



March 30, 2021

Crystal Powell
Sandia District Ranger
Attn: Bryan West
Cibola National Forest
11776 Highway 337
Tijeras, NM 87059

Re: Sandia Peak Ski Area Mountain Coaster Scoping

Dear Ms. Powell:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on the Sandia Peak Ski Area Mountain Coaster (coaster). On behalf of the undersigned organizations, we are submitting these comments on the scoping document for your consideration.

The Sandia crest is one of the most popular natural destinations for residents of central New Mexico for day hikes, wildlife viewing, mountain biking, alpine skiing, cross-country skiing, and taking in a uniquely spectacular view of Albuquerque. We saw over the past year how crucial outdoor natural spaces can be. As New Mexicans begin to emerge from the year-long quarantine necessitated by a global pandemic we expect this reinvigorated love for the outdoors to remain strong. This is particularly true as the New Mexico Outdoor Recreation Division gets more firmly established and begins serving our communities. All of this is to say that the Cibola National Forest must carefully analyze any and all proposals on the forest, especially those that will substantially and permanently alter the natural landscape.

Preliminary Matters

We have identified several issues that the Cibola National Forest (CNF) must address in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the coaster and provide some detail on those below. Step one of the approval process for this project, however, demands addressing the legality of a mountain-top coaster in the first place. The Ski Area Recreational Opportunity Enhancement Act was passed, in part, to grant the Secretary of Agriculture the authority to “authorize a ski area permittee to provide such other seasonal or year-round natural resource-based recreational activities and associated facilities (in addition to skiing and other snow-sports) on National Forest System land[.]” 16 U.S.C. § 497b(c)(1). However, these activities must “harmonize with the natural environment.” 16 U.S.C. § 497b(c)(2)(B)(i). The Act expressly prohibits the use of ski areas on Forest Service land for amusement parks. 16 U.S.C. § 497b(c)(4)(E).

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We are aware that similar coasters have been constructed and operate on other National Forests, but the CNF still must address whether this project comports with the laws and regulations governing Forest Service ski areas.

The last preliminary matter we would like the CNF to address prior to approving the construction and operation of the coaster is confirmation that the Special Use Permit allows this kind of project. The scoping materials are silent to this question, but if the coaster is not permitted as part of the SUP then it should not be approved at this time.

An Environmental Impact Statement is Required

The CNF must review this proposal through an EIS. The public interest in this proposal, the short- and long-term increase in vehicular traffic, the long-term increase in visitors during the ski off-season, the potential for substantial and permanent impacts to wildlife and recreational opportunities in the area, the potential climate change impacts, and the overall cost of constructing a mountain-top coaster cumulatively make clear that this project qualifies as a major federal action which will significantly impact the quality of the human environment.

Regulations dictate that when a cause-effect relationship exists between a proposed action and one or more “resource conditions,” a categorical exclusion (CE) should not be used. 36 C.F.R. § 220.6(b)(2). There are at least two resource conditions present that will be directly effected by the coaster: federally listed threatened or endangered species, and Congressionally designated Wilderness. 36 C.F.R. § 220.6(b)(1)(i)-(ii). Additionally, without Tribal and Pueblo consultation, the CNF cannot determine the presence or lack of presence of religious or cultural sites. *See* 36 C.F.R. § 220.6(b)(1)(vi). These three resource conditions, and the direct cause-effect relationship between constructing and operating a coaster whose impacts include increased noise and visitors, along with the public concern already raised, indicate a need for a level of analysis deeper than achieved by issuing a CE.

Additionally, we are concerned about the long-term use of the ski area as climate change impacts continue to increase in severity and volatility. The CNF needs to conduct an analysis of the long-term viability of the ski area before approving construction of this coaster. If skiing in the Sandias will face dwindling numbers as winters get shorter and snow events become more scarce and less impactful, and the coaster becomes the primary recreational purpose, the project cannot be approved. *See* 16 U.S.C. § 497b(c)(5) (“The Secretary [of Agriculture] may not authorize any activity or facility...if the Secretary determines that the authorization of the activity or facility would result in the primary recreational purpose of the ski area permit to be a purpose other than skiing and other snow-sports.”).

