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Comments: As a longtime user of and avalanche safety instructor for the Mt Baker backcountry, it is obvious on any trip to Heather Meadows trailhead that our area needs more winter trailheads and opportunity for public access for backcountry skiing. Backcountry visitation around Mt Baker has exploded in the past four years, causing dangerous overcrowding on the runs, conflicts with ski area parking and an unregulated, booming commercial guide market in the most popular Table Mountain zone-along with massive increases in snowshoer traffic that often is under-equipped for travel in avalanche terrain. The combination has created a scenario that hungers for long view solutions.

So first, I commend the Forest Service for exploring options to expand both day and overnight access for this rapidly growing sport and user demographic of backcountry skiers that some of your own visitation studies estimate grew by 400% since 2020, yet received no additional trailheads, parking or additional facility funding in Washington from the USFS or National Parks.

However, any attempt to allow commercial gain from these proposed facilities should also come with a parallel effort to increase public access and add backcountry trailhead parking for backcountry skiers and snowboarders in those same zones. Allowing commercial operations, even well meaning ones, to profit without any public access benefit ignores an essential opportunity to shape a recreational vision for the greatest public benefit. On the trail side, allowing a private hut without maintaining the road or expanding parking seems very skewed against the public good.

I urge the USFS to start thinking equitably about commercial gain and public access as backcountry skiing booms, snow levels climb and our outdoor recreation population continues to get squeezed by a lack of expansion of access, parking and opportunity. If these elements are shifted to a win-win, where backcountry skiers gain new access, road maintenance and parking at the proposed hut zones (or the huts are managed by a non-profit org), then the public benefit may match commercial gain.

I ask that you tread carefully and not miss an opportunity to create more access for a booming user group nor prioritize projects that only create a steeper cost for access to our public lands as you evaluate and review these three proposed projects.

-Sincerely

Dan Kostrzewski