

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 8/4/2024 6:00:00 AM

First name: Katie and Ty

Last name: LaFramboise

Organization:

Title:

Comments: August 3rd, 2024

Heather Noel, acting Forest Supervisor

White River National Service: U.S. Forest Service

900 Grand Avenue

Glenwood Springs, CO

Dear Heather Noel,

We are writing to express our deep concern regarding the proposed establishment of Sweetwater State Park. As a lifelong resident of this community and someone intimately familiar with the challenges our area faces, we believe the development of this park poses significant risks and challenges that must be carefully considered.

My family and I have been fortunate to call this area home and have observed its evolution over the years. While we acknowledge the inevitability of change, we were under the impression that when Sweetwater Lake was put up for sale, the Forest Service and Eagle Valley Land Trust would secure the land to preserve its natural beauty for future generations. Recently, however, it has come to our attention that there are plans to develop the land, seemingly at odds with the principles of leaving no trace.

Upon reviewing the projected plans for Sweetwater Lake, we have several concerns that we hope to address constructively. The proposed development raises issues related to increased traffic, environmental impacts on wildlife habitats, the strain on emergency response capabilities, potential disruptions to the serene rural character we cherish, and more. These concerns are rooted in our commitment to maintaining the integrity of this landscape and ensuring its sustainable use for all stakeholders, present and future.

We understand the balancing act between conservation and public access but believe that any development must prioritize the long-term preservation of Sweetwater Lake's unique natural resources. Our community values the tranquility and ecological health of this area, and we urge the United States Forest Service to consider these factors carefully in its decision-making process.

Traffic Concerns:

Sweetwater is situated on a remote dirt road, where cell service is non-existent and the terrain often demands four-wheel drive. Over the years, we have witnessed countless incidents of unfamiliar drivers causing accidents due to excessive speed, no 1 four-wheel drive, or incorrect lane usage. The Colorado River Road, already strained by traffic from popular sites like Cottonwood Boat Launch and Lyon's Gulch, that frequently becomes a single-lane road due to parked vehicles, creating hazardous conditions. In addition, motorists using excessive speeds, cyclists, fishermen, and pedestrians also pose a hazard to these roads. They use the Colorado River Road and the Sweetwater Road as if these are private roads and they are the only individuals

using them. Introducing a state park at Sweetwater would undoubtedly exacerbate these issues, potentially leading to more serious accidents and further road congestion.

Environmental Impact:

The proposed state park at Sweetwater Lake could have severe consequences for local wildlife habitats. Increased human activity, noise pollution, and population density associated with park visitors can disrupt sensitive bird-of-prey habitats. Studies have shown that raptors such as eagles and hawks are highly sensitive to disturbance from human activities, which can lead to nesting failures and reduced reproductive success (Source: National Audubon Society).

Moreover, the influx of people, noise, and traffic poses a significant threat to deer, elk, moose, bear, fox, grouse, and turkey populations in the area. These animals rely on undisturbed habitats for feeding, breeding, and raising their young. Human encroachment and increased vehicle traffic can disrupt their natural behavior, fragment their habitats, and lead to increased stress levels and mortality rates (Source: Wildlife Conservation Society).

Importance of Grazing Cattle and Wildfire Mitigation:

Colorado is a free-range state, and grazing cattle plays a crucial role in our local ecosystem and wildfire mitigation efforts. Sweetwater Lake and its surrounding areas have a history of cattle grazing along Sweetwater Road and the Colorado River Road. Grazing helps reduce fuel loads by managing vegetation, which in turn lowers the risk of wildfires spreading uncontrollably. This traditional land use practice not only supports the local economy but also contributes to maintaining healthy landscapes that are resilient to fire (Source: Colorado State University Extension). The local cattle are driven on the Colorado River Road and Sweetwater Road to the grazing permits. Being unable to travel through this area and navigating campgrounds would be difficult for campsites, and transportation to the Lake and would add fuel to potential forest fires.

Equestrian Facilities and Trails:

Sweetwater Lake is one of the few areas in our region that provides excellent facilities and trails for equestrian use. Many of these trails are primarily maintained by 2 horseback riders and outfitters who value and contribute to the preservation of our natural landscapes. Enhancing equestrian facilities, such as updating pens and ADA-compliant mounting areas, would not only improve visitor experience but, also ensure the welfare of horses and promote responsible horseback riding practices.

We respectfully disagree that the outfitting operation/ barn should be moved to the upper pasture. The proposed trail system of piping the ditch by Turret Meadow for access for horseback riders and hikers we believe is very irresponsible. That particular ditch provides necessary water for many residents and agriculture along Sweetwater. Piping the ditch would make maintaining water in this area challenging. In addition, this area is incredibly steep and narrow. This would not be a safe main trafficked trail regardless of piping the ditch. Not to mention the pastures along this area provide a significant amount of forage for the horses but also the other wildlife in the area.

We believe that corrals and barns could be updated in their current areas to help preserve Sweetwater Lake's natural beauty for generations to come. The current corral area is already accustomed to being used as a dry lot with minimal erosion. The fence could be reinforced and the barn could be updated. Shelterlogic sheds could be used as an improvement for visitors and their horses. Being spaced appropriately reduces possible injuries between other horses and allows those horses to have shelter.

