

Thad Berrett, District Ranger
Powder River Ranger District
Bighorn National Forest
1415 Fort Street
Buffalo, WY 82834

July 24, 2024

RE: Pole Creek Vegetation Management Project

Dear Mr. Berrett:

Thank you for considering concerns and addressing comments in the final EA. I appreciate the modifications to the project and the design features, and I appreciate the thorough analysis of habitat structural stages. I feel the project as a whole is needed and important to implement but I have lingering concerns.

Portions of the Pole Creek Nordic area are currently vulnerable to heavy wind and snow scour, so it is likely the commercial treatments within and adjacent to the area will worsen those conditions. Depending on the cutting prescription, it could take two or three decades for conifer regeneration to provide new protection. This negative outcome should not be overlooked given the popularity of the trails, the commitment of Powder Pass Nordic Club (PPNC) to maintain the trails, and the financial commitments from the Johnson County Recreation District, the Johnson County Tourism Board, and private donors.

I request that units 011 and 012 and the northeast unit of unit 20 be removed from the project, or substantial leave buffers be left adjacent to the ski trails. Mitigations such as snow fences should be implemented by the Forest Service where the ski trails' snow cover is negatively affected by treatments. The width of the leave buffers, other design features, and mitigation details should be discussed with PPNC and specifically addressed in the EA and Decision.

The commercial treatments on the east side of the 449 ski area will affect three important access routes into the 449 area: Trail 127, Road 522112, and Road 447. I appreciate that Timber 5 Design Feature includes unit 68. I request units 063, 078, and possibly 064 also be included in Timber 5, and in design features developed with PPNC for the ski areas.

I expect pre-commercial thinning treatments will generally improve snow conditions in the long term by retaining healthy conifer stands with full crowns, so I am hopeful that the treatment in unit 079 will be beneficial to the 449 ski area.

Thank you for planning the Pole Creek Vegetation Management Project.

Sincerely,
Jennifer Walker