United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service
White River National Forest
900 Grand Ave
P.O. Box 948
Glenwood Springs, CO 81601-3602
970-945-2521

**File Code:** 2720
**Date:** September 24, 2026

Dear Interested Party,

The Forest Service is soliciting comments on a proposal to issue a campground concession special use permit to Pitkin County Government to operate, manage, maintain, improve, and renovate the Maroon Bells Scenic Area (MBSA). The permit authorizes year-round occupancy and management of the site with an operating season of May 15th to November 10th annually as conditions allow. Forest Service proposes to issue a 5-year campground concession special use permit with the option to amend the permit and add 5 additional years to the authorization.

This proposal would continue and expand a 50-year partnership between the White River National Forest and Pitkin County in managing the MBSA. The proposal consists of an administrative action to issue a special use permit to manage a developed recreation site; no change to public access is proposed and the proposal also does not affect or include any portion of the Maroon Bells Snowmass Wilderness. The MBSA will remain a part of the White River National Forest with Forest Service staff administering the terms and conditions of the special use permit and Pitkin County staff overseeing day-to-day operations of the site.

Project documents for public review are located here: https://usfs-public.box.com/s/c5x1legos7q5x3wljtmrw5isyve87628

For more information on the project proposal, visit the White River National Forest webpage at: https://www.fs.usda.gov/r02/whiteriver/

**BACKGROUND**

The MBSA is a corridor of National Forest land following Maroon Creek Road (Pitkin County Road 13) from the forest/county boundary to Maroon Lake. The area draws visitors from around the world for its iconic view of the Maroon Bells peaks from Maroon Lake and is a significant contributor to the local tourism economy. Approximately 215,000 visitors a year visit the MBSA during its May-Oct season, a number that has increased substantially in recent years.

Since 1977, the USFS and Pitkin County have partnered in the management of the MBSA. The MBSA is located on the White River National Forest just outside of Aspen Colorado; however, Pitkin County owns and manages the only access road and has jurisdiction over parking areas used by visitors riding the shuttle bus. They also provide law enforcement and search and rescue support. Additionally, Forest Service and Pitkin County entered a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2025 to co-manage the MBSA. Under this MOU, the County funded and hired a site manager for the 2026 operating season and conducted infrastructure maintenance at MBSA facilities.

In 1997, the USFS began charging fees to access the MBSA, including the $10 day use fee that is currently in place today. Since that time visitation has increased dramatically, revenue from fees has not kept up with the costs of operating the site, and there is a long backlog of deferred

maintenance needs for facilities at the MBSA. To address these issues, from 2021-2023, through a collaborative process a local stakeholder group consisting of Pitkin County, the City of Aspen, the White River National Forest, Roaring Fork Transportation Authority, Aspen Skiing Company, and the Aspen Chamber Resort Association worked together to develop a Comprehensive Recreation Management Plan (CRMP) to proactively and sustainably manage users, access, and infrastructure while preserving the natural resources within the MBSA. Development of this plan included a robust public process with five public meetings, 220 comments received, and 8,000 survey responses. Through this process the stakeholder group compiled and prioritized dozens of recommendations and implementation actions to sustainably manage the MBSA.

Over the three years since the CRMP was completed, the stakeholder group has continued to work together on implementing the recommendations and action items in the CRMP and identified that issuing a special use permit to Pitkin County was a practical and achievable solution to managing the site more sustainably across forest and county jurisdictions in a manner consistent with the 50-year partnership and community interest in the site. This special use permit management structure began within the Forest Service in 1991 and is frequently and successfully used to manage developed recreation sites across the country. Over 66 developed sites on the White River National Forest are currently managed under a campground concession special use permit and the WRNF is one of 75 National Forests across the country to manage developed recreation sites via this type of permit.

