

HOMEWOOD SNOWCAT TOURS

Scoping Summary Report

Introduction

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service/Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit (LTBMU) sought input regarding a proposal to allow Homewood Mountain Resort to provide guided snowcat skiing/snowboarding tours in the Ellis Peak area during the winter of 2014-2015. A Decision Memo is being prepared for this project.

The scoping (request for comments) period began on October 17, 2014 and ran until October 31, 2014. Public scoping included notification to local media outlets and scoping letters mailed or emailed to interested parties.

In response to the scoping request, formal input was received from the following organizations and individuals on the dates indicated.

Name	Date
Al Reynolds	October 22, 2014
Chris Olson	October 22, 2014
David Anderman	October 22, 2014
David Powell	October 22, 2014
David Purves	October 22, 2014
Dennis Keller	October 22, 2014
F&J Radecker	October 22, 2014
Forrest Carmichael	October 22, 2014
Geary Eppley	October 22, 2014
Michael Hammond	October 22, 2014
Steve Benton	October 22, 2014
K. Jacobs	October 23, 2014
Robert Yoder	October 23, 2014
Andy Lindsey	October 25, 2014
Gary Chaney	October 26, 2014
Casey Ressler	October 28, 2014
Erik Maliska	October 28, 2014
Rob Weston	October 28, 2014
Nancy Bogner	October 29, 2014
James Macleod	October 30, 2014

Keith Bernstein	October 30, 2014
Pat Maliska	October 30, 2014
Organizations	
Snowlands	October 30, 2014
Tahoe City Downtown Association	October 30, 2014
West Shore Association	October 30, 2014
Friends of the West Shore	October 31, 2014

Summary of Comments

Comments received are categorized based on their relevance to the Project (see definitions above) and organized based on issue areas, including issues surrounding wildlife concerns, fishing, restoring the dam, recreational uses, and evaluating the historic eligibility of the dam. The majority of comments received were fully supportive.

Support for the Proposed Action

“Please consider the tours so more people can enjoy what I have for years.”

“I fully support the proposal to offer guided snowcat tours on Ellis Peak. The use is consistent with the current use of the property, and enhances the backcountry use and experience in the area.”

“I would welcome the snow cat experience so the area can be enjoyed by many more than could otherwise make the trek.”

“The proposal will benefit Homewood and improve its viability as a skiing venue. This in turn benefits the Lake Tahoe area economically. I see no measurable environmental impact from this operation. It will likely have much less impact than, for example, summer hiking.”

“I believe it is an excellent use of USFS lands. There should be minimal environmental impact with winter operations. The benefit to the users is tremendous. Since the area is in the open motorized operation area, the program should be approved.”

“I think this would be wonderful use of our forests without doing too much to disturb the natural habitat.”

Forest Service Response: Thank you for your support and continuing cooperation. We look forward to continuing to work with citizens and agencies throughout this Project.

Experience

“It’s already bad enough that the snowmobiles are tracking up the snow. Save it for people who earn their turns in this hike-to-only terrain. 10-12 people plus guides putting in 7 laps per day

won't leave any freshies for the fairly large number of people who currently enjoy this easily accessed area.”

“We don't appreciate our peace and quiet being ruined by motorized vehicles being allowed anywhere in the backcountry and especially after having taken the time to skin up there on our skis it would be annoying.”

“Secondly I suspect that just like when we hike the high country in the Sierras we'll see that trash shows up at places that people get packed into by packers. Our experience has been that people who expend effort to get somewhere pristine tend to have very different mindset about it than those look for the easy way out.”

Forest Service Response: Depending on when we receive snowfall there is still an opportunity to find 'freshies' in this area because snowcat tours will only be conducted 3 days per week, typically Fridays through Sundays, weather and conditions permitting. The area proposed is also currently open to over snow motorized vehicles. The permit will require that the operations practice the leave no trace environmental ethic and pack out all of their trash.

Effects to the Environment

“Any additional motorized vehicles will bring noise, emissions, disturbance of nature to this area which currently is largely untouched. Having additional skiers and snowboarders make their way through this area will have a negative effect on nature (plants and animals).”

Forest Service Response: The area proposed for snowcat tours is currently open to over snow motorized use. Snowcat use will be limited (3 days a week, 6-8 trips per day) and only allowed for 1 year with this permit. This one year permit will allow the Forest Service to monitor and evaluate the activity. Impacts from this operation will be monitored and evaluated during this one year temporary period. Adjustments to the operations will be made if unacceptable impacts to other recreationists or the natural environment are discovered. If limited or no impacts are found, then a longer term permit may be proposed. With the longer term permit there will be additional opportunity for public involvement and the possibility for additional resource protection measures to be developed to ensure that the operations do not affect other users or plants and animals.