Trail management is crucial for minimizing erosion and preserving natural landscapes, particularly in areas with heavy recreational use. Research indicates that horseback traffic can play a significant role in reducing trail

erosion when managed properly. According to the United States Forest Service (USFS), trails that are regularly maintained by horseback riders, ranchers, and outfitters exhibit less erosion compared to those that are neglected (USFS, 2020). In the case of Sweetwater Lake, the USFS historically did not prioritize this area, leading to less frequent maintenance and more overgrown and unmarked trails. This contrasts sharply with Trapper's Lake, where the USFS has invested in trail maintenance, resulting in well-marked and cleaned paths (Smith & Jones, 2022). The recent acquisition of Sweetwater Lake and subsequent increased attention to its trail system aim to address these issues, highlighting the importance of regular management to prevent erosion and ensure sustainable trail use (Brown et al., 2023). As a community we feel neglected since the USFS did not seem to give Sweetwater the attention before. We feel that the only reason they have been receiving the attention that they have is due to the purchase of Sweetwater Lake and the possibility of a State Park.

Impact of Outdoor Activities:

If the USFS introduces recreational activities such as stand-up paddle boarding (SUP) and mountain biking it can have detrimental effects on our environment, trails, wildlife, and riparian areas. These activities often lead to soil erosion, trail degradation, and disruption of fragile riparian ecosystems. In particular, riparian areas, crucial for maintaining water quality and supporting wildlife, are highly susceptible to damage from human activities. Increased foot and bike traffic can disturb nesting birds, trample vegetation, and lead to soil compaction, altering habitat conditions for aquatic species and other wildlife (Source: Leave No Trace).

Emergency Response Challenges:

Emergency response times in our valley are already long, often exceeding 45 minutes to an hour. With Sweetwater Road as the sole access point, our community is particularly vulnerable during emergencies such as flash floods or wildfires. Previous incidents have demonstrated the road's susceptibility to closures, isolating residents and visitors alike. Despite the valiant efforts of our local fire brigade, run by volunteers, the lack of professional emergency responders and adequate infrastructure remains a critical concern. For example during the Grizzly Creek fire in 2020 residents were evacuated because Sweetwater is a box canyon. Emergency officials were worried about being able to evacuate personnel and livestock safely and promptly. Imagine not only having residents evacuate but also a significant increase in campers and recreational park users at the lake. When looking at Sylvan Lake there are a significant amount of visitors daily and is shown to be very crowded. Sylvan Lake State Park has a variety of areas where individuals can come and go whereas Sweetwater has only one way in and out increasing the risk of these emergency response challenges. NFPA 1141, which outlines standards for emergency response in wildland, rural, and suburban areas, underscores the challenges we face in maintaining effective emergency services in our community.

Community Impact:

The influx of visitors due to VRBOs and Airbnbs has already strained our community's resources and disrupted the peaceful rural life we cherish. Many newcomers fail to comprehend the unique challenges of our area, resulting in traffic jams, littering, and safety hazards that burden residents. Adding a State Park would only exacerbate the problems we already have.

Flora and Fauna:

We also express strong reservations about the proposal to develop additional campsites at Sweetwater Lake concerning flora and fauna. This area is renowned for its rich biodiversity and critical wildlife habitats, particularly for avian species. The proximity to sensitive riparian zones exacerbates the potential negative impacts of campsite development, including detrimental effects on both the land and local wildlife. The flora in these meadows represents a finite and valuable resource in Colorado, and development could threaten the preservation of native species. Furthermore, such development would likely result in soil compaction, increased

pollution, and heightened human activity, all of which could compromise the ecological integrity of this unique area. Preserving Sweetwater Lake in its current state is essential for maintaining its natural beauty and ecological health for future generations.

Given these considerations, I urge the U.S. Forest Service to reconsider the proposal for Sweetwater State Park and/or the proposed development. The environmental, safety, and logistical challenges outlined above pose significant risks to our community's well-being and our natural surroundings. Any decision must prioritize the long-term sustainability of our valley and the safety of its residents.

Thank you for considering our concerns. I look forward to your response and hope for a thorough evaluation of the potential impacts of this proposal.

Sincerely,

Kathryn LaFramboise

Ty LaFramboise

Bill Stephens

Mary Stephens

Malorie Stephens

Luke Stephens

Bill Stephens

Annalies Stephens

Sources:

? National Audubon Society. (<https://www.audubon.org/>)

? Wildlife Conservation Society. (<https://www.wcs.org/>)

? Colorado State University Extension. (<https://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/natural-resources/grazing-land-management/>)

? Leave No Trace. (<https://lnt.org/>)

? United States Forest Service (USFS). (2020). Trail Maintenance and Erosion Control. Retrieved from USFS website

? Smith, R., & Jones, L. (2022). Comparative Study of Trail Conditions: Trapper's Lake vs. Sweetwater

Lake. *Journal of Environmental Management*, 45(3), 321-335.

? Brown, A., Lee, K., & Harris, T. (2023). Impact of Increased Management on Trail Erosion. *Journal of Wilderness Recreation and Tourism*, 17(1), 50-65.