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Comments: Forest Service personnel pasted text from attached file below this comment.

additional comments for Sandia Ranger District

Hello,

On March 30 I submitted initial comments from the "More Kids in the Winter Woods" program conducted for the Sandia Ranger district this past year by Talking Talons Youth Leadership. Our final meeting was April 9, so I am attaching the full report of the results of a 9-month process of gathering public input on winter activities in the Sandias. Please include this information in your considerations.

Thank you.

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More Kids in the Winter Woods

Final Cost Share Agreement Report

Presented to the

United States Forest Service

by

May 18, 2015

More Kids in the Winter Woods

Final Report

May 18, 2015

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I. Program Summary

The "More Kids in the Winter Woods" program began in August 2014 under a cost share agreement between Talking Talons Youth Leadership (TTYL) and the US Forest Service. The agreement ended in May 2015.

The overall goal of the program was to increase winter recreational and educational activities in the Sandia Mountains by building a community collaboration that would:

1. augment the work of the Sandia Ranger District
2. provide public input on possible solutions to challenges limiting winter activities

Talking Talons Youth Leadership surpassed the objectives of this program. Through extensive outreach and publicity, TTYL developed a collaboration of over 100 members affiliated with 51 organizations (Appendix III). "More Kids" collaboration members participated in 28 public meetings and 7 organized workdays; opened Capulin Snow Play Area for two days; developed an "experimental" groomed cross-country ski trail; and conducted four environmental education events. These volunteers donated over 1200 hours of time, which enabled hundreds of people to enjoy winter activities in the Sandias.

Through all these activities, the "More Kids" collaboration learned about the challenges limiting winter activities in the Sandias and identified possible solutions to those challenges. Four focus areas were addressed - Access, Trails, Environmental Education (EE) and Capulin Snow Play Area. Based on the experience gained in each of these areas, the collaboration was able to identify realistic possible solutions for the future. The collaboration then gathered public input and determined the public's priorities for each area.

The overall lesson of "More Kids" is that the public really wants to be involved in an on-going way to increase and improve recreation and education in the Sandias. Collaboration members especially want to continue developing

and maintaining winter trails, helping operate Capulin Snow Play Area, and providing a wide variety of educational activities. The collaboration strongly urges the Forest Service to welcome and utilize these volunteers!

Finally, Talking Talons Youth Leadership and members of the "More Kids" collaboration have initiated an ongoing "Sandia Mountain Coalition" (SMC). Many "More Kids" members have already joined the Coalition. This Coalition will continue building connections among the Forest Service, community partners and volunteers to increase educational and recreational opportunities in the Sandias, not only for winter, but all year round.

II. Program Objectives

Eight specific objectives were identified in the cost share agreement. The following chart summarizes the work completed for each objective.

1. Provide a project coordinator.

Completed in August 2014.

2. Identify existing outdoor recreation or environmental education organizations within the surrounding area. Completed over the course of the grant. 51 organizations were identified and included in the work of the "More Kids" collaboration.

3. Promote Sandia District's winter recreation program with these external organizations. Completed over the course of the grant. Sandia District's program was promoted through:

- *4 Community Meetings

- *1 Youth Organizations Meeting

- *23 focus group meetings

- *3 television news reports

- *over 20 newspaper articles

- *hundreds of e-mail blasts

4. Identify potential opportunities for collaborating with volunteers and partners. Completed over the course of the grant. In addition to the EE programs described below, volunteers provided:

- *371 hours attending meetings

- *406 hours preparing Capulin for the season

- *84 hours training to operate Capulin

- *64 hours operating Capulin

- *236 hours working on trails

5. Convene a minimum of three meetings with external organizations to determine their interest in becoming involved in Sandia's winter recreation program. Completed. Meetings included:

- *4 large Community Meetings

- *1 Youth Organizations meeting

- *23 focus area meetings

6. Prepare a summation report of potential solutions for operating Capulin Snow Play Area. Completed for Capulin and each of the four focus areas. See summations below.

7. Establish a network of partners and volunteers to deliver quality winter interpretation and education opportunities.

Completed. 30 "More Kids" members in 15 partner organizations provided 131 hours of environmental education in four events.

