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Re:Mammoth Mountain Main Lodge Redevelopment EIR/EIS Scoping
USFS Project #62406
SCH #2022110276

Friends of the Inyo submits these comments on behalf of our 1,000+ members and supporters who care deeply about protecting and maintaining wild lands and wildlife habitat. Founded in 1986, Friends of the Inyo protects and cares for the lands of the Eastern Sierra. FOI has over three decades of experience working with the Inyo National Forest (INF) on National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) projects including forest planning, vegetation and fire, recreation, and travel management.

The proposed Mammoth Mountain Main Lodge Redevelopment project (Project) would be a substantive redevelopment and expansion of intensive uses on private and National Forest Lands (NFL). The proposed Project includes:

Parcels A and B (Private Land)

The applicant proposes to redevelop Parcels A and B and construct new ski facilities at Mammoth Mountain Ski Area (MMSA).

Parcel A

Existing development on Parcel A would be replaced with two new hotels and a range of resort residences, resort residential amenities, a transportation center, bus turnaround, and underground parking. The buildings would be up to eight stories high. The resulting development would include up to 1,000,000 square feet (sq ft) of new facilities on Parcel A, including:

- 250 Hotel rooms ("hotel keys")
- 164 resort residential units
- 95,000 sq ft of commercial facilities
- 105,000 sq ft of skier services facilities are proposed on Parcel A
- Realignment of State Route 203

New Road

A new road would be built to public road standards on NFS land to connect Parcels A and B.

Parcel B

Development on Parcel B would include up to 45 units, consisting of single-family and multi-family dwellings in 15

buildings up to 3 stories tall and an additional 5,000 sq ft of commercial development. Parcel B would also include a new wastewater treatment facility and ponds.

Forest Service Special Use Permit Area

Additional development is proposed on United States Forest Service (USFS) land within the existing MMSA Special Use Permit (SUP) area:

Base Redevelopment Area

Redevelopment in the Base Area includes relocating the gondola and Chair Lift 11 bottom terminals, a new skier service building, along with several kiosks located along a promenade between Parcel A and the ski area.

The existing Panorama Gondola lower terminal and Chair 11 lower terminal are proposed to be relocated from Parcel A to adjacent Forest Service lands.

A new 2 to 3 stories tall skier services building is proposed at the eastern boundary of the new snow front on the SUP Area and the existing Main Lodge building would be completely removed. New snowmaking facilities, utilizing reclaimed water from Parcel B, would be added to the base area.

Big Bend

A new 24,000 sq ft mountain operations building for administration and employees is proposed to be located within the Big Bend Forest Service Permit Area and a 360-stall surface parking lot is also proposed. A new above ground potable and fire suppression water storage reservoir is proposed to be constructed southwest of Parcel A.

Project Phasing

Construction of the first phase is proposed to begin by approximately 2026, depending on the ultimate timing of project approvals. Subsequent phases would be developed subject to market conditions and other environmental factors such as snowfall.

Comments

The proposed Project, if developed, would significantly change the area surrounding the MMSA, the community/Town of Mammoth Lakes (TOML), and our region as a whole. We offer these comments to engage with the INF and TOML in order to identify the potential impacts on our region's unique natural resources and to develop appropriate measures to avoid, minimize, and mitigate any adverse effects on those resources. Since this is a joint DEIR/DEIS, the terms "effects" and "impacts" are used synonymously.

CEQA broadly defines "project" to include "the whole of an action, which has a potential for resulting in either a direct physical change in the environment, or a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment." We note that the Area of Potential Effect (APE) does not appear to be defined yet. The DEIR/DEIS must clearly define the APE and consider both direct and indirect effects.

Aesthetics

The proposed Project with an eight-story building, new 45-unit residential development on 15 acres, 1,000,000 sq. ft. of new facilities including a 686,000 gallon above ground water storage tank, and the resulting deforestation of the Big Bend ski areas would result in a significant change to scenic integrity of the Project area. The proposed development's size, height, and intensity can be reasonably expected to substantially degrade the existing visual character and quality of public views from not only Highway 203 but INF lands including the John Muir and Ansel Adams Wilderness Areas.

