



NEWS, OUTDOORS

Forest Service halts new Keystone chairlift after resort mistakenly builds road in protected tundra

Vail Resorts has apologized for the mistake, but the opening of Keystone's Bergman Bowl — a new 555-acre, 16-trail expansion that ranks one of the largest capital investment plans underway in the U.S. resort industry — could be delayed



Jason Blevins

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Construction crews have cleared trees at Keystone ski area as part of an expansion into the resort's Bergman Bowl, seen on July 28. (Hugh Carey, The Colorado Sun)

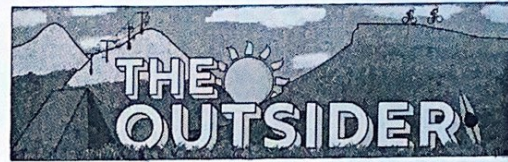
The U.S. Forest Service has halted construction of a new lift in Keystone after the resort mistakenly built a temporary road in protected alpine tundra.

Keystone has Forest Service permission to build a road to the bottom of its new Bergman Bowl chairlift and a temporary road higher in the bowl to access lift towers. Forest officials earlier this month saw construction crews plowing that temporary road beyond what was allowed, impacting alpine tundra and burying a stream with debris.

“We were surprised and disappointed to see this for sure,” said Scott Fitzwilliams, the supervisor of the White River National Forest who this month sent Keystone **a cease and desist letter** requiring the resort to suspend construction while the impacts of the mistake are measured.

“We deeply regret the impact this unauthorized construction activity has had on the environment that our team works carefully to protect every day,” reads a statement posted online July 27 by Keystone manager Chris Sorensen. “We take environmental protection and compliance extremely seriously and are committed to making this right.”

But making it right will take time and the suspension of construction and new restoration work could force Keystone to delay the opening of its 555-acre, 16-trail expansion with a six-passenger lift into Bergman Bowl, which was set to open this winter. The project ranks as one of the largest capital investment plans underway in the U.S. resort industry.



This story first appeared in **The Outsider**, the premium outdoor newsletter by Jason Blevins.

In it, he covers the industry from the inside out, plus the fun side of being outdoors in our beautiful state.

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Construction companies work to clear the forest for a new chairlift and ski runs as part of a 555-acre expansion at Keystone's Bergman Bowl, seen on July 28. The downed trees are stacked near the resort's Outpost restaurant. (Hugh Carey, The Colorado Sun)

The shutdown is a devastating blow to Vail Resorts, which last month had two planned lift upgrades at its Park City Mountain Resort **shut down by the town's planning commission.**

Combined with the company's **fight with the Town of Vail over a housing project**, the pain of this summer is mirroring last winter for Vail Resorts, when the company endured withering criticism as **a labor shortage left it struggling to fully open its ski areas.**

Fitzwilliams said the damage "is not a catastrophic ecological event." His cease-and-desist letter requires the resort to suspend all vehicle traffic above treeline and halt all road construction and logging.

Keystone hired a restoration firm to develop a plan for repairing the damage.

Fitzwilliams will look at that plan and make a decision in the next few days. It will be a big decision. If the previous environmental review addressed impacts to the alpine tundra, Keystone would be able to make repairs and move forward with construction. If the impacts require more scrutiny under the National Environmental Policy Act, with scoping and public comment, the project will be delayed for several months, forcing Vail Resorts to push the opening of its ballyhooed expansion to 2023-24.

"We don't quite know how this will all shake out right now," Fitzwilliams said, noting that while he has seen timber harvesters move beyond permitted forest boundaries, he has never seen this sort of mistake with a ski area expansion before.

Keystone's Sorensen said the construction of the road was "due to a misunderstanding by our construction team, for which we take full responsibility."



The undamaged forest, seen on July 28, is within stone throw of the forest recently cleared on Keystone ski area. (Photos by Hugh Carey, The Colorado Sun)



A forest recently cleared above the Outpost building during the construction of a new chairlift for Bergman Bowl at Keystone ski area seen on July 28.

The Forest Service approved the expansion into Bergman Bowl this summer after two years of environmental analysis. The agency's review reconfigured lift towers and roads for construction and maintenance to avoid impacts to wetlands in the bowl. The new lift, which climbs about 1,000 vertical feet and has a capacity to move 2,400 skiers an hour, will reach an elevation of 12,300 feet on top of a bowl that has been accessed for years only by hiking or snowcat.

The approval included a permanent 2,140-foot access road that required about 2 acres of grading and tree removal. The plan allowed construction of temporary construction routes to access lift towers, build a skier bridge and remove trees for ski runs.

“The temporary construction routes will be located within the disturbance footprint of approved ski trails and will not require earthwork,” reads the **approval by acting forest supervisor Lisa Stoeffler**, who noted one 1,830-foot temporary road crossing Bergman Bowl uphill of the bottom lift terminal would require “spot grading and incidental tree removal” causing “temporary ground disturbance” to about half an acre. That road was plowed in “beyond the authorized acres,” reads the cease-and-desist letter, which notes that topsoil had not been salvaged as required and a stream was buried with grading material.

The approval allowed a “minimal construction route” that would not require any grading or earthwork to the top of the lift using low-impact machinery. The Forest Service project approval required Keystone to immediately restore and revegetate the temporary roads and construction staging areas when the project was completed.

The Bergman Bowl expansion is part of a massive investment for the 2022-2023 winter. The company is spending \$320 million in capital improvements for the coming season, including **19 new chairlifts at 14 resorts.**

“We care deeply about investing in the guest experience at our resorts and, while of course disappointing when there are delays for any reason, we are committed to overcoming challenges to deliver these important projects,” said Bill Rock, chief operating officer for Vail Resorts’ resorts in Colorado and Utah in an email. “Right now, we are focused on working with the U.S. Forest Service to do what is needed to care for the environment we all love.”

CORRECTION: *A photo caption was updated on July, 31, 2022, to correct the terrain feature to undamaged forest.*