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Comments: [External Email]Lutsen Mountains Ski Area Expansion Project

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Dear Supervisor Cummins,

Please see attached comment letter.

Thank you,

Alice West

218-213-4546

October 18, 2021

Constance Cummins, Forest Supervisor, c/o Michael Jimenez, Project Leader

Superior National Forest

8901 Grand Avenue Place

Duluth, MN 55808

Lutsen Mountains Ski Area Expansion Project

I am extremely opposed to the Special Use Permit (SUP) for the proposed expansion of the Lutsen Mountain Corporation (LMC) ski resort. I am asking that you deny permission to Lutsen Mountains to expand their operation onto public lands.

Lutsen Scientific and Natural Area

I am particularly concerned about the part of the proposed expansion on Eagle Mountain, which would allow the LMC to put ski runs right beside the Lutsen Scientific and Natural Area (SNA.)

The expansion plan calls for putting a ski run right on the border of, and uphill from, the SNA. Anything they do on that ski run -- erosion, snowmaking chemicals, and any kind of pollution -- will run downhill into the SNA.

On page 9, the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) says "The project area is not located in any congressionally designated areas, including wilderness or Research Natural Areas, and would therefore not impact any of these areas. The nearest wilderness area is the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) and is approximately 13 miles north while the nearest Research Natural Area is McCarthy Lake and Cedars approximately 85 miles south."

And yet, the EIS completely ignores the Lutsen Scientific and Natural Area, which borders LMC land for one half mile! Nowhere in the EIS is the Lutsen SNA even mentioned! The EIS doesn't even acknowledge the SNA's existence, let alone any plans to protect it from environmental damage the LMC's development will cause.

The proposed expansion, in the area uphill from the SNA, cannot be done without serious damage to the SNA.

Erosion

The EIS, page 221, says "Tree removal, terrain grading, and construction of new roads could create conditions leading to concentrated runoff and subsequent soil erosion and sediment transport. Tree removal and terrain grading can also substantially alter drainage patterns and lead to increased rates and/or duration of flows and subsequent soil erosion."

On these steep slopes, no development should be allowed that would cause erosion, particularly erosion into the SNA.

Invasive species

The Draft EIS, page 158 under Noxious Weeds, states "During the 2020 field surveys, MNR documented

invasive species that are currently present within Lutsen Mountains. A total of 26 non-native/invasive species were identified." and "Invasive species are most abundant on or along the edges of the ski trails."

The edges of the Eagle Mountain ski trails would be right on the edge of the SNA. The LMC has already allowed invasive species to spread on their own land. It is not okay to allow the LMC to spread invasive species into the SNA, or on any Forest Service land.

Snomax

The EIS says, beginning on page 19 "Snowmaking infrastructure would be installed on all new developed ski trails, for a total of 174.5 acres of snowmaking coverage. While snowmaking infrastructure would not be installed within gladed terrain, gladed terrain could receive supplemental coverage from snowmaking operations such as through carriage by wind. Snowmaking infrastructure necessary to support the proposed snowmaking system would include new pumps, valves, hydrants, and pump houses. Proposed snowmaking infrastructure would also include air, water, and power lines. These snowmaking lines would be located aboveground on the edges of the proposed ski trails and roads; the exact location of these lines would be determined during final design. Each trail would have a snowmaking line along its entire length. Up to two acres of ground disturbance would occur as snowmaking pipe is buried intermittently along the alignments as necessary; however, the majority of pipe would be aboveground and would not require ground disturbance."

On page 20, the EIS says "Lutsen Mountains' snowmaking operation currently includes the use of Snomax, a "snow inducer" based on bacteria proteins that improve the snow crystallization process, in a small minority of locations across the mountain. Therefore, Snomax may also be used in the snowmaking process under Alternative 2 but would be based on site-specific conditions and would not be used universally in the snowmaking system."

Beginning on page 218, the EIS states "Lutsen Mountains utilizes Snomax to improve its snowmaking operations. Snomax is a common snow inducer that improves the production of artificial snow by providing nuclei to which the crystallizing water molecules can attach. In the case of Snomax, the nuclei consist of proteins extracted from a naturally occurring microbe (Snomax itself contains no living micro-organisms). According to the Snomax manufacturer, the proteins are sterilized and freeze-dried making the end product a sterilized protein granule that easily dissolve in water. To assess the impacts of snowmaking additives such as Snomax on water quality in the project area, a search of scientific papers occurred; however, research indicates that this is an ongoing effort."