The DEIR/DEIS must consider both the direct impacts of the Project and the indirect impacts to the scenic integrity of the surrounding area. A complete visual impacts analysis must be prepared for the DEIR/DEIS and must include analysis of impacts to surrounding forest lands and the Wilderness Areas. The analysis must include both impacts to scenic integrity from the proposed buildings and facilities, impacts to night-time views,

and light pollution impacts.

We request the DEIR/DEIS include a detailed night-time lighting plan that strictly limits the types and intensity of Project lighting, requires strict shielding of all outdoor lights to prevent light impacts, proposes light reduction materials for higher floors of tall buildings, and requires the use of motion-sensor lights on utility buildings and other areas (particularly the wastewater treatment plant) where night lighting would not be needed unless in an emergency.

Air Quality

Project construction of this scale could conflict with the Great Basin Unified Air Pollution Control District's Air Quality Maintenance Plan (AQMP) for the Town of Mammoth Lakes, with emissions from project-generated motor vehicle trips, area sources such as propane gas consumption, and stationary sources. Although the PM10 Federal Standard continues to be met with the exclusion of wildfire events since the enactment of the AQMP, the more stringent State Standard for PM10, set at 50 µg/m3 for 24 hours, is still being violated due to wood smoke, road dust, and volcanic cinders used to control icy road conditions. In the last decade, the number of State PM10 exceedances, excluding those caused by wildfire events, is generally decreasing. The DEIR/DEIS must provide analysis of air quality impacts resulting from both the construction of and resulting development and operations of this large Project and identify measures to avoid, minimize, and mitigate adverse air quality impacts including consideration of transit requirements and building and operations electrification to reduce the use of fossil fuels.

Biological Resources

The proposed Project would significantly intensify recreational, commercial, residential, and industrial uses that will impact wildlife, remove habitat, and increase the fragmentation of wildlife habitat and connectivity. The DEIR/DEIS must include a robust analysis of impacts to wildlife and their habitat, particularly for the development of the Big Bend area, conversion of Parcel B to residential uses, and the improvement of the access road between Parcels A and B to public road standards and accompanying traffic. We recommend early and frequent consultation and coordination with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and the US Fish and Wildlife Service to inform impact analysis and identification of appropriate avoidance, minimization, and mitigation measures for adverse impacts to wildlife and their habitat. Such consultation can also inform permitting pathways for impacts to special status species.

Cultural Resources and Tribal Cultural Resources

Approximately 10 acres of new development would occur at the Big Bend area which would include cutting down the existing forest and the construction of parking lots, an operations building, and ski facilities. At Parcel B, over 15 acres of existing forest lands and wastewater treatment ponds will be converted to a residential development. The development on Parcel A remains in much the same footprint as the existing development but uses would be substantially intensified.

36 CFR 800.16 defines Area of Potential Effects (APE) as "the geographical area or areas within which an undertaking may directly or indirectly cause alterations in the character or use of historic properties, if any such properties exist. The APE is influenced by the scale and nature of an undertaking and may be different for different kinds of effects caused by the undertaking." Per the 2013 Programmatic Agreement between USFS Region 5 and the California Office of Historic Preservation (OHP), "Region 5 shall consider potential direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to historic properties and their associated settings as applicable, regardless of land ownership." Similarly, the OHP provides the following guidance for determining a project's APE: "Typically, when determining the APE, you need to consider not only the direct physical effects that the project may have on historic properties, but you must also consider the potential for: 1) Visual effects. Consider the area(s) within which an undertaking will be visible. 2) Audible effects. Consider the area(s) within which the project's noise, if any, could be heard. 3) Sociocultural effects. Consider the area(s) within which the project may cause changes in land use, traffic, public access, etc. 4) Indirect or secondary effects."

A complete Class III cultural resources inventory must be completed prior to the preparation of the DEIR/DEIS to

enable analysis of potential impacts to cultural resources and identification of measures to avoid, minimize, and mitigate adverse impacts to cultural resources.