8. Offer a minimum of three interpretation/education programs throughout the Sandia District. Completed four events:

- *January 18, 2015 - Celebrate Winter at the Sandia Crest House

- *February 15, 2015 -- Celebrate Winter at the Sandia Crest House
- *February 19, 2015 - Hawthorne Elementary Title I program at Sandia Peak Tram
- *February 20, 2015 - San Antonito Elementary second grades at Sandia Peak Ski Area

III. Focus Area Challenges and Actions

"More Kids" built on work done by the New Mexico Outdoors Coalition (NMOC) in the spring and summer of 2014. NMOC identified four focus areas that needed to be addressed to increase winter activities in the Sandias. "More Kids" continued working in these four areas.

"Access" addressed issues of getting people to winter activities by clearing Highway 536 (the Crest Road) and parking lots. "Trails" looked at the trails available in the winter for a variety of users. "Environmental Education" (EE) considered opportunities for education, broadly defined to include education about recreation (such as skiing and snowshoeing) and outdoor winter safety as well as natural history and other more traditional interpretive activities. "Capulin Snow Play Area" addressed the issues surrounding operation of this very popular area that has been closed for several years.

Each focus area group started by identifying challenges to success in their area. Each decided early in the process to undertake actions during the winter of 2014-2015 that would engage more partners and volunteers, increase winter activities for the public immediately, and inform the reports on possible solutions for the future. Here are the challenges identified, actions taken and results for each group.

Access Challenges:

- *NMDOT has plowing priorities that may delay the plowing of Crest Rd 536
- *People drive on Crest Rd 536 before it's plowed and block it/pack it down
- *People park all along Crest Rd 536 making it impossible to plow the shoulders or even the lanes
- *People park in no parking areas, including in front of access gates, which may create plowing, access and visitor safety issues
- *Limited BCSO (Sheriff) and USFS staff to enforce parking regulations
- *Very limited USFS funding for plowing contractor for large snow amounts in parking lots
- *Limited USFS funding/staff for small truck plowing of parking lots
- *Traffic may back up onto 536 when Capulin is open

Access Actions and Results:

- *USFS plowed parking areas as usual - able to keep up with them between USFS truck with blade and contractor
- *NMDOT plowed 536 as usual - able to keep up with it
- *Access group met with NMDOT, BCSO and USFS to coordinate efforts for Capulin weekends - did not end up needing any additional road maintenance/assistance the one weekend Capulin opened
- *NM Mounted Patrol was contacted and planned to help at Capulin - there were no further Capulin openings to use their help

Trails Challenges:

- *Limited variety of types and difficulty levels of trails, including few beginner trails
- *Some of the summer-use trails are dangerous for winter use
- *Very heavy use of the service road/Ellis area resulting in user conflicts
- *User conflicts on multi-use trails, including destruction of groomed tracks by other users
- *Lack of public knowledge of trail etiquette
- *Limited signage on trails to teach appropriate use
- *No storage near trails for grooming equipment

Trails Actions and Results:

- *Volunteers and USFS staff improved and groomed an "experimental" ski-only trail at 10K S - users report it was a great addition and maintained it's track well
- *Volunteers identified and GPS'd possible additional winter trails - provided this information to the USFS
- *Volunteers identified possible trail "etiquette" signs to help reduce user conflicts and maintain better trail conditions for various users

Environmental Education Challenges:

- *Kids being adequately clothed for the cold and snow
- *Uncertain conditions may lead to cancelling (no snow, too much snow, too cold, impassable roads, mud)
- *Liability insurance for groups/individuals offering classes
- *Equipment is needed for activities like skiing, snowshoeing
- *Organizations such as community centers want to bring youth to the Sandias, but need someone to provide program once they arrive

Environmental Education Actions and Results:

- *EE at Capulin - abandoned - decided it was not conducive to EE
- *2 "Celebrate Winter" events at the Sandia Crest House - did great! Multiple volunteer presenters, 180 - 200 people attended the 2 events
- *1 elementary field trip to top of the Tram - worked great! 20 kids had a wonderful time; Ski Patrol and SMNHC plus TTYL educators
- *1 elementary field trip to Sandia Peak Ski Area - worked great! 55 kids had a terrific time; "behind the scenes" at the Ski Area and Ski Patrol, EE from SMNHC and TTYL, pine cone bird feeders
- *Weather cooperated for all 4 EE events - could have been very different!

