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Request for Public Comments

Heli Ski Analysis, Cordova Area

This letter is in response to request for public input regarding Proposed Heliski Alternatives posted online on 22 July 2021.

The time and effort put into this analysis is much appreciated.

In general, I support Alternative 2, which provides areas for backcountry users adjacent to the highway, while restricting heliski operations in those areas. I feel it addresses many of the concerns expressed by backcountry users about the impact of such operations.

However, I am very concerned with the proposed helicopter flight paths that would allow flights to go directly over the range behind the Orca Lodge, then overfly the Power Creek Road, and then skirt along the edges of Eyak Lake.

Such overflights would be directly over popular recreational areas used by ice skaters, backcountry skiers, hikers, and sightseers, as well as residences in those areas. This is a highly accessible and very popular region for winter recreation.

For example, the ridge line directly above Orca Lodge includes popular skating and skiing in the Crater Lake bowl, as well as backcountry skiers traversing the ridge line to access the Hut on that trail system. I have overnighted there several times, and it is a superb skiing spot that should not be disrupted by overflights.

I am also particularly concerned about the idea of helicopters flying along the far edges of Eyak Lake and over the Queen’s Chair area, another very popular jXC, backcountry skiing, hiking, and ice skating area for many Cordovans. Plus many locals enjoy watching the swans from the parking area just this side of the Mile 5 Eyak River Bridge, and that area is also an access point for skiers heading up to ski the Queen’s Chair ridge line and bowl.

I suggest that flights from Orca be directed much further to the north, where they can then “dog leg” to the east near the upper edges of their proposed heliski terrain in Area 12. If the helicopters can fly high enough to access ski terrain in Area 12, they should surely be able to fly over mountains to get there.

Access to the Mile 13 airport should be by the same flight path currently used by other commercial airlines operating out of Eyak Lake.

There seems to be considerable helicopter traffic off the end of that runway throughout the summer, so flights in that manner would be nothing new. Again, altitude could be used to mitigate noise impact.

Regarding the lower reaches of Area 10, I would like to see an adjustment of the flight path to that region so it does not pass directly over the far end of Sheridan lake and outflow from Sherman Glacier. This is a very popular spot for ice skaters, accessed from the end of the Sheridan Glacier Road and trail system, as well as from the John Gores Road. The heliski flight in that lower corner would be in direct over such recreational users. Adjusting such flights to the east would resolve that conflict.

I would appreciate information on the number of flights anticipated per day, and the altitude at which they will be flying. Just how much traffic are we talking about?

I served in the U.S. Army at a helicopter base in Korea during the Vietnam Era, and have a rather vivid memory of the impact of overflights.

Perhaps some of these conflicts could be mitigated by requiring a significant altitude during heliski flights.

Again, thank you for the extensive analysis and detailed proposals, which include well-considered responses to public input.

Dick Shellhorn

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