Further, visual effects are direct effects to cultural resources if they are caused by an undertaking. The proposed Project, with its eight-story tall building, lighting, and 1,000,000 sq. ft. of new facilities, would introduce substantial and significant intrusive visual elements to the cultural landscape. Tribal consultation is imperative for fully understanding and analyzing visual effects to cultural resources.

Finally, audible effects from the intensification of use (e.g., equipment, traffic, amplified sound, and human recreational and residential noise) has the potential to further erode the integrity of setting and feeling (critical integrity characteristics for Criterion A National Register eligibility) as well as impact traditional qualities of sites important to the tribal community. The draft DEIR/DEIS must include an audible effects analysis including tribal consultation, to identify potential impacts to cultural resources.

Energy, Greenhouse Gases, Climate Change and Sustainability

Per CEQA Guidelines, § 15064.4, the DEIR/DEIS must analyze greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions of the Project. Mammoth Main Lodge Redevelopment, LLC and Mammoth Mountain Ski Area, LLC should propose measurable and effective strategies to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions associated with the proposed Project. Other ski resorts are pursuing feasible measures to neutralize the effect of GHGs associated with their developments. For example, Taos Ski Valley in New Mexico and Wild Mountain in Minnesota have become "carbon neutral" by incorporating measures such as daytime solar energy, geothermal power, electric snowmobiles, and even electric snowcats. These feasible and responsible measures must be considered as Project features or mitigation measures in the DEIS/DEIR.

Hydrology and Water Resources

Increasing water demands on Mammoth Mountain's groundwater, which is connected to the Owens River headwaters, could further stress the already contentious water rights and needs of this watershed which is so important for the Eastern Sierra and Los Angeles. With droughts becoming more frequent, more extreme, and longer in duration across the western United States, the viability of increasing water demand must be considered both for local and surrounding habitat as well as connected ecosystems. The applicant's proposal does not discuss the projected amount of increased water consumption from this Project or the source of the water, but we can reasonably assume additional groundwater pumping will be needed. ??Proposed residential and commercial development on Parcels A and B and Skier Services Buildings on NFS lands would require a new minimum 686,000-gallon storage tank to meet demand and state requirements. The hydrological analysis must address and disclose current and projected water consumption levels and impacts to groundwater. MMSA operates five wells on USFS land sourced from the Dry Creek aquifer. The DEIR/DEIS must identify which wells currently supply MMSA's facilities, provide a 20-year water level history of those wells, identify groundwater usage for the current facilities in Parcel A, and the amount projected for the facilities in Parcels A and B and at Big Bend in the proposed Project, including expectations of groundwater consumption for both construction and daily operations once completed.

The DEIR/DEIS must also include analysis of the amount of groundwater currently used for snowmaking versus the projected snowmaking, which proposes using treated wastewater, and what portion of that is supplemented by increased groundwater pumping. This must also include analysis of current snowmaking needs and associated evaporation rates as well as discussion of the changing winter climate and snowpack predictions. Should climate/snowpack predictions indicate a need for a large increase in snowmaking, with the potential to overdraw groundwater, the Project must not include expansion for winter sports.

Stressing groundwater levels with over-pumping is unsustainable, impacts surface vegetation, and therefore habitat health and wilderness character, and increases wildfire risk in the wildland-urban interface. Additionally, the Inyo National Forest recently released its Management Plan for the Owens River Headwaters Wild and Scenic River (ORHWSR) which has instream flows that are directly connected to Mammoth Mountain's

groundwater supply. Adverse effects from overdrawn groundwater would affect more than the immediate surrounding area. Any adverse effects to Dry Creek and other groundwater sources of the ORHWSR must be identified and analyzed in the DEIR/DEIS and measures to avoid, minimize, and mitigate adverse impacts provided.

Land Use and Forestry Resources

The Project proposes a significant intensification of land uses on Parcel A, new development at Big Bend, and the conversion of the existing wastewater treatment pond area on Parcel B to a residential subdivision with 45 dwelling units. The conversion of Parcel B would create a residential "lollipop" that intrudes into forest lands that can reasonably be expected to impact public lands and wildlife. This remote lollipop residential development appears to be inconsistent with TOML's General Plan Goals L.1 and L.6. The DEIR/DEIS must include a land use policy consistency analysis for the entire Project, particularly the proposed development on Parcel B.

