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Comments: Washington Trails Association's letter is attached as a PDF.

The following text was imported from the commenter's attached pdf.

May 1, 2024

Scott Robinson, District Ranger Cle Elum Ranger District

803 West 2nd Street Cle Elum, WA 98922

RE: Gold Creek Valley Restoration Project Draft Environmental Assessment comments submitted electronically through the comment portal - <https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/CommentInput?Project=57415>

District Ranger Robinson,

Washington Trails Association (WTA) appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on the restoration work in the Gold Creek Valley near Snoqualmie Pass. WTA has a clear understanding of the purpose and need for the project. We support the overall mission of the project and believe the proposed actions will improve key resource conditions and aid bull trout population recovery.

Washington Trails Association (WTA) has a more than 50-year legacy of engaging the hiking community. WTA enhances hiking experiences across the state by empowering a diverse and growing community of hikers to explore, steward and protect trails and public lands. WTA is the nation's largest state-based trail maintenance and hiking advocacy nonprofit organization, with more than 26,000 member households. In 2023, WTA crews largely composed of volunteers performed approximately 157,000 hours of trail maintenance. In addition to volunteer stewardship, WTA is a trusted source for hiking information that is accessed by hundreds of thousands of outdoor enthusiasts each year. It is WTA's privilege to work closely with the staff of the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest on projects large and small.

This Draft Environmental Assessment proposes to complete major environmental restoration while continuing to provide recreational opportunities to the public at the Gold Creek Pond site and surrounding area. Thank you for [designing recreational facilities to replace existing facilities in kind] (24). Gold Creek Pond is an extremely popular site for summer and winter nonmotorized recreation. It provides a barrier free visitor experience that is valued by our community. We appreciate that the proposed action will create a 1.0-long

Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant trail” (31). There are only a few wheelchair accessible trails in the Interstate 90 portion of the central Cascades. We invite the Forest Service to engage WTA staff when you are ready to design the new trail. Our staff has extensive trail design experience and would be interested in working with you and other partners to provide professional assistance, if desired.

One of the notable elements of this Draft EA is that the project envisions an extended closure lasting up to 10 years. We sincerely hope that the project can be completed and the closure can be lifted in less than a decade. The hiking community highly values the Gold Creek Valley for both summer and winter recreation. The planned closure raises concerns for our organization about displacement of visitors, access to sites in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness and maintenance of trails cut off by the closure. Here are some of our specific concerns:

- * In winter, we imagine that the many users of Gold Creek Sno-Park may look for other ways to interact with the area. We envision a situation where the loss of recreational access to Gold Creek Pond leads to increased use of Forest Road 9090 towards Kendall Peak Lakes. WTA requests that you plan for changing use along that route.

- * Other winter nonmotorized users will look elsewhere along the I-90 corridor for their winter recreation needs if the Gold Creek Sno-Park is unavailable for their use. WTA requests that a robust plan is developed to educate winter nonmotorized users to alternative locations in the I-90 corridor. We also request that either temporary or permanent Sno-Parks are established to help with the winter nonmotorized congestion that will occur in the I-90 corridor upon losing access to the Gold Creek Sno-Park.

- * We are disappointed that this project will prevent the public from using Trail 1314 to access Alaska Lake and Joe Lake. WTA proposes a new trail alignment or other actions to maintain access to this part of the Alpine Lakes Wilderness.

- * WTA volunteers have worked on Gold Creek Trail 1314 in the past. The trail is sometimes overgrown in normal years. WTA requests that Cle Elum Ranger District crews maintain the trail during the extended area closure or work with partners to provide administrative access that enables volunteer trail maintenance projects to occur. We wish to avoid an extensive maintenance backlog at the end of the restoration project.

Thank you for considering our feedback on these specific elements and on the overall vision of the draft plan. We look forward to continuing to work with you. Please contact me if you have any questions or would like to discuss our comments, questions and perspectives.

Sincerely,

Michael DeCramer

Policy and Planning Manager