Data Submitted (UTC 11): 4/5/2021 8:00:00 AM
First name: Richard
Last name: Shellhorn
Organization:
Title:
Comments: Subject: Comments on Cordova District Ranger Guided Helicopter Skiing Project #59615

I have already submitted various comments on this project, and will submit another one after analyzing data received from Jennifer L. MacDonald regarding acreage involved in this project.

In this comment I would like to focus in more detail on the impact this proposal would have on outdoor recreational users in Cordova. As noted before, I was born here, have lived here all my life, and am an avid winter time enthusiast, including XC and backcountry skiing, camping, ice skating, and hiking.

I love the outdoors, and I love having a place like Cordova that offers such easy access to it. I also greatly appreciate that we have all been able to share this area while compromising on potential conflicts, which in this case, applies to helicopters impacting our quality outdoor experiences.

I notice on page 4 of the Scoping Proposal a section titled Need for the Proposal, and the first item listed is "Connecting people with the outdoors", which mentions that "providing recreation services is a key part of the Forest Service mission."

I assume that implies the USFS being caretakers of the marvelous experiences the outdoors gives all of us, and managing the areas with that as one of the goals in mind.

It is ironic that heliski operators list an increased demand for their services as the major justification for their request for expanded areas in which to operate.

I submit that the increased demand referred to by heliski operators is also reflected within the people of Cordova. Over the past few years there has been a significant growth in outdoor recreation by locals, for at least four reasons.

1.
The expansion and improvement of outdoor access by the USFS itself. Examples include the "Sand Trail" parking lot and trail at 10 mile on the Copper River Highway. Rare is the day there are not cars parked there, for hikers, bikers, skiers, snow shoeing, snow machining, or 4 wheeling. Another is the recently improved access trail to Sheridan Lake in front of Sheridan Glacier. On some weekends there has been such demand that vehicles have overwhelmed the parking area, with over 100 enthusiasts skating, fat tire biking, kick sledding, or hiking across its marvelous ice berg imbedded terrain. Improvements and extensions of the Haystack trail, Muskeg Meander trail, and Saddlebag Glacier trail have attracted many users year round, as have cabins including ones in Power Creek Basin, the hut on the Crater Lake - Power Creek ridge-line trail, and the cabins at McKinley Lake. I could go on and on. The USFS has done a great job of enhancing outdoor recreation.

2.
Improved equipment which means further access off the road. This includes fat tire bikes, better XC skis and skates, kick sleds, GPS technology, improved climbing skins for skis and split snowboards, lightweight snow shoes, skijoring with dogs, high tech clothing, as well as snow machine or four wheeler improvements. Even something as mundane as toe warmers has made a difference.

3.
The Covid Pandemic. Never has there been a year in our lives when the outdoors has been such a priceless

and healthy safety valve, and here in Cordova, people have been out and about in record numbers, regardless of the weather. On days when conditions up high are not suitable, due to weather or avalanche conditions, I walk 5 miles on Power Creek Road along the edge of Eyak Lake, and it is amazing how many locals have discovered that to be a healthy and inspiring way to breathe in fresh air and change their outlook. These people are "hooked" on the outdoors now, and the demand will continue to grow. The same applies for all the other outdoor activities.

4. What is known locally as "Going out the Road". All of us enjoy drives out on the Copper River Highway, and especially those who for various reasons are unable to get out and about otherwise. It's an opportunity to spot wildlife, or just enjoy the beautiful, peaceful scenery. Sight seeing is especially popular from the parking lot at the end of the Eyak Lake at Mile
5.
Locals view the swan gathered at the open water there, and scan the nearby Queen's Chair, which backcountry skiers access by skiing across the lake, or hiking in from Mile 7, to enjoy spectacular skiing of all degrees of difficulty within its unique bowl. The USFS Alaganik Landing road at 17 mile is also a favorite drive for spotting moose right near the road, with a backdrop of mountains beyond the nearby highway so spectacular that I call them Cordova's Grand Tetons.

I could go on and on. I am deeply concerned about the parts of the Scoping Proposal that lists proposed changes in helicopter operations and flight paths adjacent to the highway and side roads; particularly up the Scott and Sheridan Glacier drainages, that could impact the quality of these experiences.

Right now, access to heliski areas is by flying up the Rude River drainage only. And it should remain that way, regardless of what areas are added.

My concerns are both for visual and audible intrusion created by their overflight and noise, including instances of ferrying clientele to mountains very close to these byways, depending on which acreage is allowed for their operation. It is noteworthy that several pages of the Scoping Proposal are dedicated to describing ways to mitigate that impact, which in itself reveals an awareness of those very problems.

A classic example of such impact would be overflight of ground based people out enjoying Sheridan Glacier, and having heliski choppers overfly to then "yo-yo-ing" skiers on nearby mountains. The same could happen on the Queen's Chair.

Another example is possible overflight of XC skiers and yo yo-ing of clientele in nearby mountains on the Scott River drainage above the highway. This area has become so popular that the State DOT may have to expand the parking area at 10 Mile, due to cars beings forced to park on the edge of the highway when the existing parking area is full.

I will propose, in a following comment, that based on acreage alone, regions 10, 11, and 12 on the map on page 3 of the Scoping Proposal should be off limits to heliski operations. The distance that helicopters would have to fly to reach new added areas (1- 9, 13) would be an extension of flight paths which they now travel, and eliminate the need for overflight up the Scott and Sheridan drainages, as well as anywhere along the highway, including over Cordova, Eyak Lake, and residential areas at Mile 6.

In my next comment, I will provide a proposal that greatly expands the areas heliskiers can utilize, as requested in their proposal; while also retaining closely accessible areas for non-ski operations, and not allowing overflights or heli-ski operations in those areas.

That sounds like a win-win to me.

Sincerely,

Dick Shellhorn
Cordova, Alaska 99574