Additionally, the Project proposes an "Adventure Center" where guests can learn about available recreational activities within the resort as well as in the adjacent forest areas. With not only the expansion of resort facilities ultimately driving more visitors to MMSA and thus more visitors to the public lands both within and outside its boundaries, the Project actively encourages increased use in the surrounding forest. The DEIR/DEIS must address the likely impact to adjacent public lands, quantify the intensification of the use, and identify measures to avoid, minimize, and mitigate adverse impacts from the intensified use including requirements for reasonably priced or free-of-charge year-round transit and parking.

Noise

The intensification and expansion of uses proposed by the Project can be reasonably expected to increase residential, commercial, recreational, industrial, and traffic noise generation. Noise pollution disrupts the quiet enjoyment of public lands, adversely impacts wildlife, and degrades tribal cultural landscapes. An acoustic analysis must be prepared for the DEIR/DEIS to analyze the Project, including all proposed activities, to identify noise impacts and measures to avoid, minimize, and mitigate adverse impacts to humans, wildlife, and tribal cultural resources. Appropriate mitigation measures must be identified to avoid, minimize, and mitigate adverse noise impacts from both the construction and operation of the Project.

Wildfire

Development in fire-prone areas increases the likelihood that more destructive fires will ignite, fire-fighting resources will be taxed, more habitat and people will be put in harm's way or displaced, and more structures will burn. The proposed Project would increase housing capacity, recreational use, and human presence in the forest landscape with concurrent risk for wildfire ignition, exposure, and evacuation needs. The proposed residential development on Parcel B only exacerbates the increased wildlife risk and resulting risk to human safety and loss of wildlife and their habitat.

On top of the over 2,000 guests and residents estimated between Parcel A and Parcel B, evacuation must also take into account visitors to Devils Postpile National Monument and recreators in the surrounding National Forest, all of who will have to be evacuated via the 203. The ability of local fire fighting forces to respond to this area also needs to be considered in the DEIR/DEIS, for the sake of both human safety and the surrounding habitat which is further put at risk with residential and commercial activity. We recommend the DEIR/DEIS incorporate the California Attorney General's recently released best practices for CEQA analysis and mitigation of wildfire impacts.

Cumulative Impacts

The Mammoth region has seen substantial growth over the past 20 years that has impacted everything from groundwater to wildlife and endangers maintaining an intact, healthy natural landscape for people and wildlife. The cumulative impacts analysis must address past, present, and reasonably foreseeable/probable future projects that could combine with the impacts of the proposed Project. The analysis must include projects located

on public and private lands in the region.

The DEIR/DEIS must include analysis of the cumulative impacts of similar projects which bring more guests into the area, and encourage human presence on public lands. These projects which are in the permitting process or have been approved and are under construction and/or pending construction include:

Old Mammoth Place Amendment, 343 hotel units/460 hotel bedrooms

Mammoth Crossing, 742 hotel bedrooms

South Hotel, 299 hotel bedrooms

Snowcreek VIII, 200 hotel units/400 hotel bedrooms

Limelight Hotel, 151 hotel rooms

The Parcel/"The Sawyer" Phase 1, 81 residential units

Villas III at Lodestar, 33 residential units

Terra Blanca, 12 residential units

Eastern Sierra Climate and Communities Resilience Project - 56,000 acres of forest restoration

Alternatives

Given the multiple uses proposed for development on public and private lands, alternatives analysis must include a robust range of alternatives including but not limited to:

No Project

No development of Parcel B

No development of the Big Bend area

Reduced housing/hotel capacity on Parcel A

Reduced housing density on Parcel B

Reduced housing capacity on both Parcel A and B

Reduced development of the Big Bend area

Required transit service for MMSA employees

Conclusion

If developed, the proposed Project would result in a fundamental change to the Eastern Sierra, and if developed thoughtlessly, would irrevocably damage our landscape, natural and cultural resources, and harm the wildlife and people who have made these lands home. We look forward to seeing comments and recommendations addressed in the DEIR/DEIS and in the permitting process.

Sincerely,

Wendy Schneider

Executive Director