**PURPOSE AND NEED**

The purpose of the Proposed Action is to ensure effective and sustainable long-term management of the MBSA for the benefit of the public. It has been determined that there is a need to use a third party to manage the MBSA due to staffing limitations, funding issues, and deteriorating infrastructure. Due to the adjacent and overlapping jurisdictions between Pitkin County and the USFS and the 50-year history of cooperative management of the MBSA, the USFS is proposing to issue the special use permit to Pitkin County so that the USFS can provide sustainable management into the future while continuing to provide a high-quality visitor experience.

**PROPOSED ACTION**

The White River National Forest proposes to issue a campground concession special use permit to Pitkin County Government to operate, manage, maintain, improve, and renovate the MBSA trails, infrastructure, and facilities on approximately 1300 acres.

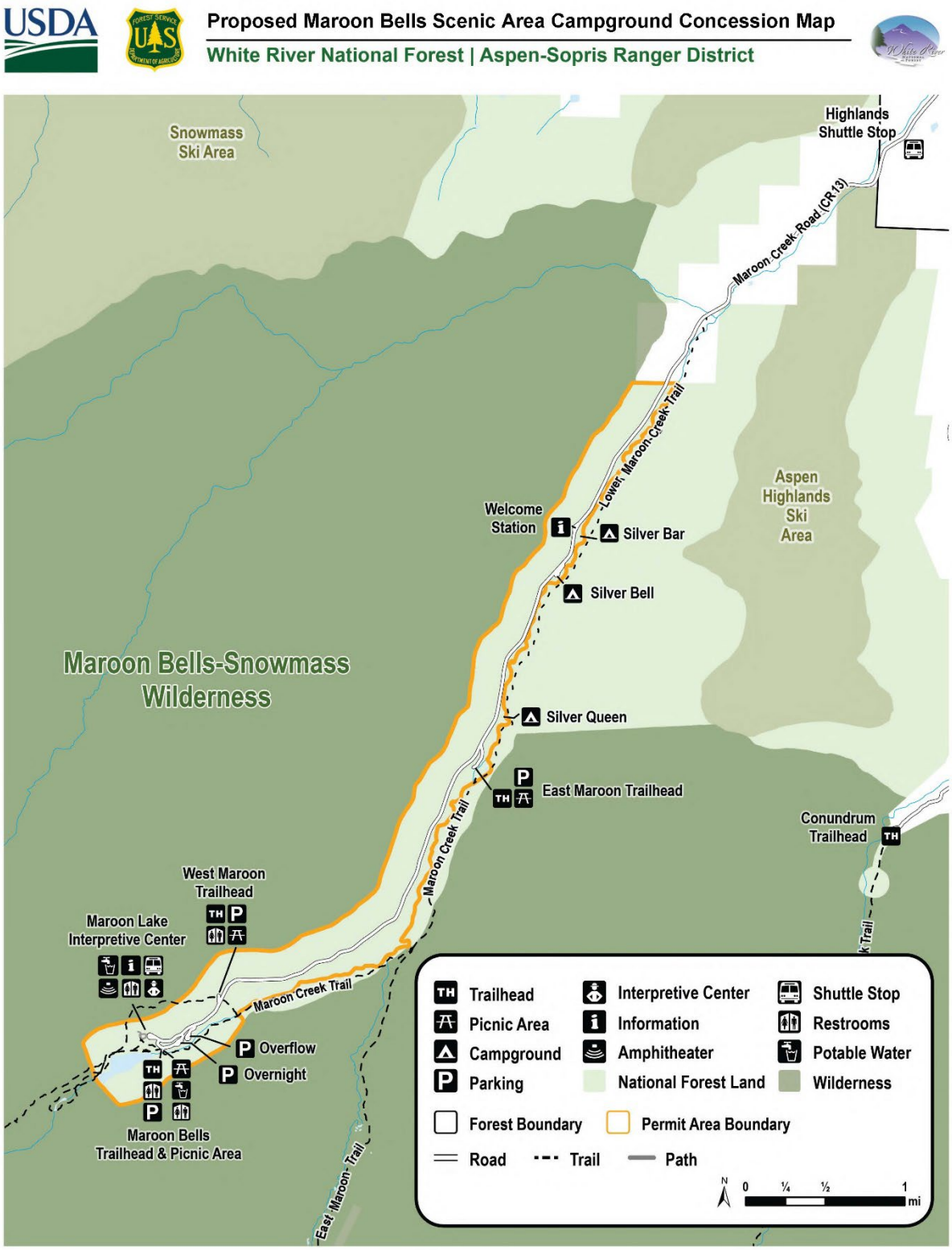
The infrastructure and facilities include:

