. If the base area is fully built out with lodging and housing, where will parking be located and double in size?

What effects will there be on Teton Canyon winter trailhead? Will it continue to grow as a hub for snowmobile shuttles for backcountry skiers exiting Grand Targhee?

I’m asking that my questions and comments be considered during the scoping period and going forward with this EIS the process.

Thank You,

Rich Baerwald