

Decision Notice

USDA FOREST SERVICE
Eldorado National Forest
Placerville Ranger District
El Dorado County, CA

Sierra-at-Tahoe Huckleberry Expansion

Decision and Reasons for the Decision

Based on my review of the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Sierra-at-Tahoe Huckleberry Expansion (November 2008), I have decided to implement the Proposed Action (Alternative One). No substantive issues were brought forward during the 30-day notice and comment period. My reasons for the decision follow:

Alternative One, the proposed action, will improve skier safety in the Huckleberry Canyon area including the implementation of avalanche control, closures when conditions are not safe for skiers, signing the boundary to direct skiers toward the permit area, and the addition of a "catch trail" to guide skiers back to the base area. In addition, this will increase the amount of challenging terrain within the permit boundary.

As part of this project, the Forest Supervisor will amend the Ski Area Term Special Use Permit for Sierra-at-Tahoe, Inc. to add 320 acres of terrain in the Huckleberry Canyon area, as shown in the EA. Within the project area the following will be authorized:

A trail will be groomed over the snow during the operating season to allow skiers in the area to return to Sierra's existing trails and base area. This trail will be approximately 16 feet wide and extend approximately one mile along the north boundary (bottom) of the Huckleberry addition.

Twelve trees will be felled to provide the necessary width for the grooming machine to construct the trail. Timber cutting will take place after November 1st. Timber will be cruised and sold to Sierra at current market value as required by the Ski Area Term Special Use Permit, Clause III.D.

The new boundary will be marked similarly to the current boundary with cautionary "Ski Area Boundary" signs. Entry to the area will be managed by maintenance of five separate gates with appropriate signage warning of the backcountry nature of the area.

The Huckleberry Canyon addition will be monitored for avalanche activity/danger, and may be closed when unstable snow conditions exist. Avalanche control, including hand charges, may be used in the area when extreme conditions exist to reduce risk for visitors and ski patrol.

Hazard trees will not be removed in this area. Current management of hazard trees is to remove those only along existing runs, roads, trails, and lift lines; hazard trees are not removed in the general forested areas. The area will remain closed to motorized vehicles except by permit.

Alternative Two, the No Action alternative does not meet the need for the project.

All mitigation measures included in the Proposed Action will be implemented. These include:

1. Grooming will be limited to between 5 and 8 AM, or during daylight hours.
2. The twelve trees will be cut and left in place. The resort will work with the wildlife biologist to directionally fell trees and pile limbs to enhance habitat for American martin and their prey. The area will be restored as much as possible to a natural condition to retain the visual quality of the area in summer.
3. The trail will not be used if the snow pack anywhere on the trail surface is less than three feet deep. For the first two years after trail expansion development, the meadows, ponds, and stream crossings, will be monitored by aquatic specialists after the snow melts. Any negative effects to the aquatic systems will be repaired and a plan will be developed in coordination with the aquatic specialists for protection of the Riparian Conservation Areas or for the mitigation of negative impacts.

Alternatives Considered

Alternatives analyzed in detail included:

1. Proposed Action – Amend the Ski Area Term Special Use Permit for Sierra-at-Tahoe, Inc. to add 320 acres of terrain in the Huckleberry Canyon area.
2. No Action – The Huckleberry Canyon will continue to be managed as an area outside Sierra-at-Tahoe's boundary. The area will continue to be accessible through five gates along Sierra's eastern permit boundary. Sierra will continue to monitor avalanche conditions, and may post warnings at the gates. The area will not be tended by Sierra's Ski Patrol, and Sierra will not be responsible for avalanche control in that area. No trees will be cut to provide a wider groomed trail, but Sierra will be allowed to continue grooming a small return trail with snowmobiles.

Public Involvement

A brief description of this project has been on the Eldorado National Forest's Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) since January 2007. A scoping letter was sent on May 18, 2007 to over 100 adjacent property owners and interested parties. The Forest received six letters, two email messages, and one telephone call in response to public scoping. Three telephone calls and four letters were received prior to project development and public scoping.

Legal notice that the preliminary EA was available was published in the Mountain Democrat on September 10, 2008. The EA was sent to the nine respondents to public scoping.

Forty-one responses were received during the comment period. One issue was outside the scope of this proposed action, and the rest were favorable to the proposed action. Two responses were received after the comment period ended. No substantive issues were raised; therefore, no alternatives other than the proposed action and the no action alternative have been fully developed and analyzed. A summary of the responses to scoping and those received during the comment period may be found in Appendix A of the EA.

Finding of No Significant Impact

A finding of no significant impact is attached to this decision notice.

Findings required by Other Laws and Regulations

The EA has been completed pursuant to Forest Service Handbook 1909.25. The EA is sufficient for me to determine whether or not to proceed with the Sierra-at-Tahoe Huckleberry Expansion project. My decision is consistent with the National Forest Management Act as well as the Eldorado National Forest (ENF) Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment, (January 2004). The proposed action meets standards and guidelines of the ENF LRMP area designation of "Potential Winter Sports".

1. Soil and water resources will be conserved. Streams and fisheries in the project area will be protected. No ground disturbance is expected. Estimates of the threshold of concern and the equivalent roaded acres were confirmed for the affected watershed.
2. As shown in the EA and determined in the wildlife and plant biological evaluations, the viability of populations of threatened, endangered, and sensitive species will be maintained.
3. The protection of heritage resources has been confirmed in the EA.

Implementation Date

The project is planned for implementation in November of 2008.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

Pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12 (e)(1), this decision is not subject to appeal.

Contact Person

If you have any questions about the Environmental Assessment for the Sierra-at-Tahoe Huckleberry Expansion, please contact Cindy Oswald at 530-647-5320.







DUANE A. NELSON
District Ranger



Date:

Sierra-at-Tahoe

-  Permit Boundary
-  Expansion Boundary
-  Lifts
-  Groomed Trail