We are disappointed and concerned that the CNF intends to approve such a substantial project, which will have immediate and long-term impacts on many resources in the area, through

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application of a CE. The project area must include New Mexico State Road 536 as well as a buffer zone along the State Road corridor to fully analyze the impacts to wildlife and recreational opportunities of the construction and operation of this coaster. The CNF must also conduct a full analysis of the noise impacts to wildlife and recreationists - specifically to the opportunities for solitude offered by the surrounding Wilderness Area.

We are confident that after reviewing scoping comments, the CNF will see that a deeper analysis is required.

Consultation with Other Agencies and Tribes

The CNF should consult with all necessary state and federal agencies before approving construction of this project. These agencies should include at least: United States Fish and Wildlife Service, United States Geological Survey, New Mexico Department of Transportation, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and New Mexico Environment Department.

Additionally, the CNF must consult with interested Tribes and Pueblos, including at least the Pueblos of Sandia and Isleta. There is a high likelihood that cultural artifacts are present in the project area and full tribal consultation is the only way to be sure that these artifacts are not lost or damaged.

Increased Traffic

Construction and operation of a coaster at Sandia Peak poses serious short-term and permanent traffic concerns. The CNF should work with the New Mexico Department of Transportation to conduct a traffic analysis so the full impacts can be realized and presented to the public for comment. Construction materials and apparatus will need to be brought to Sandia Peak, presumably through the use of heavy trucks on New Mexico State Road 536. State Road 536 is a mountain road, with many switchbacks and blind curves, and presents a challenge that must be addressed.

How will the increased heavy truck traffic impact visitors and wildlife? What precautions and mitigation measures will be put into place to ensure catastrophes are unlikely but are quickly dealt with if they do? Is State Road 536 even designed for such heavy trucks or will significant reconstruction, repair, and maintenance need to be undertaken? How will that work be paid for? The lack of specificity in the project proposal is concerning; the public is frankly incapable of providing useful scoping comments without knowing how the construction of the coaster will occur and what methods will be used both for transporting materials and actual construction on-site. This is yet another indication that a categorical exclusion is inappropriate for this project.

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Beyond the short-term concerns of increased traffic due to construction, we are also concerned about the increased traffic due to a new attraction available year-round. The Sandia Peak already attracts visitors year-round, of course, but the mountain-coaster will significantly increase visitor numbers during the spring, summer, and fall. Again, we urge the CNF to work with NMDOT to conduct traffic analysis and determine what upgrades and maintenance will need to be done to State Road 536. Roadwork is a reasonably foreseeable impact of this project. We are aware that the anticipated access point for coaster-goers is the Sandia Tram year-round and the ski lifts during ski season, but this assumption does not excuse the CNF from fully analyzing the increased traffic along State Road 536 from recreationalists wanting to hike south from the parking lot at the Sandia Peak to the coaster.

Of course, with an increase in vehicular traffic comes an increase in the production of greenhouse gases. Per the Biden Administration's priorities, the CNF must conduct a full analysis of the climate change implications of this project. If the construction and operation of a mountain-top coaster will lead to a significant and localized increase in greenhouse gas production, perhaps it is not wise to permit the project to go forward.

While not necessarily a contributor to traffic, if helicopters will be used to bring construction materials to the project area, our concerns regarding noise and disturbance to local wildlife and recreationists remain. The fact that it is unclear how materials will be brought to the construction site is an indication that a CE is inappropriate for this project.

Recreation and Wilderness Concerns

The project area is popular among both hikers and mountain bikers who are used to the ski area being less busy during the off-season. This coaster will introduce a new disturbance to the area and as such will lead to recreational disturbance. A CE does not allow the kind of analysis necessary to insure that any impacts to recreational opportunities are minimal.

