

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 7/22/2024 6:00:00 AM

First name: Janet

Last name: Rivera

Organization:

Title:

Comments: Safety Concerns, including Road Concerns

Sweetwater Lake is not a good location for a state park due to safety concerns.

Fire Danger

During the Grizzly Creek Fire three summers ago, the Sweetwater Community was evacuated. The fire was still ten miles away, so the residents inquired as to why they were required to leave. A policeman checking off names at the foot of the road explained it was because they lived in a box canyon with only one road out. In addition, he said, this area had limited opportunities for emergency communication. There is no cell service, and the reverse 911 didn't work. That brought home the seriousness of fire safety to the over 100 Sweetwater neighbors!

Today, new landowners on Sweetwater Road (County Road 150) and the neighboring County Road 151 are facing complications when applying for new building permits. Garfield County is concerned about too many people living in a box canyon should a wildfire break out. How much more dangerous this situation becomes if 250 people are visiting a state park 10 miles up that road inside that box canyon!

Flash Flood Danger

The Sweetwater Road tends to wash out each summer during the "monsoon" season of mid-July through August, which is also peak camping season. Sometimes these are mild washes and sometimes they are dangerous and violent. Last year, the rushing, watery mud was over a foot deep across the road near the Garfield/Eagle County border on the way to the lake.

It's hard to imagine RV drivers from the cities navigating through these situations. Yet, that is part of the USFS's plan.

Search and Rescue

Search and Rescue is located an hour or more away.

When search and rescue teams go into the Flat Tops Wilderness from the east side, they often land helicopters in a lower pasture near Sweetwater Lake. CPW's site plan is to turn this pasture into an RV park with cement pads and electric hookups. There are few, if any, other places that a rescue copter could land safely

Communications

There is no cell service along the Colorado River Road, the Sweetwater Road, and County Road 151. The large number of visitors projected for the park will have emergencies without a way to get help. Drivers could be stranded or come to private homes for help.

Trespassing

The USFS's plan is to let parking be the limiting factor to keep numbers down at the park. However, after driving so far, it is unreasonable to think people will just shrug their shoulders and turn around. Instead, they will park along the road or on neighboring private property.

Personnel

Previously, AJ Brink Outfitters has had staff living on the property year round. They helped stranded visitors, gave directions, opened their rentals for emergencies, kept trails clear, communicated with local police and fire districts, rescued boaters, saved injured hunters, and extricated lost hikers. In addition, they protected their business equipment housed there. In order for CPW to have this same level of coverage, it will cost the taxpayers a lot of money and will mean building many additional structures. Yet, CPW will not be able to present a safer experience than the concessionaire has in the past, and it will take years before CPW staff will have knowledge of the area even close to that of the current outfitters.

Trails

Numerous trails begin at Sweetwater Lake. These are used by hikers, horseback riders, backpackers, and hunters. The plans should be to keep these trails accessible, but be careful of which trails are shared. Hikers with

dogs meeting equine users is especially dangerous. Any new trail work should protect access while keeping people safe. The proposed new trail near Keep Ditch is a horrible idea. These and other trail plans should be detailed in the scoping proposed action for comment.

The Hilltop trailhead is used by backpackers. However, if use is increased, then the road to Old Hilltop would need to be repaired. The idea of just making people walk up to Old Hilltop is awful, as it would add significantly difficult hiking to reach the trailhead. This would definitely decrease access to backpacking in the Flat Tops.

Wildlife

Sweetwater Lake has long been a haven for wildlife. However, with more people, there will be more human/wildlife interactions. These can be inconvenient when running into a skunk or beaver. These can be dangerous with bear, moose, mountain lions, elk, deer, and, potentially, wolves. The greater the visitor population, the greater these unsafe interactions will become.

In addition, wild turkeys roam the roads. Deer cross the road daily. Even livestock and pets are on the road making driving dangerous.

Lake Concerns

Safety on the lake is always a big concern. The south end of the lake gets overgrown with water weeds. By mid summer, this is a dangerous place to capsize a kayak or to fall off of a Stand Up Paddle board. Should a swimmer struggle in these weeds, they would wrap around their arms and legs and could pull them under. Even experienced swimmers can drown in water weeds. Yet, the USFS's plan is to encourage more "hand launched watercraft". With no beach, I doubt there would be a lifeguard on duty, but this could be an extremely dangerous area.

Road Concerns

To get to the proposed park, a visitor first has to navigate the Colorado River Road which is overrun in the summer with bicyclists, rafting shuttles, visitors to Round-Up River Ranch, and is often packed with back up traffic at the Dotsero end when the Glenwood Canyon is closed.

Then add the 10 miles of narrow, curvy Sweetwater Road. This dirt road isn't even two lanes wide in places! It could not handle the RV traffic a state park would invite. In addition, the community fears accidents from people driving too fast; increased human/wildlife interactions (esp. worrisome are moose and bear); and trespassers on the private lands that border this possible new park. The nearest police station is in Gypsum, 24 miles away.

Mudslides and rockslides have closed numerous portions of Sweetwater Road and the Colorado River Road over the years. This is a risk to the park visitors who will be stranded in our box canyon.

The repeated closures of the Glenwood Canyon back up traffic at Dotsero making it hard for residents, visitors, and even safety services to get through. This could exacerbate any emergencies that happen at Sweetwater Lake.

Sweetwater Road is mostly a dirt road. Seasonally, it gets washboards and potholes, which are graded out by the county on a rotating schedule. The increase in traffic will only exacerbate road damage.

Improvements to the road will cost the taxpayer - whether through County construction or State Park funding - a significant amount of money, in the millions. Yet, if the road was widened and improved, that would just increase the speed at which people navigate it. The isolated location means it is rarely patrolled for speed enforcement.

Some RV's will be too long or wide for the road, which might end up blocking the narrow road for local traffic and park guests

A traffic count on the lower end of Sweetwater Road in 2021 showed 240 vehicles daily. The scoping report as presented at input sessions, puts 100 more cars on the road (250 people with 2.5 people per car). However, since there is only one way in and out, that results in 100 cars going up and 100 cars going down. So, 240 becomes 440. More people means more road upkeep and more vehicle accidents.

The intersection of County Road 150 (Sweetwater Road) and County Road 151 (sometimes referred to as the 7W Road) in Garfield County is a huge concern. Even at the current level of traffic, this is a dangerous, blind intersection. Deliberately increasing traffic on the road without mitigating this danger is unconscionable.

Conclusion

Nowadays, a driver to Sweetwater Lake has to drive through a gauntlet of bright yellow and red "No State Park" yard signs lining both sides of the road. All the residents feel that Sweetwater Lake is a very bad location for a state park, especially due to safety concerns.

There are many reasons that all these residents feel this way. Sweetwater Lake is a good spot for the small, primitive Forest Service Campground located there. A resort that has been operating in the area for years and has hosted tourists from around the world is another good idea. These smaller and historical uses around the lake maintain the wildlife, the beauty, and the riparian ecosystem while welcoming visitors.

Our number one worry is how unsafe this location would be for all the visitors if expanded, developed, and marketed into a State Park!

Janet Rivera

Cynthia Ebert

Michael Thompson

Scott and Rita Skelton

Dan and Casie Ward

Ketih and Leigh Birdsong

Eric Eckdahl

Robert Beyer, Catherine Beyer and Mia Beyer

Scott and Carol Vasina

Jennifer, Matt, Kodi, and Austin Raper

Katie Hood

Thatcher Family

Bill Bohannon

Lynn Brown