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First name: Janet

Last name: Rivera

Organization:

Title:

Comments: Regarding Purpose and Need listed in Scoping Letter

The purpose of the proposed action at Sweetwater Lake is stated by the US Forest Service (USFS) in the May 3, 2024, scoping letter as "to provide the public a natural resource-based recreational and educational experience at Sweetwater Lake that is reflective of the culture and history of the area while managing visitation at the appropriate scale[hellip]" I believe that the prior use of this property - a small Forest Service Campground, some hiking trails with a lake overlook, and access to the lake, along with a privately run restaurant, a few rental houses, horseback rides, rental boats, and an option for small events met this purpose much better than the new proposed plan would. The only difference would be the previously privately run resort would no longer be private, but would be a concessionaire on the Forest Service property. Listed below are responses (in black) to the actions proposed in the Scoping Letter bullets (in blue) under Purpose and Need.

"The actions proposed in the Sweetwater lake Recreation Management and Development Project are needed to:

Enhance and provide sustainable management of the public lands around Sweetwater Lake.

Suitable management could be provided by the concessionaire, as they have done historically for the last 30 years, which would save the USFS and the taxpayers considerable money. With their extensive knowledge of the area, putting this property into other management will not enhance, but will diminish the use at these public lands.

Provide updated and sustainable nature-based recreational services to the public that are appropriate to the environment and are responsive to the recreational needs of the public.

Providing sustainable nature-based recreational services has been happening at the lake for the past 100 years! For the past 30 years, approximately half of the lakeshore was owned by the Forest Service. That gave the public full use of the lake waters themselves for fishing, small watercraft, and other enjoyment. The private dock has always been open to the public to launch boats for free. The "private" restaurant has always been open to the public to eat. Recreation has also included hiking, wildlife viewing, horseback riding, ice fishing, backpacking, birding, camping, hunting, picnicking, and snowshoeing. All of this has been sustainable as can be observed by the excellent state of the property and its amazing flora and fauna. No updating is necessary.

Improve the site's existing recreation infrastructure while providing updated facilities in alignment with applicable laws, policies, and known best practices.

Improving the site's existing recreational infrastructure could be completed without building new facilities. If the concessionaire license included on-site management, USFS and CPW housing would not need to be built. Instead, the current rental houses and little motel could be remodeled and brought up to USFS standards at considerably less expense than building new rental cabins and staff housing.

Develop and implement management strategies to reduce or mitigate potential impacts on the site's natural and cultural resources from public visitation.

Developing and implementing management strategies to reduce or mitigate potential impacts is only necessary if the USFS or CPW decide to build new amenities and then market them widely throughout the state. As it stands now, the public visitation since the whole site went into USFS ownership is less than when the concessionaire had a viable operation prior to the sale. Jeff Shroll, Eagle County Manager, mentioned in the first open meeting that traffic volume last year was below pre-Covid numbers. This demonstrates that the minimal amenities, minor advertisement, and remote location will continue to mitigate impacts perfectly well on the site's natural and cultural resources from public visitation. No new strategies are needed if no new amenities are constructed.

Provide for year-round on-site management, including oversight and management for all the site's resources and facilities.

Providing for year-round management can best be completed by the people who have lived there and managed it for the past 30 years. They can be awarded licenses and permits through the Granger/Thye Act.

Provide public recreational, interpretative, and educational opportunities.

Providing public recreational, interpretive, and educational opportunities have been happening at the lake for the last 30 years. The lake property has been well used by school groups, civic groups, scout groups, reunions, church gatherings, community meetings, Eagle and Garfield County public meetings and retreats, Cattlemen's Association, Vail Recreation District, Gypsum Town Board and Fire District, Vail Lodging Concierges, and many, many more. Most of these are more conducive for a privately run small business to organize and coordinate than for the USFS or CPW. In fact, turning this type of management over to a government agent might reduce historic access to these groups. In addition, the current company held many interpretive materials available to the public throughout the restaurant, with knowledgeable staff to discuss the history and wildlife of the area.

Janet Rivera

Jan and Bill Martin

Gretchen Hennum

Robert and Catherine Beyer

Keith and Leigh Birdsong

Thatcher Family