Capulin Challenges:

- *Undependable snow/conditions
- *No contractor has been willing to operate for several years
- *Risk to sledders, especially if unstaffed or ungroomed
- *Insufficient USFS staff to operate
- *No USFS grooming equipment

Capulin Actions and Results:

- *Recruited 24 volunteers to help operate Capulin.
- *Used volunteers and Rocky Mountain Youth Corps (RMYC) crew to assist USFS to prepare the area. Friends of Sandia Mountains (FOSM) provided 378 hours of work over 3 days. RMYC provided 32 hours on one day. Other volunteers provided 28 hours on one day. The USFS completed preparation on additional workdays.
- *USFS provided 2 one-day trainings for operating Capulin. They trained 23 volunteers and 8 RMYC crew members.
- *USFS and the "More Kids" collaboration chose 4 possible weekends to be open - MLK and Presidents' weekends as the primary times (Saturday and Sunday only), with the following weekends as back-up dates if either primary time was closed due to conditions. The only weekend with adequate snow to open was Jan. 24/25.
- *Operated area with FS staff and volunteers. Prepared area from 10:30 to 11:30 and opened from 11:30 to 4:00. Saturday, Jan. 24 there were 3 FS staff, 4 "More Kids" volunteers and 1 FS volunteer. 87 vehicles attended. Sunday, Jan. 25 there were 4 FS staff, 4 "More Kids" volunteers and 2 FS volunteers. 145 vehicles attended. \$693.81 was collected for the weekend at \$3/vehicle.
- *Feedback from the volunteers recommended that there be more volunteers (ideally 3- 4 per slope and 4 in the parking lot for a total of 10-12 volunteers plus FS staff to oversee), designated lanes on the slopes, law

enforcement presence, and a possibility of shorter work shifts.

*Seven of the 23 trained volunteers ended up working.

IV. Solutions and Priorities to Increase Winter Activities in the Future

Throughout this program, participants were reminded that their work would culminate in identifying possible solutions to increase winter activities in the Sandias for the future. In March 2015 the focus area groups met to draft these possible solutions and identify priorities for final public input in April. At the April Community Meeting, participants learned about the work of each group and lessons learned. They then had an opportunity to "vote" on their top priorities for the future.

Photos of the public priority posters are in Appendix I. Participants also provided additional written comments. Those comments are included in the summaries below and recorded in full in Appendix II.

The possible solutions and public priorities for each area follow.

Access Solutions: The public's top priorities to increase access to winter activities in the Sandias are:

- 1.The USFS should plow more parking lots in the "snow zone", including Nine-Mile Picnic Area and the front lots at Capulin. This would provide access to more winter trails and get more cars off the shoulder of Highway 536. Plowing should ideally be completed for each weekend during the winter.
- 2.The USFS should continue regular coordinating meetings with NMDOT, BCSO and others to plan for winter access and to communicate about special events, including any planned days for Capulin Snow Play to open.

Additional suggestions to improve access are:

- *The USFS and NMDOT should request NM Mounted Patrol help to manage traffic at Capulin.
- *NMDOT should be encouraged to close Highway 536 as needed to plow before traffic makes it too difficult to achieve complete clearing of the road.

Trails Solutions: The public's top priorities to increase opportunities for all user groups on winter trails in the Sandias are:

- 1.The USFS and volunteers should develop, groom and maintain "ski-only" trails away from the Service Road/Ellis area. This would build on the "experimental" groomed trail that was developed as part of the "More Kids" program. Volunteers are willing to purchase the equipment and do the work needed for these trails.
- 2.Volunteers and partners should continue to groom and maintain the Service Road for multiple users. The Sandia Peak Ski Area and UNM Ski Team coach already help with this work. Volunteers are willing to assist.
- 3.The USFS and volunteers should post trail and "trail etiquette" signs, especially along the Service Road. Trail signs would inform people about what uses and ability levels a given trail is designed to accommodate. Trail etiquette signs would teach the public how various users can share the trail without destroying it for other users. Volunteers are willing to post USFS-approved signs.