Similarly, a CE does not fully analyze the detrimental impacts of noise uniquely suffered by Congressionally designated Wilderness Areas. As the CNF knows, Wilderness Areas are designated when they, among other factors, offer opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation. The coaster will come as close as 200 feet to the Wilderness boundary, and with mechanical noise and the shouts of people riding the coaster there will surely be a loss of solitude felt by recreationists enjoying the Wilderness Area.

We note that the Forest Service's own Wilderness Stewardship Performance Guidebook and Wilderness Character Monitoring Technical Guide indicate need for an EIS. The WSP considers auditory encounters in the same manner it considers visual encounters. A coaster within 200 feet of Wilderness will certainly generate significantly more encounters and therefore directly and

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negatively impact solitude. This will result in a reduction in WSP points unless the CNF includes management directives and actions that will improve solitude. The WCM Technical Guide requires the CNF to take into account the remoteness from sights and sounds of human activity *outside* the Wilderness as a measure of the percentage of acres of Wilderness that are more than one half mile away from external developments. The threshold for change is 3%, but the public has no way to know if the CNF conducted this analysis and if so whether the impacts of the coaster on the Wilderness Area exceed the 3% threshold.

Viewshed Concerns

The construction and operation of this coaster will result in negative impacts to the viewshed from certain vantage points of Sandia Peak. The impacts analysis and review must ensure that any viewshed impacts comport with the 1985 Land and Resource Management Plan or the Land and Resource Management Plan as amended should the CNF finalize that process, as well as Agriculture Handbook 701.

Species Concerns

In addition to concerns arising from vehicular traffic increases, we are concerned about the increased human presence in the ski area during the off-season. Many wildlife species breed and brood during the ski off-season, and the increased human presence during this time will increase noise pollution and the chances of human-animal interaction. The impacts to species need to be fully analyzed and reasonable mitigation measures put into place, including limiting operations during breeding seasons of threatened and endangered species, or state species of concern.

A search of the project area using Fish and Wildlife Service's IPaC mapping tool shows that the following threatened or endangered species may be present: New Mexico meadow jumping mouse; Mexican spotted owl; Southwestern willow flycatcher; and Yellow-billed cuckoo. The FWS IPaC tool indicates the presence of several unlisted migratory bird species as well. The CNF must conduct consultation in accordance with the Endangered Species Act for any listed species in the project area before approving construction. A CE does not provide the level of analysis required by this project.

Tree Cutting Concerns

The construction of this coaster will require significant, as yet undetermined, cutting of trees in the project area. The public has a right to understand and provide comment on how many trees will be cut down, and if the ordinary restrictions prohibiting the cutting of old trees will be enforced. At a moment when the entire globe is battling the increasingly severe impacts of climate

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change, we have concerns about cutting any trees as any tree lost is a loss of carbon storage. This, too, indicates the need for an environmental impact statement.

Cave and Karst Concerns

While not extensive, there are caves in the Sandias which attract visitors and are crucial to cave-dwelling species. Of particular concern are the Embudo and Cat Track caves, near the ski area. Visits to these sites increase during the ski off-season. The CNF must conduct a full analysis of the impacts to cave and karst systems of construction and operation of the coaster.

Accessibility

The purpose and need statement included in the scoping document for this project asserts that this coaster is needed to allow for passive recreation opportunities at Sandia Peak. This is certainly a worthwhile goal, and we agree that our public lands are for everyone's enjoyment. In that vein, we encourage the CNF to analyze opportunities for making the coaster accessible to all, including people with a disability. This can be done, for example, by ensuring that pathways are constructed or improved in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and by requiring some percentage of cars to be wheelchair accessible.

Conclusion

The undersigned are not necessarily opposed to the Sandia Peak Mountaintop Coaster, but we are concerned that very important analyses will be overlooked should the CNF approve the project through the use of a CE. We urge the CNF to conduct or require an Environmental Impact Statement, or at the very least an Environmental Analysis, to ensure critical resources are not adversely impacted during construction and operation.

We are happy to further discuss any of the issues raised in this comment with representatives of the CNF. Please include this comment in the project record and include the undersigned in the list of interested parties.

Thank you,

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