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Comments: Concerns about Proposed Action

The White River National Forest is proposing multiple actions to meet the purpose and need of the project as described below, Maps of the project are available on the project webpage at

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/whiteriver/?project=64047>.

Authorize a 20-year special use permit to Colorado Parks and Wildlife, under the Granger-Thye Act, to implement and maintain improvements described below and manage the area consistent with the purpose and need.

We would prefer that the Granger-Thye Permit be issued to AJ Brink Outfitters who have been excellent stewards of the Sweetwater Lake area for over 30 years. We see no need to pile another government agency on top of the US Forest Service when a local small business can do the same thing, only better. And we oppose putting a local company out of business, affecting the family's livelihood. We especially object to a 20 year special use permit issued to CPW.

Redesign the current site to promote recreational opportunities at a scale that is compatible with the capacity of the project area, its resources, and the surrounding area. The proposed site design would minimize impacts to wildlife and natural resources by utilizing those areas and lands that have been previously disturbed and would include the following actions.

The current site needs minimal redesign. Recreational opportunities already abound. The capacity of the project area has been at a level that is compatible with the resources and the surrounding area. A state park would increase the scale of visitor numbers until the safe capacity has been surpassed, the resources stretched, and the surrounding area adversely impacted. The present design of Sweetwater Lake Resort is significantly superior to the USFS Scoping design. The Sweetwater Lake Resort already has minimized impacts to wildlife and natural resources while this new state park design would introduce negative effects. There is no need to develop the property further. Leave "previously disturbed" areas as they are, and do not build out a larger footprint.

Evaluate existing structures for retention with an emphasis on those buildings that provide the best opportunity to interpret the rich history at Sweetwater. If feasible, some structures may be restored to the historic character of their 1920-to-1940 construction and used as part of the cultural interpretative program for the site. Existing structures that are in a state of severe deferred maintenance and out of compliance with various laws, regulations, and policies may be removed.

The best way to interpret the rich history would be by letting guests rent out the historic houses. This living history immersion is far superior to an interpretive program. These houses were constructed in the 1920's to 1950's. The houses are in "severe deferred maintenance" because first the realtor and secondly the USFS have decided to allow them to deteriorate. A better plan would be to remodel them into their previous era adornments while bringing the buildings up to current codes. The USFS would try to convince us that this is too expensive. However, we believe tearing buildings down and constructing new ones is more expensive than remodeling existing buildings. The Concessionaire and the Community are willing to fundraise to improve these buildings.

Develop a new campground area to provide 15 to 20 campsites in a historically disturbed area that currently contains little native vegetation ("lower pasture").

Developing a campground in a pasture is one of the worst ideas in this scoping document. While you can call a pasture "historically disturbed", in reality this pasture was created prior to 1915. For over 100 years, this pasture has provided feed to both wild animals and domestic horses. Destroying pastureland where elk graze and calve, where deer regularly feed and bed down, and where any number of small animals and birds have adapted to this habitat is irresponsible.

While we are not in favor of a new campground, if it's going to be developed, it should be smaller - more in line with the older USFS campground of 8 or 9 sites. It should be primitive only so as to have less impact on the environment. And it could be built on Dead Horse Flats (across the road from the current barn) or next to the older USFS cabin. While the USFS will claim endangered penstemon as a reason not to build there, in actuality the penstemon grows all over the property.

And Dead Horse Flats is significantly more historically disturbed as it is the site of a previous human-made dump among other past uses. The area around the older USFS cabin is also highly disturbed as it was previously grazed by both cattle and horses.

Construct 8 to 12 new cabins to provide an overnight recreation opportunity similar to that which historically existed in the vicinity. These cabins would be constructed with materials and architecture designed to provide a "rustic" western character similar to the styles of other cabins and lodges in the Flat Tops area of Colorado.

Remodeling old cabins would be preferable to tearing them down and building new ones. However, if this should be done, construct a maximum of 6 cabins in the 2 to 3 bedroom category with kitchens, living rooms, and bathrooms as this will present the typical Sweetwater experience. Dry cabins are just camping spots and should be included in campgrounds, if at all. Log siding is okay for a "rustic" character.

Construct equestrian facilities in the "middle Pasture." Proposed facilities would include barn and stable operation, 4 to 7 overnight equestrian camping sites, and extra day-use parking for equestrian users. This area could also provide overnight parking and access to the surrounding Flat Tops Wilderness Area. This location is previously disturbed and is proposed for equestrian facilities to minimize the impact to the natural resources, while separating use between equestrians and other visitors.

