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Organization:

Title:

Comments: July 2, 2024

Dear White River National Forest Supervisor Heather Noel,

My husband and I have lived on Sweetwater Road for 40 years, and we are not in favor of White River National Forest's proposed plan for Sweetwater Lake. Nor are my neighbors who have signed below. This is not the use we had hoped for as we raised money for the preservation of the lake. Neither is this the use that we believe is compatible with our area. And we can imagine how this will have a negative impact on the culture of our community.

Several years ago, the Eagle Valley Land Trust approached Sweetwater residents with the idea of preserving the lake. They asked for working volunteers for a fundraising committee to this end. I volunteered for this. We spent over a year meeting and soliciting funds to preserve Sweetwater Lake. We made phone calls, wrote letters, spoke in front of government councils, sent letters to the editor of local papers, etc. And we were successful. We raised more money than expected in a short period of time. A lot of locals and visitors were interested in preserving the lake as it was and closing it forever from development.

Shortly after the complicated sale went through and the land was transferred to the US Forest Service (USFS), they announced that the property would be developed and managed by the Colorado State Park service. We were horrified! No one who had donated money had thought they were giving money for development! We felt we had been deceived, and in turn, had lied to our donors unknowingly.

We don't want the lake to be developed. While we are happy that the entire property around the lake is now open to the public, we do not want to see amenities developed there to draw more and more numbers up to the lake! In fact, private ownership of the lake property would have been preferable to the proposed public level of build out! That at least would have had less impact on our community!

We enjoyed the previous and historic use of Sweetwater Lake - a combination of a primitive USFS campground, day use, and fishing area, along with a small privately run resort over a hundred years old. The historic resort was open to and used by the whole community, especially the restaurant. It included rental rowboats, horseback rides, and rental cabins. It welcomed tourists from Vail and Aspen and Denver, but never felt overrun. The remote location and dirt road seemed to keep the visitation on a comfortable level. The limited amenities felt right for the culture of our valley - slow pace and quiet atmosphere. I have attached a "Sweetwater Experience" letter that we sent to the Forest Service in 2022, explaining what we had been trying to save.

The proposed park would not only ruin the Sweetwater Lake experience, it would also have major negative impacts on the Sweetwater Community. The last ten miles of the drive to Sweetwater Lake is along Sweetwater Road. About 100 families live along this dirt road and a side road nearby. Most have chosen to live in this area for its remoteness, its beauty, its western culture, and its strong sense of community. On any given day, you might find a 4-H youth exercising their calf or lamb on the road; a neighbor from town taking a slow, scenic drive; a rancher steering his side by side to check on cows; some seniors taking a walk; or even an occasional cattle drive. Dogs wander free, folks can ride their horses on the road, and even chickens occasionally strut down the middle of the street. The area is considered "open range", so stray cattle are not unusual. This idyllic, slow pace would be totally destroyed by the traffic that a developed park would bring to the area. The park plan proposes 100 cars a day, some towing RV's, driving up through this neighborhood and then, later in the day, those 100 cars coming back down!

We spoke with Senator Dylan Roberts and Representative Elizabeth Velasco about our concerns. Mr. Roberts said he just didn't understand the motivation to make this area into a park. When Fisher's Peak was declared a state park, that community held a huge celebration! But he noticed that this current park idea at Sweetwater has zero local support - it is not wanted by the local community, by the nearby towns, nor by either county government that it impacts! He wondered, why is it even being considered?

In conclusion, neither I nor many of the rest of the residents of Sweetwater are in favor of the development that state involvement at Sweetwater Lake would produce. We prefer that the Forest Service continue to manage the area, preferably with a licensed concessionaire doing most of the daily work. We don't mind the primitive Forest Service campground, the rental boats, the horses, the restaurant, or the cabins (should they be repaired and reopened). But we are not in favor of any additional development. We are vehemently opposed to new buildings like maintenance shops, park or forest employee housing, rental dry cabins, administration buildings, etc. We are also opposed to RV campgrounds with electric hookups, cement pads, and dump stations. We are especially repulsed by the proposal to put construction in the pastures! All of this would drastically change the culture of our area.

We strongly oppose the plan put forward by White River National Forest in this NEPA process. We do not want to see amenities developed at the lake, which we believe will negatively impact both the lake experience and the bordering community.

Respectfully submitted,

Janet and Benny Rivera

Larry and Tish Mabry

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