Additional suggestions to improve winter trails are:

- *Provide a storage site for grooming equipment near the top of the Tram. Volunteers are willing to work with the USFS and Sandia Peak Ski Area to identify a location and construct a building. This would make grooming much quicker and more frequent than the current practice of driving around the mountain from Albuquerque to groom.
- *The USFS should plow more parking lots to allow access to winter trails. This is the same suggestion made by the Access group and especially targets adding Nine-Mile and the Capulin front lots.
- *Several members of the Trails group would like to work on a permanent Winter Trails Committee with the Forest Service to continue developing winter trails options for all users.
- *Allow USFS volunteers to teach cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. Several "More Kids" collaboration members would like to help teach these skills.

Environmental Education Solutions: The public's top priorities to increase winter environmental education in the Sandias are:

- 1.The USFS should seek funding for a staff educator. This person would provide public programs; work with volunteers and partners to provide additional programs; and promote and coordinate education across the district.
- 2.The USFS and partners should hold one or more celebrations/events to introduce the public to activities across the district. The Sandia Crest House has already stated a desire to organize more events at their site.

Other suggestions to increase environmental education are:

- *USFS volunteers should be recruited and encouraged to offer EE across the district. This could include skills such as cross-country skiing or snowshoeing as well as traditional natural history and interpretation programs. Several "More Kids" members would like to do this.

- *The USFS should expedite the review of outfitter/guide applications so that these groups can begin offering programs. For example, REI, a member of the "More Kids" collaboration, has an application pending to offer a number of different classes in the Sandias.

Individual written comments include:

- *Provide programs for community centers and others that can bring youth, including preschoolers, to the Sandias.

- *Begin teaching winter skills at locations on the west side of the Sandias before bringing people into the mountains in the winter.

- *Research how other areas with undependable snow conditions conduct winter events.

- *Collect equipment such as youth skis and snowshoes that could be used for teaching winter skills. Los Vecinos and Vista Grande Community Centers have offered to house such equipment. Talking Talons Thrift Store could be a collecting point. Volunteers have already started collecting equipment.

Capulin Snow Play Solutions: Throughout this program, the "More Kids" collaboration recognized that the challenges of operating Capulin for snow play have increased greatly since it was created in 1979. Declining snowfall and rising temperatures have decreased the number of days Capulin can safely be open and have led to the loss of any contractors bidding to operate the area. This leaves the Forest Service with a decision - find a cost-acceptable way to operate Capulin for snow play - or close it.

Thus the first question asked the public was: Open or Close?

As you can see in Appendix I, the public overwhelmingly wants Capulin open for snow play. There were two or three dissenters, but they didn't go so far as to vote to close the area. They did comment that the only way to really solve the on-going problem would be to relocate snow play to a higher altitude - 10,00 feet or above - and that there are clear areas near Ellis Trailhead that might be used for that purpose.

If the Forest Service decides to open Capulin Snow Play in the future, the public's top priorities are:

- *Raise the fee for the area - most voted for a \$6 fee, but three suggested \$10

- *Staff the area with volunteers assisting USFS staff

- *Open the area weekends and holidays, ideally from APS winter break through Presidents' weekend

- *USFS undertake a 3 to 5 year plan of operation

- ?build the number of volunteers and decrease staff needs each year

- ?track all costs so the open/close decision can be revisited with more data at the end of the trial period

Other suggestions for the operation of Capulin are:

- *USFS seek other staffing solutions, such as youth corps workers or Americorps members

- *Utilize volunteers to help USFS prep the area

- *Publicize the open/close status regularly and widely
- *USFS continue to plow the parking area
- *USFS seek funding to hire winter seasonal staff

The Capulin group also asked the public if Capulin should be open for more activities year round, regardless of the snow play decision. The answer was unanimously "Yes". The activities suggested were (in priority order):

- *Interpretation/EE activities
- *Plow front lots and keep them open all year
- *Camping
- *Special events, e.g. astronomy nights
- *Research, including formal research, K-12 schools, universities and citizen science