Restrict the Use

“Commercial operations in this area should not preclude individual recreationists from accessing the permit area. Continued public use of these lands needs to be affirmatively confirmed in the permit. There should be no provision in the permit for closure of this area to the public for any reason associated with the proposed operations. It should be the affirmative duty of the permittee to ensure that its operations do not impact the safety of other users.

For example, the permittee should not be allowed to close the permit area to the public for avalanche control activities and should not be allowed to use explosives for control activities. There should not be any gates or limited access points to this area (though we accept that

Homewood Resort may limit the points at which patrons of Homewood Resort may exit its patrolled lands.)”

Forest Service Response: This permit would only be approved for one year in order to assess the impacts to others from the operations. This permit does not approve the use of explosives for avalanche control and does not approve the operator to preclude others from using the area.

“In addition, snowcat operations should be limited to a few specific days of the week that are announced well in advance and remain constant during the season, so that users desiring to experience this area free from commercial operations may continue to do so.”

“Lastly, due to the ecological sensitivity of the Lake Tahoe watershed, as well as the prime importance of preserving natural soundscapes, the operations should be limited to snowcats using best available technology that maintains all emissions (toxic pollutants and noise) at levels that do not create incremental risk to watersheds or disturb soundscapes.”

Forest Service Response: Snowcat operations are proposed for 3 days per week, typically Fridays through Sunday, weather and conditions permitting. Although motor vehicle regulations are under the jurisdictions of CARB and the USEPA and not the LTBMU, the Forest Service, in cooperation with State and Federal agencies, encourages the use of Best Available Technology. All equipment used for this permit would meet existing Federal and state emissions standards.

Suggestions for Analysis

Air Quality:

Air pollution from over-snow vehicles (OSV) emissions, including deposition to snow and the impacts on criteria air pollutant levels and human health:

- The Lake Tahoe Air Basin is designated as non-attainment/transitional for ozone and non-attainment for PM10 by the California Air Resources Board
- Off-road vehicles emit significant amounts of NOx and VOCs (precursors to ozone formation)
- Localized emissions of carbon monoxide during the wintertime months may not disperse, creating air pockets that are hazardous to humans

Forest Service Response: There is a difference between snowmobiles and snowcats. Snowmobiles (especially those with 2 stroke engines) produce higher levels of emissions compared to snowcats. Snowcats are rated and regulated by CARB and the EPA as nonroad diesel vehicles. The principal air pollutant emissions for diesel-fueled heavy equipment are NOx and PM; unlike gasoline engines, diesel produces low CO. CARB and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have identified on- and off-road diesel as important contributors to regional NOx and particulate emissions with

attendant ozone and health impacts, so a series of emissions reduction programs have been put in place involving engine redesign and use of low sulfur fuel. The EPA has established progressive emission standards for these sources to be implemented in a series of "tiers."¹ For non-road diesel engines, Tier 2 standards apply for equipment manufactured between 2001 and 2006. Tier 3 standards apply for equipment manufactured between 2006 and 2008. The most stringent standards, Tier 4 standards, consist of an interim and final set of standards. The standards for engines less than 75 horsepower (hp) start in 2008, the standards for engines between 76 and 174 hp began in 2012, and the standards for engines 175 hp and greater began in 2011. California has adopted and accelerated the EPA emissions reduction program.

Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Emissions:

- The analysis must examine the GHG emissions generated by the proposed project, and assess how these new emissions impact the GHG emissions in the TRPA Regional Transportation Plan/Sustainable Communities Strategy

***Forest Service Response:** The TRPA Regional Transportation Plan/Sustainable Communities Strategy (RTP) speaks to reducing emissions from cars and light trucks. Important directions of the plan are to reduce the overall environmental impact of transportation in the Region, create walkable, vibrant communities, and provide real alternatives to driving (TRPA, 2012). Therefore, the RTP does not apply to recreation outfitter guides.*

Water Quality: Water pollution from OSV emissions, including potential individual and cumulative impacts to downstream water bodies (e.g. Lake Louise and Lake Tahoe);

- Impacts of pollution on aquatic environments and wetlands/stream environment zones, including area streams, lakes (e.g. Lake Louise, Ellis Lake, and Lake Tahoe) and the potential to impact the meadows and riparian areas in Blackwood Canyon (see map 16, attached)
- Impacts on the quality and health of the water supply that drains into Madden Creek and provides drinking water for many homes