Artificial snowmaking involves bacterial accelerants with properties similar to pesticides and herbicides. Some studies have found Snomax to be toxic. This should not be allowed on any land where airborne drift from snowmaking or groundwater from melting snow might run downhill and contaminate the SNA, and injure the flora and fauna there.

Snomax is illegal in some countries:

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3360831/Could-Swiss-skiing-holiday-make-ILL-Snomax-fake-snow-banned-Austria-Germany-used-Alps-bad-health-says-French-study.html>

<https://www.pressreader.com/uk/scottish-daily-mail/20151216/282175060065936>

https://www.acschemmatters-digital.org/acschemmatters/december_2018/MobilePagedReplica.action?pm=2&folio=4#pg4

SNA

According to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) "Scientific and Natural Areas are not intended for intensive recreational activities or social events such as weddings. Restrictions on organized events help protect native plant communities and wildlife.

Complete Administrative Rule: MR 6136.0550, Subpart 1. (link is external) (Letter L)"
<https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/snas/rules.html>

Downhill skiing, as provided by LMC, is an intensive recreational activity. I did not see anything in the EIS which explains how LMC plans to keep their customers from straying onto the SNA and engaging in activities which are forbidden in the SNA. I did not see any provisions for preventing skiers from trespassing on and damaging the SNA. Uninformed tourists have damaged National Forest areas in the past. With a ski run only steps away from the SNA, there is nothing to prevent people from peeling bark from trees, skiing over small trees and shrubs and breaking them, and leaving refuse. Any structures erected to keep skiers out of the SNA would also limit the free movement of wildlife, and free flow of water.

Who is going to monitor this expansion process, to make sure the LMC does not build a ski run right into the SNA?

The application by the LMC should be rejected unless the LMC can clearly demonstrate that their proposal will not in any way impact the SNA, now or in the future. Any agreement between the Forest Service and the LMC

needs to have penalties for any incursions into the SNA. These penalties need to be stiff enough to deter the LMC from any violations. The Forest Service needs to monitor what the LMC is doing, and take enforcement action if they trespass or damage the SNA in any way.

The Special Use Permit should not be approved until it can be shown that the expansion cannot lead to damage to the SNA.

Recreation

Currently, the Forest Service lands included in LMC's proposal are open to everyone for recreation, including hiking, camping, birding, backcountry skiing, snowshoeing, and hunting. If the LMC gets their way, these areas will be closed off to everyone except those who can afford \$97 plus tax for a one-day ski pass. (Lutsen Mountains website) If the LMC wants a larger ski area, they should go buy their own property somewhere to do that, instead of taking it away from the American people. Why should we have to pay LMC in order to recreate on land that belongs to us?

Tribal Resources

On page 141, the EIS starts talking about tribal resources. Haven't white people stolen enough land from Native Americans? Haven't white people broken enough treaties with Native Americans? My answer to both questions is "yes, and it is time to stop."

It is not hard to imagine what LMC's answers would be. It is appalling that LMC would even consider expanding their operations onto 1854 Treaty land, and even more appalling if the Forest Service agrees to let them do it.

Lake Superior Pollution

The EIS discusses the various watersheds LMC's expansion would affect. This ski resort has a well-established history of polluting the Poplar River. Are we to assume that they would not pollute again?

The Poplar River, and all rivers on the North Shore, drain into Lake Superior. Lake Superior contains approximately 10% of the world's fresh water. Are you willing to risk erosion, snowmaking chemicals, and other runoff from LMC's infrastructure polluting Lake Superior? All that fresh water seems like it would be worth

considerably more than a ski resort.

Climate Change

Climate change is known to be a planet-wide crisis. Trees are known to sequester carbon. To help alleviate climate change, we need more trees! We do not need more tree cutting, clearing, buildings, emissions, and pavement. No new developments, including this one, should be allowed unless they are carbon-neutral. This development does not produce food, housing, or anything else people need. It will only supply entertainment for an elite few, and make a few rich people richer, at the expense of everyone else.

All the infrastructure proposed in the EIS is not carbon-neutral. Currently, 55% of Cook County's electricity comes from coal. (Interview with John Twiest, Arrowhead Electric CEO, October 14, 2021)

We are in a climate emergency! The Forest Service should be doing everything possible to preserve and expand our forests. The Forest Service should be helping to slow rising temperatures. This ski resort expansion will contribute to climate change.

Arrowhead Electric

If LMC is allowed to go ahead with this expansion, Arrowhead Electric Co-Op will need to build a new substation to handle all of LMC's new infrastructure. That substation is estimated to cost two million dollars. Because Arrowhead Electric is a member-owned cooperative, the cost of that substation will be incurred by its 4300 members/customers. (Interview with John Twiest, Arrowhead Electric CEO, October 14, 2021) Two million, divided by 4300, equals \$465, the average amount each customer will have to spend for the new substation.

