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First name: Mae

Last name: Smith

Organization:

Title:

Comments: Re: United States Forest Service Pole Creek Vegetation Management Project Comments

I would like to preface this letter by saying that I believe in active forest management. I also know that the mission of the USFS is multiple use and that timber is one of those uses. However, there are appropriate and inappropriate locations and times for certain management activities and not all uses are compatible. Timber management, specifically clear cuts and heavy thinning, are not compatible with winter recreation use in the Pole Creek and 449 Ski areas because of the potential for snow loss throughout the season. These management actions would be more appropriate in other areas identified in the maps. According to the scoping documents, there is "Roughly 37,000 acres of land classified as suitable for timber production is located within this project area." (USFS, 2022) My request is that the Pole Creek and Powder Pass 449 cross country ski areas be removed from the Pole Creek vegetation management project.

Wyoming residents (and those who travel through) need the opportunity for safe, winter outdoor recreation. Cross country skiing provides a very low cost and active option. Pole Creek is the only ski area in Johnson County that is groomed for skate skiing and these ski areas have been maintained for over 50 years. Snow cover can be tenuous on minimal snow years like we saw the last two winters. With extensive tree removal, the snow will blow away, making this area no longer skiable. This area should be designated as a winter recreation area and exempted from future possibility of major forest thinning and clear cuts that would cause extensive snow loss.

I am on the Powder Pass Nordic club board, am the Sheridan Junior High school cross country ski coach and an avid Nordic skier so am invested in the maintenance and improvement of the ski areas. I have volunteered numerous hours and equipment use for the trail maintenance at Pole Creek ski area. Many others have as well with an estimated value of over \$100,000 in volunteer time. I have been involved in the grant writing and fundraising efforts to maintain the trails and making this ski area the great resource that it is. The county has also invested over \$150,000 in funding for trail maintenance and events that encourage winter outdoor recreation. These resources would be wasted if this area no longer held enough snow to maintain trails for skiing and other forms of winter recreation.

In addition, I have volunteered my time to teach ski clinics for the Powder Pass Nordic club at Pole Creek. These events supported the local ski shop through rentals and retail sales and encouraged future use of the ski trails. As the ski coach, I have brought the ski team to Pole Creek trails too. It is so important to connect our youth to the outdoors, especially in the winter time, and easy access to maintained ski trails makes this easy and fun. Loss of the ski area would result in loss of revenue for the local businesses in the short and long-term and discourage winter recreation for youth and adults.

Highway 16 is designated as a scenic byway. I see on the maps that there is a small buffer along the highway where it is designated as thinning but it is pretty minimal. The viewshed will drastically change with clear cuts and thinning operations right next to the road. It will certainly change the view from the ski trails if the trees are removed.

The WUI buffers around structures are unnecessarily large. According to Fremont County FireWise, the vegetation removal buffer recommended is 100-200 feet while the buffers created in the scoping maps are 1760 feet or 1/3 mile (10 times greater than recommended). These buffers can be reduced and still meet FireWise objectives while avoiding much of the Pole Creek ski area.

In summary, there have been extensive human and financial resources invested into the Pole Creek and Powder Pass 449 ski areas to allow for winter recreation for the last 50 years. These ski areas provide enjoyment, physical activity, connection to nature and socioeconomic benefit to the local community and beyond. The proposed vegetation management project would remove enough trees that snow capture would be minimal and would drastically alter the viewshed, rendering these ski areas no longer useable for winter recreation. There are tens of thousand of acres of saleable timber on the Bighorn National Forest. I request that these two ski areas, as well as a large buffer, be removed from this vegetation management project proposal and that they are designated as non-motorized recreation areas to protect them into the future.