***Forest Service Response:** Emissions resulting from the snowcat operations proposed under this permit are very limited and fall within the expected emissions already analyzed for the general OSV use (by snowmobiles, etc.) in this area (LTBMU Revised LMP FEIS, 2013, pp. 3-549 to 3-550) since snowmobiles produce higher levels of emissions. Direct, indirect and cumulative impacts from snowcat emissions to water quality are not expected to be measurable from this project.*

The permittee will be required to comply with the LTBMU Hazardous Spill Notification and Response Plan, which identifies a notification and responsive action plan for potential spills of hazardous materials, such as fuel or fluids from the proposed snowcat use. In addition, the snowcat trail will be required to avoid channel and meadow areas to

¹ <https://www.dieselnet.com/standards/us/nonroad.php>

protect these areas from direct effects of potential spills. Finally, a minimum depth of at least 1 ft of compacted snow or ice is required for snowcat access on trails to avoid erosion or sediment delivery to nearby waterbodies.

Noise and Impacts to Quiet Areas for Non-motorized recreation:

- Noise pollution, including impacts to nearby areas which the LTBMU's 2014 Forest Plan has listed as backcountry (see Forest Plan map 16, attached), areas set aside for non-motorized use, and areas impacted by the attenuation of noise through topographical features

***Forest Service Response:** The Revised Forest Plan has not yet been approved, so this project is directed by the 1988 Forest Plan. The area proposed for snowcat tours is currently open to motorized over snow vehicle use as well as the adjacent areas to the north and the south (LTBMU Snowmobile Guide, Revised 2010). See below for a discussion of noise management.*

Direct and indirect impacts to wildlife:

- Impacts to wildlife through direct air, water, and noise emissions, and indirect impacts to wildlife habitat from pollution and other impacts of the proposed project;

***Forest Service Response:** The project was evaluated for how it would affect threatened, endangered, proposed, candidate or sensitive (TEPCS) species and their habitats in a Biological Assessment/Biological Evaluation for Aquatic and Terrestrial Species (Project Record). The snowcat tours could have some temporary effects on individual TEPCS species (northern goshawk, bald eagle, California spotted owl, and pacific marten) from recreation related disturbances similar to those that occur as a result of existing public recreation use. However, very minimal habitat alteration would occur as a result of this project and no cumulative effects are expected. It was determined that this project would not result in a trend toward federal listing or loss of viability because effects to survival and reproductive activities are not expected. There would be no effects to any other TEPCS species.*

Direct and Indirect Impacts to non-motorized recreation:

Impacts to snowshoeing and Cross-Country skiing opportunities in nearby areas which may be affected by noise;

***Forest Service Response:** This portion of the Tahoe Basin has been characterized as being within an urban outdoor recreation area sitting adjacent to a rural outdoor recreation area. Translated into the "accepted" Community Noise Equivalent Level (CNEL) noise threshold standard, the "accepted" noise/sound levels around the ski runs are around 55 decibels, and 50 decibels around the adjacent land areas. As it relates to Homewood, the permit will require that any authorized snowcat equipment is appropriately equipped with industry provided sound muffling devices, and that these machines are only operated during daylight hours. This is because CNEL noise levels are weighted, with noise levels being "slightly penalized" when they occur from 7am to*

10pm and "significantly penalized" when they occur during the 10pm to 7am nighttime period. That is a standard industry formula. We would then monitor the noise levels, along with Homewood, to ensure their overall noise levels are in compliance with the TRPA standards for the Basin. If there's a noise related problem, some attention might be given to the muffler system, or the speeds as well as the operation period of the snowcat tours. These snowcat tours will generate more overall noise for that area, but it is unlikely that the tours will generate "unreasonable" noise levels if their operations are monitored and managed. Oversight of the noise levels are a part of the operations requirements. We would appreciate any feedback from the public as to the noise impacts during this 1 year temporary activity.


Forest Health and Tree Removal:

The analysis must assess the extent and options available to minimize tree removal for the OSV's path.

Forest Service Response: Tree removal will be minimized for this project. Less than a dozen small diameter trees would be removed and only a few would be limbed for safe mobility of the snowcat.

Summary of Issues

I have reviewed the public scoping input and this summary report. I appreciate the questions and comments provided by the public.



Nancy J. Gibson
Forest Supervisor
Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit



Date