

Resort Skiing

A-Basin Gets Approval for Snowmaking

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Arapahoe Basin, CO Nov. 18—Next year at this time, skiers and snowboarders could be carving early-season turns at Arapahoe Basin whether Mother Nature cooperates or not. The U.S. Forest Service announced today that White River National Forest Supervisor, Martha Kettle, has approved a revision of A-Basin's 1984 master plan, a decision three years in the making. A final Environmental Impact Statement and formal Record of Decision are due Friday, Nov. 19.

As part of a slate of upgrades, The Forest Service OK'd snowmaking for 125 acres at Summit County's oldest ski area, with conditional approval for a second phase that could enable near year-round skiing. The snowmaking proved the most controversial part of the proposal, with impacts to water quality downstream the subject of protracted negotiations. The decision announced Thursday doesn't resolve all the issues as planned. A-Basin's actions would lead to increased concentrations of toxic heavy metals in the Snake River downstream of Keystone Resort.

Some A-Basin loyalists and ski purists also argued against snowmaking on the grounds that the ski areas natural conditions are one of its most attractive assets, but ski area officials responded that snowmaking is an economic necessity in today's competitive setting. And, as this season and last season show, A-Basin employees are the hardest hit when the ski area can't open on time. Last year, A-Basin opened Dec. 19, one month after its scheduled date, leaving some workers hanging in the meantime.

A new mid-mountain restaurant, improvements to ski patrol facilities, replacement of the aging Lemawee lift and a pedestrian tunnel under Highway 6 are also part of the plan. A proposed alpine slide and new above-treeline hiking and mountain biking trails were stricken from the original proposal. The cost of the snowmaking system alone is estimated at about \$3 million, with the price for the other improvements dependent on final design and engineering costs.

Pending the outcome of any appeals or litigation, construction could begin next summer, said Greg Finch, vice president of Avon-based Dundee Realty, USA, A-Basins corporate owner. Dundee — the American subsidiary of a billion-dollar Canadian real estate firm — bought A-Basin for \$4 million from Vail Resorts in 1997, following the Vail-Ralston merger. The sale was required by the U.S. Department of Justice to allay antitrust concerns. A-Basin still maintains a joint ticketing agreement with Vail Resorts, giving Breckenridge and Keystone passholders access to The Legend's lifts.

The master plan revision was launched when A-Basin was still in the Ralston Resorts fold, but was put on hold during the merger and divestiture proceedings. More recently, protracted negotiations over potential impacts to water quality slowed the Forest Service decision-making process.

A-Basin plans to divert its snowmaking water from the North Fork of the Snake River. The North Fork is an unpolluted tributary that helps dilute toxic heavy metal pollution in the Snake, which flows from Keystone into Dillon Reservoir. Part of the concern with A-Basin's proposal — and a big part of the reason it took the Forest Service so long to reach a decision — is that the diversion will result in increased concentrations of the metals in the Snake.

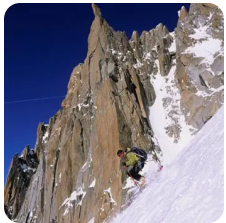
Levels of those metals, including zinc, manganese, cadmium, and iron, chronically violate water quality standards, requiring Colorado to designate the river as “impaired” under the Federal Clean Water Act. The concentrations are high enough to negatively affect the health of the aquatic ecosystem. The pollution originates with run-off from abandoned mines riddled throughout the nearby mountains. A-Basin has volunteered to be part of an effort to do some passive, low-tech and low-cost treatment of water at some of the abandoned mines in hopes of mitigating at least part of the impact.

The Forest Service acknowledged that some of those concerns remain. The decision announced Thursday will result in “slight” increases in concentrations of metals, said Michael Liu, who coordinated the agency's environmental review of the project, providing some continuity for three different district rangers. The Forest Service weighed the benefits of snowmaking to the public against the effects on water quality and concluded that, in this case, the impact to the resource is justified, Liu explained.

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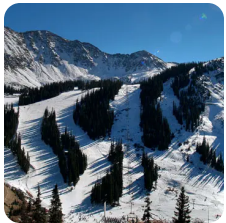
A-Basin Snowmaking Appealed



Snowmaking at A-Basin



Environmentalists Challenge A-Basin Snowmaking



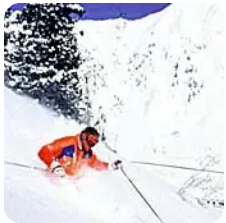
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