

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 30, 2009

Mr. Rick Cables
Regional Forester
United States Forest Service
Rocky Mountain Region
P.O. Box 25127
Lakewood, CO 80225

Dear Mr. Cables:

I am writing to express my concerns with the Forest Service's recent decision to decline to initiate an environmental review under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) for a proposed lift service for downhill skiing on Snodgrass Mountain near Crested Butte, Colorado. I would respectfully urge the Forest Service to reconsider that decision in light of the extensive preliminary work that has been done by the project proponents and other factors that I identify below.

First, I want to make it clear that I do not have a position on this proposal. Whether or not lift service for the proposed ski area is permitted on Snodgrass Mountain is between the Forest Service, the public, and the proponent—after all of the regulatory and public involvement process has been completed.

But that is precisely the nature of my concern about this decision by the Forest Service not to proceed under NEPA with this proposal—it does not allow for an official or robust public review of the specific proposal nor a full airing of issues and input regarding it.

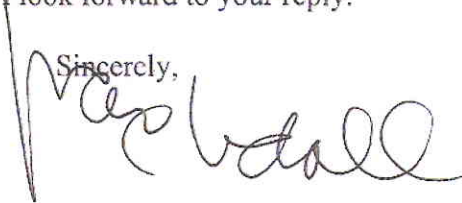
It is my understanding that the area encompassed by the ski area proposal on Snodgrass Mountain is already within the Crested Butte Ski Area permitted boundary. Furthermore, this area is managed by the Forest Service in its current management plan for downhill skiing, and that management prescription is also reflected in the draft forest plan revision that has been out for public comment. As a result, it seems entirely consistent within the existing Forest Service plans for the Crested Butte Ski Area to submit a proposal for lift service for the purpose of downhill skiing on Snodgrass Mountain.

I also understand that the Forest Service requested the project proponents to seek "community consensus" on this proposal prior to the Forest Service's consideration of initiating NEPA. My office is in receipt of letters expressing such support from some communities in the area of the proposal, so it is unclear what standard of "consensus" the Forest Service is requiring or which mechanisms the Forest Service offered to evaluate such "consensus." In addition, it also seems that such consensus would be hard to secure and premature before the community has had a chance to review a specific proposal in the context of a NEPA review.

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I believe that the Forest Service ought to give the community—and the broader state and national public—a chance to review and comment upon a specific proposal, objective studies, and reasonable alternatives, which can only be achieved under a thorough NEPA analysis. If, after that analysis and attendant public comment, the Forest Service determines that this proposal lacks merit or cannot be accomplished without significant environmental and social impacts, the agency can, of course, issue a “no action” decision. However, it seems premature to issue such a decision before this proposal has even had the benefit of that review.

Thank you for considering this request. I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,


Mark Udall
U.S. Senator

cc: Mr. Harris Sherman, Undersecretary of Agriculture for Natural Resources and Environment, U.S. Department of Agriculture