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Comments: May 4, 2022

James Duran, Forest Supervisor
c/o Paul Schilke, Winter Sports Coordinator
P.O. Box 110
Questa, NM 87556

Re: Comment for Scoping Period for Taos Ski Valley Gondola and Other Improvements.

Dear Supervisor Duran:

I have been residents of Taos County since 1976. During those forty-six years, I have been active in civic, community and environmental organizations including the "Committee to Save the Rio Hondo." One of the main reasons I live in Taos is to partake in the pristine wilderness that surrounds the Taos Valley. During the last four decades, I have witnessed a small family operated Taos Ski Valley morph into a corporation whose main mission is real estate development.

The purpose of my letter is to request that a thorough examination be done as to the effects of the proposed expansion of the Taos Ski Valley via an Environmental Impact Statement [EIS]. The Ski Area Outdoor Recreation Enhancement Act (SAOREA) and Forest Service Manual (FSM) provide direction on what activities and developments are permissible concerning ski areas operating on Forest Service lands. FSM2343.14(1)g directs that activities and associated facilities at ski resorts increase utilization of snow sports facilities and not require extensive new support facilities, such as parking lots, restaurants and lifts. The expansion plans in the proposed action by the Taos Ski Valley require new support facilities including lifts, roads, and restaurants. This is in direct conflict with FSM direction and must be addressed in the Draft EIS.

Therefore, I also request that Carson National Forest and its contractors (CNF) study, provide data, and analyze the following potential impact in the upcoming Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Proposed Action:

Impacts to Water, Wildlife, Environment, & Aesthetics

1.IMPACTS TO WATER RESOURCES. The Proposed Action seeks to install a septic system or sanitary line based on engineering recommendations, with water supplies coming from onsite wells to support on the on-mountain guest service facility at the top of lift 7 and the new Whistle Stop building. These developments would not only require significant quantities of water, but also potentially impact water quality in the project area as well as water quality in the ground and surface waters within the Rio Hondo Watershed. The disturbance of soils along the Lake Fork of the Rio Hondo for installation of the gondola and all its towers will result in impacts to the stream and must be studied diligently.

Recommendation: The DEIS must comprehensively evaluate the direct, indirect and cumulative impacts of the Proposed Action on water resources. Specifically, the DEIS must examine the potential impacts to water quality, ground water supplies, surface water supplies including drinking and agricultural water supplies for the nearby towns of Taos Ski Valley, Amizette, Valdez, Arroyo Seco, and Arroyo Hondo. The impact on the sensitive aquatic habitat for trout in the Rio Hondo and the Rio Grande needs to be studied as well as essential drinking water for

the terrestrial wildlife. I request the study to take into account the impact on downstream acequia users. I request that you consult with the Taos Valley Acequia Association in order to evaluate what specific effects the Proposed Action would have on local acequias.

2.Impacts to Wildlife. I believe the Carson National Forest published an undated, "Potential Species of Conservation Concern in June of 2020. Would you please analyze the impact that these projects could have on the known species in the Wheeler Peak Wilderness and the greater CNF. Given the significance of climate change, the increase risk of wild fires, the increased recreational use that is already impacting wildlife listed, I believe any extra disturbance of habitat is harmful and recommend a full EIS to study the impacts on the species listed.

3.Impact on the Wheeler Peak Wilderness. The TSV is adjacent to the one of New Mexico's most sensitive Wilderness Areas and has the highest mountain in New Mexico, Wheeler Peak. According to the Wilderness Act, Public Law 88-577 (16 U.S.C. 1131-1136), the NFS is one of the federal agencies assigned to protect and enforce this act.

Section 2 of this act states the following:

"In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness."

The proposed actions would interrupt and violate the purpose and scope of the 1964 Wilderness act by increasing mechanization, population and urbanization in lands directly contiguous to the Wheeler Peak Wilderness.

Recommendation: With the NFS being stewards of the Wilderness Act, I request that you re-examine with regard to the resultant effects of increased mechanization, population and urbanization, all of which are contrary to the intention of this Act.

I also request that the CNF prepare a full EIS that will clarify the results of your study with the recommendations pursuant to your findings, while upholding the spirit of the Wilderness Act. There is a great incompatibility between increased populations and mechanized use and the wilderness experience. Continued expansion of the TSV diminishes the goals and purposes of the Wilderness Act.

4.Impacts to Regional Sustainability and Quality of Life. The Scoping Letter refers to "promoting sustainability on NFS and adjacent lands." More building and more mechanization is not a formula for sustainability. Where is a plan for alternative energy and managed or limitations on the skier population? Continued growth in a fragile alpine environment is clearly not "sustainable." TSV has been in an unsustainable growth mode since the installation of the Kachina Peak chair lift in the summer of 2014. Larger and more expensive homes and hotels have been constructed and continue to be planned and promoted. That is the master plan of the TSV. I request that CNF explain in what ways these proposed actions are promoting sustainability on the NFS and adjacent lands. I submit that they are not.

5.Additional Considerations: There is a need for a DEIS to address these additional areas: recreation, disturbances to vegetation, and over all skier safety including avalanche hazards are all items that should also be examined in the EIS. I request that you also consider the Impact on overall traffic along the ski valley road as well as in the town and county of Taos.

Concluding Comments

It might not be the intention of the Carson National Forest, but the request for comments letter sounds very much like the proposed project has already been endorsed and supported by the CNF. It is ironic that at the bottom of the letterhead on the first page there is this statement, "Caring for Land and Serving People." I do not believe that these proposed improvements will be "caring," for the land as much as they will be caring for the bottom line of the Taos Ski Valley Corporation. I find it distressing that the CNF in its request for comments did not bother to inform the public why these comments are important in regard to the obvious environmental impacts. Surely, CNF knows better than anyone how to write a "comment letter," that will be impactful. Other than mentioning to include the heading, "Taos Ski Valley Gondola and Other Improvements Project," and signing your name, there are not any guidelines or information on what makes for a viable comment letter that would compel the CNF to accept and consider its content. An obvious example would be to explain the differences and benefits between an environmental assessment and an environmental impact statement. If the NFS has an evaluation process that determines what kind of comments are considered and what kind are not, surely that information would be important for the writer to know so their time and effort is not wasted. Simply giving a number to call if you have any questions is a meager way to help the public exercise their legal rights.

The current operation of TVS has serious problems that should be remedied before any future expansion is even considered. In the April 28th issue of the Taos News it says:

"A recently completed Water Master Plan showed unaccounted for water (water lost through leaks or unauthorized connections) represented, on average 80 percent of the communities supplied-water from 2014 to 2020, or about 135,000 gallons per day. A typical public water system in the U.S. has a loss rate of 16 percent." Is it just coincidence that is the same time period of the ongoing expansion of TSV? I doubt it. It is again ironic that Taos Ski Valley has managed to find a way to garner public funds for their private enterprise to try and fix the problems they created. In the same way, TSV is using public lands for their own aggrandizement, not for the benefit of the local population or natural environment. I strongly recommend no further construction or expansion of TSV on public lands until all these proposed projects are evaluated in the context of what is the greater good for the people and land of Taos. We are currently in the midst of the worst fire in New Mexico history coupled with unprecedented drought. I submit Is this not a time for hasty expansion and poor use of our limited natural resources.

Respectfully,

Bruce Grossman