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Comments: Comments on Lutsen Mountains Expansion Project

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I am writing in support of the Forest Service proposed Special Use Permit for Lutsen Mountains expansion.

As a local resident and employee at Lutsen Mountains I am keenly aware of the role Lutsen Mountains plays in our local economy. I have served on local tourism boards for 35 years, working closely with our regional partners. Tourism accounts for nearly 80% of our local economy. Many of these businesses need year-round traffic to be sustainable. In the winter, alpine skiers and snowboarders account for approximately 70% of the visits in the Lutsen/Tofte area. The success of Lutsen Mountains is integral to the survival of these businesses and by association, the entire Cook County economy.

As an avid skier, I appreciate the draw the expansion terrain would bring. I ski Lutsen 30&#43; days per season. I have skied at dozens of resorts in the West developed on USFS land and studied the impact they have on their communities. I have skied at every ski area in Minnesota. At each of these locations I visit with skiers on the lift, in the chalets and in the community. Lutsen is unique in the Midwest as a true destination resort. Guests are rarely choosing between Lutsen and other Midwest areas for their vacation, but rather evaluating between Lutsen and the western resorts. The bar for terrain and facilities has been set by large multi-resort conglomerates. While Lutsen will always be smaller in scale, it must continue to grow and develop to remain a viable choice as a ski vacation destination.

I am also a frequent user of our National Forest. I camp each summer at our Forest Service campgrounds. I forage for berries and mushrooms. I visit the BWCAW 5&#43; days per year. I have hiked most sections of the Superior Hiking Trail. I have backcountry skied the proposed SUP area along with other slopes along the Sawtooth ridge. I have beat the bush on public lands throughout Cook County for ducks and grouse and deer. What I have learned is how vast this public treasure is, and how simple it is to find solitude with a five minute walk from anywhere you might find a crowd. I appreciate the recreational opportunities the Forest Service provides, yet also realize I am not the only user. When my favorite mushroom forest is suddenly a clear cut, I understand. I search for a new spot, perhaps return in a few years looking for berries, and respect that the Forest Service has a monumental task in balancing commerce and recreation of this public asset.

There has been some pushback from the backcountry ski community regarding this proposal. As a participant myself, I can affirm that there are better locations within the national and state forests along the North Shore for alpine touring. The SUP area has a thick band of balsam mid-slope followed by a talus ledge of broken rock. Significant clearing and perhaps some moderate snowmaking are needed to make this a safe and enjoyable full length run. LeVeaux Mountain, Caribou Lake and Agnes Lake are just a few nearby slopes that are underused and offer much better terrain and access for backcountry skiing. The passion for this slope is less about its terrain and driven more by easy access from trespass on private land or by using lift access and skiing beyond

the current ski area boundary. This creates an untenable risk for search & rescue, including for those who may follow tracks unwittingly into terrain not suitable for the unprepared skier.

It appears rerouting of trails by other users - snowmobile, cross-country ski and the Superior Hiking Trail - are easily mitigated in the plan and in many respects will enhance access, awareness and use of these complementary activities.

I am thankful that we don't have a proposal for a much more significant use of our National Forest, such as a copper nickel mine, in our immediate back yard. Should that proposal proceed on the other side of the forest, I am hopeful the USFS has the ability to require the protection of the surrounding forest and water resource. And while a ski area will never generate the same revenue as a mining operation, its impact on jobs and the local economy is perhaps not that different. This is a moderate proposal with limited resource impact, fitting within the Forest Service recreation management plan that can be an anchor for the next generation of Cook County residents and North Shore visitors. Thank you for your willingness to review and hopefully approve this proposal.

Sincerely,  
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