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April 9, 2021

Via Email – cnfheli@usda.gov  
Cordova Ranger District  
Attn: Cordova Guided Heli-Ski Project  
P.O. Box 280  
612 Second Street  
Cordova, Alaska 99574

Re: Comments of Silverton Mountain Guides on Cordova Ranger District  
Scoping Notice and Notice of Intent to Prepare an Environmental  
Assessment for Guided Helicopter Skiing Project

Dear Cordova Ranger District:

I am commenting on behalf of Silverton Mountain Guides LLC (SMG) on the above-referenced scoping notice and notice of intent to prepare an environmental assessment (EA) that the Cordova Ranger District released for the guided helicopter skiing project. Please add these comments to the administrative record for the project and the EA, please add me to the mailing list for this project, and please email or mail me a copy of the EA and draft Decision Notice when it is available.

Interest of Silverton Mountain Guides in the Project

SMG is a highly qualified and experienced provider of guided helicopter skiing on federal and state public lands. I currently hold six Forest Service special use permits and Bureau of Land Management special recreation permits, under which I provides guided heli-skiing, including a term permit (SEW716) issued by the Seward Ranger District of the Chugach National Forest, and two-seasons of temporary special use permits (COR417) issued by the Cordova Ranger District, both of which are currently in effect within the Chugach National Forest. I have provided approximately 20,000 guided helicopter skiing service days with a perfect safety record, a record that is not matched by any permitted Alaska helicopter skiing operator.

SMG submitted an application for a special use permit in response to the prospectus for the project. The Cordova Ranger District informed SMG in a March 1, 2021 letter that SMG's application was not selected by the evaluation panel for further processing. SMG has separately appealed that decision under 36 C.F.R. Part 214 because the evaluation panel did not properly apply the selection criteria.

SMG submits these comments for two reasons. First, SMG has a concrete interest in providing guided helicopter skiing on Forest Service lands within the Chugach National Forest, elsewhere in Alaska and beyond. SMG has provided guided heli skiing within the Cordova Ranger District nearly every flyable calendar day during the months of March and April 2021 under its temporary permit. SMG is an affected stakeholder, and supports the Forest Service's development of appropriate protocols and conditions for permit holders, including the allocation of service days, conditions affecting access to habitat avoidance terrain, and permit stipulations affecting safety, the environment, and coordination among permit holders. The Cordova Ranger District's final decision notice based on the EA, resolution of these topics, and selection of permit conditions is likely to affect SMG, directly or indirectly.

Second, SMG has requested the Chugach Forest Supervisor to direct that SMG's application be considered for issuance of a term permit to provide guided helicopter skiing within the Cordova Ranger District at the conclusion of the decision making process the District has undertaken. SMG acknowledges the work of, and values its relationship with, the Cordova District Ranger and District personnel. SMG is hopeful that it will continue to partner with you in offering the highest quality guided permitted heli-skiing within the District for many years.

#### Additional Comments

SMG Supports the Project. SMG supports the Cordova Ranger District's goal of meeting the demand for guided helicopter skiing within the Cordova Ranger District. There is a concrete public demand for guided heli-skiing within the District, and SMG supports the District's intent to issue special use permits to as many as three qualified operators. There is also a demand for guided heli-skiing permits within the Cordova Ranger District among heli ski operators based on the attributes of District terrain. Lands within the Cordova Ranger District are unique and not like other terrain in southcentral Alaska. Even during extreme windy periods of northerly flow, which can result in firm snow, windslab, and unfavorable avalanche conditions in other areas in the region, terrain within the District typically maintains soft powder snow with favorable avalanche conditions. This factor creates a demand and need for heli-skiing within the Cordova Ranger District among heli-ski operators, who in turn, meet the increased public demand for heli-skiing.

SMG Supports Issuance of Permits to Three Qualified Operators. The Cordova Ranger District terrain identified in the scoping notice will accommodate three qualified operators. This has been proven the past two years via the temporary permits issued to three qualified operators who have proven to operate collaboratively and safely. Issuing three permits will benefit the public because each operator provides a significantly different experience and at a different price and different times of year. The operators will fly and ski at different times during the operating season and diversity of choice benefits the recreating public, who have the choice of participating in a way that best suits their needs. Three permitted operators will help the Cordova Ranger District achieve its Chugach Forest Plan goals of "connecting people to the outdoors" by "providing a diverse array of recreation opportunities." (FW-GL2-SOCIAL-DC-2, FW-GL2-REC-DC-3). SMG supports the District's issuance of heli-ski permits to three qualified operators for these reasons.

