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Organization:

Title:

Comments: Dear USFS,

I would like to officially ask some questions and object to certain parts of the proposal for huts in the Mt Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. I do not have any issue with the Whatcom Snowmobile Club warming hut that is proposed: This hut is similar to existing ones and open to the public. The rest of my letter concerns the other three huts at North Twin Sister, Heliotrope trailhead, and Anderson-Watson trailhead.

Overall, the scoping letter does not provide adequate information to make an informed decision about these huts. Many details are missing or vague. I was at the meeting in Sedro-Wooley and was informed that the full hut proposals would be made public; however that still hasn't happened more than a week later. The public needs to know the details of each proposal.

Things that are missing from these proposals:

1. Public or private use: Will public use of these huts be allowed? Will overnight access be restricted to guided groups? If not, what proportion of nights will be reserved for unguided access? If day users want to warm up in these huts, will that be an option?

2. Price: In the interest of equitable access to the outdoors, which is part of the Forest Service's mission, what would the cost be for a user to spend a night in this hut? Given that these are for-profit operations, I am concerned that price will prevent many from having access to these places.

3. Conflicts: The access points are all groomed snowmobile trails. Motorized sno-park permits pay for grooming, and the snowmobile clubs often maintain the roads. I can imagine a number of ways for the operators to help support these efforts and reduce conflicts on the trail/road and in the parking lots. For example, shuttling clients to the start of hike/sled in a larger vehicle to avoid crowding parking. However, this needs to be spelled out in the proposals. Furthermore, in the Twin Sisters I am concerned that the guide company will act as a gatekeeper to the area and report users who bike or hike in to the Hampton company, which is none of their business. (It is a tragedy that there isn't a public easement for access to this wonderful area for hiking, climbing, and skiing.)

4. Environmental issues: Some information is given about the toilet and human waste plans for these huts. However, we are missing information about water sources and disposal of greywater, food waste, etc. Also, there is no indication that these huts will be setup for preventing pests like mice from getting into human food (an issue at the Fortune Creek hut in the Teanaway) or whether they will be proofed against more fierce animals like martens or bears.

Now I will detail issues that seem relevant to the individual proposals:

North Twin (Baker Mountain Guides): Access to this area is through Hampton company private land on a mixture of roads and trails. The site for the hut is not accessible by snowmobile or car with the current trail. How will the company move in and out the structure, firewood, etc each year without vehicle access? The location within the FS boundary is a remaining stand of old-growth Nootka cypress and other species in a flat, somewhat marshy area. Will this hut require cutting old growth? Is it realistic for guides to hike out 5 gallon buckets of human waste back to the parking area? It seems that the Baker Guide company has an interest in keeping others out of their "exclusive access" (words lifted from their website) to the area. However, many people purchase permits from Hampton for recreational access to that area, and it can be reached without passing through Hampton land. There are many incidents I have heard of where John Minier, owner of Baker Mountain Guides, has questioned people in that area about whether they have permits.

Heliotrope (Aspire Mountain Running): This proposal would place a hut in the parking lot for Heliotrope ridge trailhead. While the general area is a great place for skiing and other activities in good weather and with moderate-low avalanche danger, it seems like options will be quite limited on storm days. So I worry that the hut is not well-situated to be used. At the meeting in Sedro-Wooley, the owner of Aspire stated that their hut would be "public", but I want to see this in writing with a clear explanation of what that means (refer to my points above). Parking on Glacier Creek road is also quite limited and with fluctuating snow levels, I am concerned about cars being snowed in on the road. Also, the road is in severe disrepair and it is premature for the FS to greenlight a project like this without stabilizing the washout.

Anderson-Watson (Roundhouse Touring): Of all the proposals, I think this location is the best for a ski touring hut. There is good storm skiing in glades within the wilderness but also nice alpine terrain above that. Being that the ski terrain is wilderness, foot travelers will not overlap with (legal) snowmobile travelers. However, I am concerned that none of the members of Roundhouse were able to attend the Sedro-Wooley meeting. Are the proponents still interested in making this hut happen? The same road concerns as for Heliotrope apply here.

Thank you for allowing me to voice these concerns. I am in favor of increasing access points for non-motorized travelers and would like to do so in a way that minimizes conflict with snowmobiles. Infrastructure like huts is one way to make remote areas of terrain more accessible. We just need to make sure that we build and operate these huts well, with the public in mind! Unfortunately, the information that we have about these proposals is not sufficient to know whether or not this is the case.

Sincerely,

Kameron Decker Harris
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