

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 7/31/2024 6:00:00 AM  
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Comments: Heather Noel, Acting Forest Supervisor

White River National Forest

900 Grand Avenue

Glenwood Springs, CO 81601

Re: NEPA Process Sweetwater Lake

The Forest Service is certainly learning of the communities' concerns with the extensive development planned for Sweetwater Lake. Our tiny community most likely will be significantly impacted within a few years and perhaps not in a positive way. I realize communities need to evolve and we are fortunate to live in a truly beautiful part of Colorado. We were initially excited when the Forest Service acquired the additional land around Sweetwater Lake. The bottling plant, golf course, 400 home sites and whatever else was planned was probably unrealistic but would have been worse. Governor Polis' vision for the area was presented as a "kumbaya" moment — the vast public will now be able to experience nature in a KOA type campground. Quite a contrast from the prior Sweetwater Lake that had a few primitive campsites and parking spaces for backpackers and horseback riders who TRULY wanted to experience nature.

The Forest Service could probably negate a number of objections from the community. Yes, the White River National Forest is public land and thus property of all residents. As much as we would love to have apple pie again at the resort and use the property as our backyard, communities often times need to evolve. In my opinion there are two incredibly challenging issues that the Forest Service must thoroughly consider and mitigate to the fullest extent possible. One is security for the community and the other is traffic.

I have lived here since 1976. Although we are fairly self-sufficient, we have needed the assistance of a sheriff deputy from time to time. Short of a near fatal or fatal accident, getting a response will take hours no matter the seriousness. Not too long ago, at Sweetwater Lake a drunk father grabbed their two children from the mother and proceeded down Sweetwater Road. A vacationing Houston police officer witnessed the event and followed the vehicle honking her horn. The drunk father finally pulled over at the Colorado River Road and the officer took the keys from the ignition. She asked to use our phone, called Eagle dispatch and waited and waited. An hour later called again to request deputy response. The children were terrified, freezing cold and hungry. It was still another hour before police arrived. They were truly professional and in my opinion deescalated the situation very well. They just didn't have the manpower to appropriately respond to the dispatches that night. This event particularly stands out in my mind as it was extremely volatile. Had the Houston skilled and experienced police officer not been present, there most likely would have been tragedy that night. Over the years I have had to assist with other similar situations. As you know there is no cell service in the area, so people in distress must

rely on local residence for land line phone. We now have a mobile phone we can share with these people as some we definitely have great concerns with them entering our home.

Covid was another interesting two years. Since traveling was difficult, the Colorado River became a magnet for camping and rafting. Telling people [ldquo]this is private property,[rdquo] the response was frequently [ldquo]there are no other campsites or put-ins, so deal with it.[rdquo] We acquiesced as we didn[rsquo]t want our property further vandalized. Most likely we will experience heightened trespassing as Sweetwater Lake is more publicized, yet not being able to accommodate demand.

In my opinion the most serious concern that requires the greatest consideration from the Forest Service is existing roads and traffic. Eagle and western Garfield County are a mecca for tourism. In fact, much of the economy is dependent on tourists. The population of the area has also exploded for much the same reason. Unlike other State Parks/Forest Service campgrounds that require a fair distance of driving, Sweetwater Lake is 17 miles from I-70, 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  hours from Vail, and 1 hour from Glenwood Springs. The convenience of a State Park near so many highly desirable tourist areas/activities means a full campground during much of the season. The Forest Service personnel drive the Colorado River Road and Sweetwater Road regularly, so they must be as nervous as we are about the road traffic. In the last 15 years there has been a significant increase in the number of bicyclists on the River Road and [ldquo]by the grace of God[rdquo] no one has been seriously injured. It really is a matter of time! I won[rsquo]t even walk along the road, let alone risk riding a bicycle anymore. As the road follows the river, blind corners are frequent. Improving and widening the road will be a major expense and probably just result in more traffic and increased speed [ndash] two factors we don[rsquo]t need.

Then there is Sweetwater Road which I can[rsquo]t imagine was ever designed for heavy traffic. Your personnel know the blind curves, steep drop offs, narrow portions of the roadway, etc. make driving the road a true potential hazard. After driving all day imagine drivers in large motorhomes navigating an unfamiliar road. Then during certain times of year, an unsuspecting driver hitting the washboards on the downhill slope between the L Quarter Circle and the Community Center only to have another driver coming from the 7-W Ranch merging onto Sweetwater Road. This scenario may seem a little dramatic, but your personnel must truly have concerns with the additional traffic coming from the interstate.

Your agency has had significant experience with overuse of forest service land. Hanging Lake became so popular that now hikers need to ride a shuttle bus from Glenwood. Silvan Lake was once a great camping destination but has deteriorated with overuse. Sweetwater Lake could very easily become the next Hanging Lake or Sylvan Lake.

In conclusion, I realize the Forest Service has been tasked with an almost impossible solution to make Sweetwater Lake accessible to the public and still consider the concerns of our community. Although I don[rsquo]t know exactly the current occupancy planned for the campground, I truly hope you will start with a manageable plan that allow some people to have a great experience at Sweetwater Lake and perhaps a phase 2 if the safety to the community and road traffic appear to accommodate a little increase.

Please, please, please do not ignore the concerns of the community. We are by far the most knowledgeable of the potential hazards and dangers of the area. Thank you for your thoughtful considerations and hopefully allowing us to live in a place we want to still consider home.

Respectfully,

D. Scott Stuart