The Forest Service Should State that the Purpose and Need for the Project Includes Providing Guided Heli-Skiing Throughout the December 1 to April 30 Season. The scoping proposal states that the proposed use season is December 1 to April 30. That is appropriate, however consideration should be given to expand the use to also include the months of October, November, and May depending on snow conditions. In SMG's experience, there is a demand for guided heli-skiing within the Cordova Ranger District during the October through May time period. SMG is unique among permitted Alaska heli-ski operators because it works a longer season (October to late May) compared to other heli-ski operators that typically work a shorter season (late February/early March through April). The Forest Service should state in the EA that part of the purpose and need for the project is to provide guided heli-skiing to the public October to May, or at least throughout the December 1 to April 30 season identified in the scoping notice. The Forest Service should consider expanding the identified season to October 1 to May 31, depending on snow conditions. That purpose and need is consistent with the Chugach Forest Plan which directs the agency to provide a "diverse array of recreation opportunities by permitting businesses to provide guided recreation activities" within the Forest (FW-GL2-REC-DC-3), and to support "local communities" that "benefit economically and culturally from tourism opportunities that depend on the outstanding natural landscapes of" the Forest (FW-GL2, GW-GL2-SOCIAL-DC-4, FW-GL2-SOCIAL-DC-7). A longer operating season is consistent with this Chugach Forest Plan guidance, and would help achieve the stated goals of the project. The scoping notice stated that the District will use "key indicators" in its adaptive management strategies to allocate service days. The District should recognize that a valid "key indicator" is when, during the operating season, a permit holder plans to provide guided heli-skiing service days. Spreading those days out, rather than stacking them in a limited period, is a better strategy. That is another reason that the District should state that the purpose and need includes providing guided heli skiing throughout the entire operating season.

The Forest Service Should Issue Permits to Applicants that Will Provide Guided Heli Skiing Throughout the Entire Season, Not Just Late February into April. Given the District's stated goal of providing guided heli-skiing at least from December 1 through April 30, the District should issue permits to applicants that have a history of operating during that period. That would achieve the purpose and need for the EA and the project. Issuing permits only to heli-ski operators who operate in the typically limited window of late February into April would be far less effective at meeting the purpose and need, and far less effective at achieving the Chugach Forest Plan goals stated above. The Cordova Ranger District should issue permits to applicants that can operate during the full identified December 1 through April 30 season. This will provide a far greater opportunity for the public, especially Alaskans, to enjoy high-quality recreation on their public lands.

The Forest Service Should State that the Purpose and Need for the Project Includes Supporting Local Alaska Businesses and Economies. The scoping notice appropriately notes on page 4 that the Chugach Forest Plan identifies as a goal and desired condition "supporting rural economies both locally and regionally. Local communities benefit economically and culturally from tourism opportunities that depend on the outstanding natural landscapes of the Chugach National Forest." (FW-GL2, FW-GL2-SOCIAL-DC-4, FW-GL2-SOCIAL-DC-7). Consistent with those Forest Plan objectives, the Cordova Ranger District should state in the EA that the purpose and need for the project includes supporting local Alaska businesses and economies.

The District should follow that Forest Plan guidance in the purpose and need statement, and in selecting the applicants to which it awards heli-ski permits. The District should recognize that issuing permits to Alaskan-owned or managed applicants rather than out-of-state applicants is more consistent with the Chugach Forest Plan, and will provide far greater local economic benefits. Alaska based heli-ski operators have the ability to uniquely serve the Alaska community for a longer season than out of state transient operators.

SMG Supports the District's Intent to Develop a Plan for Coordination Among Permit Holders. The scoping notice states that the Forest Service will request permit holders to develop a multi-operator communications and dispute resolution plan. SMG supports this concept, and has significant experience coordinating, accommodating, and cooperating with other permitted heli-ski operators in shared terrain. SMG helped prepare the current USFS adopted existing multi-operator communications and dispute resolution plan used by the three operators utilizing the Cordova Ranger District heli terrain currently under temporary permits.

SMG Supports the District's Proposed Wildlife Permit Stipulations. SMG supports the wildlife permit stipulations identified on page 5 of the scoping notice. SMG supports the District's proposed permit stipulation that requires helicopters to maintain a minimum of ½ mile landing distance from observed wildlife, and the stipulation that allows heli skiing within potential goat habitat if no wildlife is observed. The Cordova Ranger District has wildlife habitat avoidance areas within the permitted heli skiing terrain. SMG supports stipulations that allow heli skiing within wildlife habitat avoidance areas if no wildlife is observed.

The Forest Service Should Take a Cautious Approach With Total Service Days. SMG supports the Cordova Ranger District's stated intent on page 1 of the scoping notice to authorize heli-ski service days "conservatively" with "a lower number of client days than requested by service providers." SMG encourages the District to award fewer service days than applicants may have requested on the high end in order to maintain the high-quality powder skiing resource that the Cordova Ranger District is known for. The District should aim for sustainable, high-quality guided heli skiing rather than low-quality, high-quantity guided heli skiing. This principle is embedded in and required by the Chugach Forest Plan, which favors "providing for sustainable levels of outfitter and guide services." (FW-GL2-SOCIAL-DC-7). Limiting the amount of annual service days across all permit holders is sustainable, will enhance public enjoyment by preserving outstanding snow conditions, and will keep potential cumulative impacts low via dispersed use. A cautious, conservative approach to the total service day allocation in the District will preserve the high-quality, sustainable guided heli ski experience for the public.

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On behalf of Silverton Mountain Guides LLC, thank you for this opportunity to comment.

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Sincerely,



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Aaron Brill  
Manager  
Silverton Mountain Guides LLC