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Title:

Comments: RE: Taos Ski Valley Gondola and Other Improvements Project

Snow making, as such, is a competitive marketing tool and advantage because it's been a proven value to ski areas. Early season openings as a result of snow making generates early reservations and deposits by out-of-state destination visitor skiers. Ski season well into May and even summer accommodates more skier days as experienced by Arapahoe Basin in Colorado. Arapahoe closes mid-June, the last close of any ski area. It's been something of a dictum, 'Make snow and they will come.'

I am a long time resident of Arroyo Seco, 8 miles 'down the hill'. I farm several acres of land with full legal 'paper' water rights. I have irrigated this land since 1992 with what we call 'wet' water rights. I participate in annual meetings of Acequia Madre del Rio Lucero de Arroyo Seco. I participate in Reparto (water division) meetings every 6 days during irrigation season as a direct result of snow melt coming down mountain. This water also recharges the water aquifer underlying the irrigated lands at the base of these mountains.

The drought monitor map on noaa.gov, today, reveals the the status of Taos County as accelerating to Extreme drought (the Red Zone). About 1/3 of New Mexico is in Exceptional drought. As I write this, 165,276 acres just east of Taos have been scorched; containment is 20%; a total of 1,284 firefighters. This is a Type 1 Incident Command, the most extensive firefighting system in this country. The Haines Index: 6 . . . it doesn't go higher: desiccated fuels, high temperatures, low humidity converge into life endings and survival. More wildfire evacuees arrived today, May 5th, into Taos with their horses, dogs and livestock. It will take many lifetimes to restore this environment if ever at all.

Some would say that snow making returns the water to the watershed when the snow melts. Indeed. That said, and as often quoted, 300" average snow falls each year on TSV. That would be a statistic from the late 80s-early 90s. A look at the data reveals that the annual average over the last two decades has decreased significantly.

The claim of 200 acre feet of water diversion by TSV would substantially reduce irrigation water necessary to our communities here. These lands would desertify as acreages further towards the gorge have already without water rights.

The proposal to build and fill a tank with water, 50 feet high (5 stories) by 150 feet in diameter is stunning and overwhelming. This tank would reserve 5,000,000 gallons of water for snow making. That's the equivalent of 15+Acre Feet. Withholding this exceptional volume of water would indeed all but stop irrigation of lands with active working wet water rights.

In addition to drying out these lands, the aquifer underlying would cease to recharge . . . and a natural water cycle would be broken. The carefully tended Acequia system would suffer and decline.

TSV would become a 4 season resort with additional winter and summer sports and activities. The SUP, Special Use Permit, of 1,286 acres total would not appear to support such a degree of expansion. The limited amount of private buildable land available at the base of Phoenix (backside) would require substantial development in addition to the proposed Gondola bringing 1,800 People Per Hour into a sensitive wildlife environment.

As a Winter-only ski resort, the other 3 seasons have offered a respite and time of recovery from ski mountain pressures on the forest and its' wildlife that supports us all.

One of my passions is skiing Taos Ski Valley. It's taken a lifetime to arrive at 12,481 feet, Kachina Peak, the highest chair lift in the world. I most definitely feel very fortunate to be one of the few to ski this peak. Taos Ski Valley is not the most accommodating to blue and green skiers. Fifty-Five percent, 55%, of Taos Ski Valley terrain is undeniably Expert status. Dispersal of skiers across the mountain from both sides is disingenuous. On January 17, 2019, two skiers died beneath an avalanche at Kachina Peak in spite of the very high caliber of Ski Patrol.

To conclude this comment letter, there are so many more points to address, but I felt that focusing first on snow making, irrigation water, drought and wildfire is only a beginning. I feel that it is imperative that the Forest Supervisor requires an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). I would offer to participate in further discussions.