- Welcome Station
- Silver Bar Campground – bathrooms, all features e.g. tables, fire rings, food lockers, tent pads, etc.
- Silver Bell Campground – bathrooms, all features e.g. tables, fire rings, food lockers, tent pads, etc.
- Silver Queen Campground – bathrooms, all features e.g. tables, fire rings, food lockers, tent pads, etc.
- East and West Maroon sites – parking, bathroom, picnic areas
- Bunker Toilet with water, power, solar, and hydroelectric systems

- Amphitheater
- Interpretive Center
- Hardened and natural surface trails
- Trail bridges
- Parking Areas
- Roads
- Four-hole and two single toilet facilities
- Water, waste-water, and solar systems associated with the infrastructure listed above.

*Figure 1* shows the proposed special use permit area for the project proposal.

**Figure 1**


USDA
Proposed Maroon Bells Scenic Area Campground Concession Map
White River National Forest | Aspen-Sopris Ranger District
Snowmass Ski Area
Highlands Shuttle Stop
Maroon Creek Road (CR 13)
Lower Maroon Creek Trail
Aspen Highlands Ski Area
Welcome Station
Silver Bar
Silver Bell
Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness
Silver Queen
East Maroon Trailhead
Conundrum Trailhead
West Maroon Trailhead
Maroon Lake Interpretive Center
Maroon Creek Trail
Overflow
Overnight
Maroon Bells Trailhead & Picnic Area
East Maroon Trail
Trailhead
Picnic Area
Campground
Parking
Interpretive Center
Information
Amphitheater
National Forest Land
Shuttle Stop
Restrooms
Potable Water
Wilderness
Forest Boundary
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**CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION**
The categories in paragraphs (c) within 7 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR)1b.4 are for activities which have been determined by USDA to not have a reasonably foreseeable significant impact on the human environment and are excluded from the preparation of an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement.

The proposed project is consistent with 7 CFR 1b.(c), (29) (USDA-29c-USFS) Issuance of a new authorization or amendment of an existing authorization for recreation special uses that occur on existing roads or trails, in existing facilities, in existing recreation sites, or in areas where such activities are allowed.

**HOW TO COMMENT AND TIMEFRAME**
Comments will be accepted through October 9, 2026. Electronic comments will be the sole method for submitting comments. Comments submitted online at https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/CommentInput?project=NP-5311

Written comments must be submitted to: Brian Glaspell, White River National Forest Supervisor. Persons commenting should include: 1) name, address, telephone number, organization represented, if any; 2) name of the proposal on which the comment is being submitted; and 3) specific facts and supporting reasons for consideration.

Names and contact information submitted with comments will become part of the public record and may be released under the Freedom of Information Act. Decisions that are categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) are not subject to an administrative review process (pre-decisional objection process) (Agriculture Act of 2014, Subtitle A, Sec. 8006).

Comments received on the project may be viewed here:
https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/ReadingRoom?project=NP-5311

For more information about this project, contact Aspen-Sopris District Developed/Dispersed Program Manager Kendra Head at 970-263-2266, or email kendra.head@usda.gov.

Sincerely,

BRIAN GLASPELL

Digitally signed by BRIAN GLASPELL
Date: 2026.09.24 16:35:09 -06'00'

BRIAN GLASPELL
Forest Supervisor