It's expensive enough already to live in Cook County. Is it right for everyone who uses electricity in this county to have to pay for a substation for a ski resort? Especially when many of us can't afford to ski there?

Opening a can of worms

The rationale for the SUP appears to be that the Forest Service lands are supposed to provide recreation. If this ski resort expansion is approved because it provides recreation, what is to stop other recreation businesses from applying for permits?

There are dog mushers in Cook County who sell dogsled rides. That is a recreational business. Some of them have been denied permits to set up kennels on their own property because the neighbors don't want barking dogs. Those dog mushers might like acres of Forest Service land for their business. If one of them applies for an SUP, how could you deny it, after approving LMC? What about someone who wants to start a horseback riding stable? I could probably get a loan for horses and equipment, but land in Cook County is too expensive for me. Maybe I should apply for an SUP.

My point is that if you approve LMC's plan, you are setting a precedent. Everyone is going to want an SUP. If you approve one, how can you justify not approving the next one? And thereby giving away more and more of the National Forest, one piece at a time?

Financial Assurance

Who is going to clean up their mess? Should the taxpayers have to foot the bill for LMC's profits?

The Forest Service should require LMC to have funds set aside to pay for any environmental damage they cause to Forest Service lands, the SNA, the rivers, and Lake Superior. They should also require LMC to set funds aside for restoring Forest Service land to its preexisting condition when skiing is no longer taking place. Due to climate change, this may happen sooner than expected.

In order to ensure compliance, the LMC should be required to place in trust enough money to cover the cost of any expense the state of Minnesota may incur in mitigating any damage the LMC may cause to the SNA.

A gift to all Minnesotans

Lloyd Scherer donated 240 acres to the State of Minnesota for this SNA, to be protected in perpetuity in its natural state. He and his family were not rich; they donated this land because they loved this old-growth northern hardwood forest, and they trusted the Minnesota DNR to protect it for all Minnesotans, into the future. Protecting this forest was more important than money.

From the Lutsen SNA website:

"This site's ridges, slopes, cliffs and valleys support one of the largest blocks of essentially undisturbed old-growth northern hardwood forest in Minnesota.

At the heart of the SNA is the 240-acre Scherer Conservation Unit, donated to the state for this purpose by local landowner Lloyd Scherer and his family. Scherer had purchased the land in three parcels in the late 60s and 70s, understanding the value and rarity of its undisturbed forest. In the following years he spent countless hours walking the site in all seasons, becoming intimately familiar with the forest and the wildlife that inhabited it: wolves, pine marten, deer, red fox. He was determined that it would not be lost to logging or development.

The Scherer family gift spurred protection of additional land at the site. Soon after its designation, the SNA tripled in size when acreage to the east and south was acquired with the help of the Trust for Public Land.

This is a rugged landscape, with parts of two ridges of the Sawtooth Mountain Range. Eagle Mountain and Raven Ridge rise over a thousand feet above Lake Superior, about two miles to the southeast. The Minnesota Biological Survey has documented ten native plant communities on the 720-acre SNA, including 276 acres of old-growth northern hardwood forest and upland white cedar forest. Individual trees as of 2017 include a 213-year old white cedar, 135-year old yellow birch and 123-year old white spruce.**

As one can see on the detail map PDF, upland areas of the SNA are dominated by sugar maple forest, aspen-birch forest (balsam fir subtype) and white cedar - yellow birch forest. North and northwest-facing slopes of both ridges host upland white cedar forest, while the steeper, rocky slopes of Eagle Mountain support scrub talus (rocky slope at base of a cliff) and mafic (igneous rock rich in iron and magnesium) cliff communities. Lower elevations are occupied by lowland white cedar forest, black spruce swamp and part of a large beaver complex that extends onto adjacent land."

This site is an Audubon Important Bird Area.

<https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/snass/detail.html?id=sna01070>

From the kiosk in the SNA, at the intersection of the cross-country ski trail and the snowmobile trail:

"These are very old forests with some trees estimated to be more than 300 years old."

"Lloyd Scherer spent much time in the woods. He once noted with a laugh "It's my life."

"He could have sold the land for a large sum, but for Lloyd this land was not about money."

It is repugnant that any corporation could damage such a beautiful and precious place, just to make more money, and horrifying that any federal or state agency would allow them to do it.

Conclusion

This expansion should not be approved.

Please choose the "No Action" Alternative for the proposed Special Use Permit for a Lutsen Mountains expansion.

Sincerely,

Alice West