

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 4/29/2024 2:30:07 AM

First name: Will

Last name: Russack

Organization: Cascade Backcountry Alliance

Title: Board Member

Comments: April 28, 2024

Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest

Responsible Official Scott Robinson, District Ranger

c/o Patty Garvey-Darda, Project Lead

Cle Elum Ranger District

803 West 2nd Street

Cle Elum, WA 98922

Submitted to:

<https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/CommentInput?Project=57415>

Subject: Gold Creek Valley Restoration Project, Draft EA Comments

District Ranger Robinson:

Cascade Backcountry Alliance (CBA) has reviewed the Draft Gold Creek Valley Restoration Project Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact (Draft EA). Cascade Backcountry Alliance's mission is to protect and improve access for winter backcountry users in the Pacific Northwest. Our winter community is out every weekend at Gold Creek Pond and the adjacent Snoqualmie zones (Kendall Peak Lakes, Commonwealth Basin, Hyak Sno Park, Lake Annette Sno Park).

While CBA is supportive of this ecological restoration project that provides benefits to aquatic species and habitat connectivity, we disagree that the proposed project will have less than significant impacts on recreation, specifically winter recreation. As the report notes, winter weekend days can draw 100 to 300 cars to the Gold Creek Valley and sno-park. However, the "other recreational facilities" in the Snoqualmie Pass area do not have the capacity to absorb these hundreds of vehicles and winter recreationalists that enjoy the Gold Creek Valley during the winter months.

Snoqualmie Pass has been experiencing increasing significant parking scarcity due to increased recreation in the area over the past five to ten years. A 2021 article from King 5 describes the congestion during that winter, which has become a regular occurrence. The parking lots maintained by Summit at Snoqualmie regularly fill up, and the only other access point at the Pass for non-ski-area users is the Hyak sno-park. The report mentions the "Kendall Peak Trail" (which we assume refers to the Pacific Crest Trail) as an example of nearby resources available to winter travelers; currently, the only viable parking for the PCT and Commonwealth valley is at Snoqualmie West or along SR 906. In general, much of the access to Forest Service land during the winter relies on parking at the Summit Snoqualmie Ski areas. These facilities do not have room for an additional 100-300 cars.

Furthermore, Gold Creek Valley provides a unique winter recreation resource that caters to families, beginner snowshoers, and individuals looking for a beautiful winter scene without entering avalanche terrain or requiring specialized clothing or equipment. The alternative recreation sites identified do not provide this same opportunity.

Overall, we believe that the proposed project needs to include more substantive plans for offsetting the significant loss of the Gold Creek Valley as a winter recreation access point. Although the potential opening of Denny Creek sno-park in the upcoming seasons will help relieve some of the pressure, we recommend investigating the feasibility of the following additional solutions to help address the already difficult parking issues in the

Snoqualmie Pass vicinity:

Provide parking at the PCT North (Kendall Katwalk) parking lot to improve access to the Commonwealth Basin for snowshoeing and backcountry skiing

Allow winter recreationalists to continue to access F.S. Road 4832-144 in the Gold Creek Valley, which is outside the project area and provides snowshoeing opportunities and backcountry skiing access

Allow recreationalists to access the upper valley via trail 1314 by including clear signage and/or temporary trail markers as necessary to maintain safe closure of project area

Expand parking on Lake Mardee Road and pursue opportunities to acquire the adjacent private land, where snowshoers can access F.S. road 9090 and provide additional snow play opportunities in the flat open area, which is already heavily used by families

Work with WSDOT to allow parking on the north side of Exit 62 and add signage and trail connector for cross country skiers and snowshoers to access Cabin Creek and Mount Amabalis trail system.

We believe that the responsibility is on the Okanogan-Wenatchee N.F to work with their colleagues in the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie N.F and the community at Snoqualmie pass to help address the winter parking issues at the Pass, including the added stress caused by this project. The Draft EA currently predicts that the construction impacts at Gold Creek Pond are expected to be year-round for 5-7 years, but could extend up to 10 years. Limiting the closure period to the greatest extent possible would help mitigate the large anticipated impacts on winter recreation. Additionally we believe there would be value in producing a project map documenting the temporary impacts and recreational closures (both summer and winter) that could be distributed to the recreational community.

Lastly, beyond winter access considerations, we believe that the new Trail #1250 should be paved for the greatest level of accessibility. The Gold Creek Pond trail is the only paved ADA trail in the I-90 corridor that provides this level of accessibility and views of the Alpine Lakes wilderness and should be replaced in-kind upon completion of the project.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments as part of this process, and thank you for your consideration of our positions.

Sincerely,

Will Russack & Tess Wendel
Cascade Backcountry Alliance