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First name: Marc
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Organization:
Title:
Comments: Re: Environmental Assessment for the Cordova Ranger District Guided Helicopter Skiing Project # 59615

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Scoping Proposal for Cordova Ranger District Guided Helicopter Skiing Project. I am a Cordova resident, backcountry skier and subsistence hunter. I am opposed to expanding the guided helicopter skiing area to sectors 10, 11 and 12 because of noise pollution, conflicts with existing users and disturbance to wildlife. I am also opposed to the use of the Cordova municipal airport by heli-ski businesses.

Currently, the one heli-ski business in Cordova (Points North Heli-Adventures) solely operates out of Orca Lodge. Flight paths typically head away from the community and therefore do not disturb local residences. The Cordova Municipal Airport is lightly used by small, fixed wing planes and occasionally a helicopter flying maintenance missions. Expanding use of the municipal airport to heli-skiing businesses will substantially increase the amount of flight noise to surrounding residences as these businesses need to fly multiple flights every day to shuttle groups of clients to and from their skiing areas.

In the scoping proposal flight paths are from the Cordova Municipal Airport through the "gap" between Queen's Chair and Wolverine. Frequent helicopter traffic from possibly multiple different heli-skiing companies will cause significant noise disturbance for the 200+ residences along Power Creek Rd, LeFevre, Lake Ave, Lake Shore Dr., Elmer's Point Dr., Highland Dr., Alpine Falls, the Copper River Highway, 5-mile Loop Road and Eyak Drive.

The scoping proposal also indicates that flight height over the Copper River Highway is unrestricted. Helicopter noise would become audible all along the Copper River Highway, which is frequented by much of the community both for recreation and for hunting/trapping access. The proposed flight paths up the Sheridan and Scott rivers are in direct conflict with existing Forest Service trails and other user groups.
Cordovans spend much of the year exploring the backcountry for both recreation and hunting and trapping. There are numerous trails, cabins and much wild terrain accessible on foot or on skis in the areas proposed for heli-ski access, particularly in sectors 10, 11, and 12. Opening these areas to heli-skiing would disturb the users' peace with loud helicopter traffic and possibly lead to dangerous conflicts between user groups.

In the scoping proposal heli-skiers may not "land above nor ski onto an avalanche path above any observed people". However, in much of the terrain it will not be possible for heli-ski guides to see backcountry users ascending. Even on slopes that are not deemed "avalanche paths" a helicopter or a large group of skiers could trigger a loose snow slide that could be dangerous to those below. The safety protocols outlined in the proposal are insufficient in areas heavily used by locals.

The proposed expanded heli-skiing area includes terrain that is critical wintertime habitat for mountain goats, brown and black bears, wolverines, wolves, coyotes, moose and more. Units 10, 11 and 12 in particular include or border known rich wildlife habitat areas, such as the Power Creek Valley, Scott River Valley, Queens Chair, Sheridan Mountain, McKinley Lake and Salmon Creek. Helicopter flight noise, fuel cashes, and large groups of skiers descending the mountainsides can disrupt feeding, resting and hibernating wildlife. The scoping proposal allows for total self-regulation by heli-skiing companies when it comes to wildlife protection with no oversight. If a pilot sees an animal they may fly a 1500ft minimum above it. However this policy will not protect hibernating animals or those who are camouflaged or out of sight.

The existing heli-skiing area and the use of Orca Lodge as take off and landing area keeps helicopter traffic

away from Cordova and areas that can be accessed by local users. This arrangement has lead to locals welcoming heli-skiers as guests to our community every year. Points North Heli-Adventures has been responsive to the needs of the community and refrained from landing on nearby peaks that are accessible to locals. Without formally establishing protocol, however, Cordovans will be relying solely on the good will of all future heli-ski businesses to do the same.
Cordova is a tiny, isolated town. We have only 36 miles of road and a very limited area we can access for recreation and hunting. There are thousands of acres of remote wilderness far from town or the road system that a helicopter can easily access. Expanding heli-skiing to our local peaks and road-accessible wilderness is both insensitive to the community and unnecessary.

I am opposed to the project scope as proposed. Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

Marc Carrel
Cordova, Alaska