Do not build anything in any of the pastures! Instead, improve the current barn and stable operations. Build 4 to 7 equestrian camping sites below the current barn. Put extra day-use parking beside the barn. This area has always provided overnight parking and access to the surrounding Flat Tops Wilderness Area. This location is previously disturbed. Changing the location of the barn creates more impact to the natural resources than leaving it where it is. We do not need to separate use between equestrian and other visitors, as the barn is already located on the edge of the day use area. Many visitors are not aware of equestrian opportunities until they see them in action.

Develop additional lake access points. Any new access will include minimal disturbance to the lakeshore and lakeside willows by utilizing perpendicular-only paths through the willows to fishing docks or watercraft launching docks to minimize any disturbance on the lake edge.

We are in favor of two new lake access points using perpendicular paths and fishing docks, one by the old campground and one by the old cabins.

Convert the existing Forest Service Campground and parking to day-use individual or group picnic sites and maintain the existing day-use trailhead and lake access parking in this area.

We are in favor of converting the existing Forest Service Campground and parking to day-use individual picnic sites and maintaining the existing day-use trailhead and lake access parking in this area. However, we are only in favor of converting this old campground if the new campground is built in the disturbed areas of Dead Horse Flats OR the area around the old USFS cabin. If the only spot for a new campground is in a pasture, which evolves drying up the pasture and taking it away from animal habitat, then we insist on keeping the campground where it is currently located.

Construct a new lodge with administrative, educational, and interpretive spaces to enhance the visitor experience through site amenities and services. This new lodge building may offer small-scale food service capabilities such as a small coffee and pit shop or limited prepackaged food offerings that would align with Forest Service policies for providing food service on National Forest System lands while not necessitating an increase in wastewater accommodation. The construction of a group picnic site with possible food truck or mobile kitchen parking will also be explored in this area for small events or day-to-day operations.

Again, it makes more sense to renovate the current lodge than to build a new one. We are not interested in small-scale food service like a coffee shop or limited prepackaged food. We would prefer a small, sitdown restaurant permitted under the Granger Thye Act as can be found in numerous other spots in the US Forest Service.

The previous restaurant offered administrative, educational, and interpretive spaces. It included wildlife viewing with spotting scopes and bird feeders. It offered historical interpretation with photographs, news articles, and scrapbooks. In addition, it had an office, restrooms, a small store, information services, phone services, and was a safety center.

If a new restaurant needs to be constructed, we prefer the location across the street from the current restaurant where the last lodge/restaurant was located (burned down in 1954). The foundation can still be seen there.

We do not mind a group picnic site in addition to a restaurant, but do not feel that a food truck or mobile kitchen would be appropriate. Instead, the restaurant can cater any small event in the area.

Evaluate establishing day-use hiking and equestrian trails on the northeast side of the lake. These trail would provide loop trails and connections between the existing UTe Trai, to the new equestrian area, and the Keep Ditch Trail. These trails could provide an additional access to the Flat Tops Wilderness Area other than the existing Hilltop trailhead north of the project area. Evaluate establishing trails to a now overlook on the southwest side of the lake to provide an additional scenic overlook of the lake. Evaluate additional trails within the project area to highlight the historical significance of the site and its buildings as part of an interpretive trail system or provide other recreational opportunities

The northeast side of the lake makes a poor trail head due to the steepness of terrain and soggy soil. The Keep Ditch Trail is not safe for horseback riding with its sheer drop off. Construction of additional trails does not really make sense when the USFS has not been able to maintain the trails it already has. The constant and difficult trail maintenance in the area has been accomplished by the local outfitters.

We are not opposed to a new overlook on the southwest side of the lake, although it should not be located near to the nesting raptors.

Construct appropriate maintenance facilities, equipment storage and personnel housing necessary for management and maintenance.

If we keep the footprint small, we should not need more than one building for maintenance and equipment storage and another for staff housing, with possible seasonal apartments downstairs.

A park with visitor numbers under 60 people per day, as has historically been the use, does not need a huge staff. We suggest these administrative buildings be built in the Dead Horse Flats area or near the old USFS cabin.

For the cave within the project area, develop a cave management plan in consultation with the tribes to ensure the vital cultural history is preserved and incorporate the plan in the proposed special use permit.

We agree with this cave management plan in consultation with the Ute Tribes, as long as the end goal is opening the caves to visitation and interpretation.

Janet and Benny Rivera