

File Code: 1910

Date: April 9, 2018

Dear Interested Party,

The Flagstaff Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest is soliciting comments on a proposal from Arizona Snowbowl to replace and upgrade the existing Agassiz chairlift. As is further described below, the existing fixed-grip triple Agassiz chairlift would be replaced and upgraded to a detachable chairlift-gondola combination (referred to as a “chondola” or “telemix”). The proposed configuration of the Agassiz chairlift would allow closed gondola cabins to be interspersed on the same line as chairs, which is intended to improve the guest experience at Arizona Snowbowl in both the summer and winter seasons.

The resort has completed initial planning of the proposed action, which is depicted on the attached map. Your comments on this proposal are being sought at this time.

Purpose and Need

Constructed in 1986, the existing Agassiz lift has served Arizona Snowbowl well but is nearing the end of its expected durability and will need replacement. Additionally, Arizona Snowbowl intends to improve its summer recreation opportunities. The addition of closed (gondola) cabins, that would be provided by the proposed chairlift-gondola combination, are needed to accommodate the existing summer *Sky Ride* operations and guest safety during sudden inclement weather as well as provide accommodation for persons with disabilities. A popular guest activity since the 1960s, Arizona Snowbowl presently hosts over 40,000 visitors on the summer *Sky Ride*. In its current state, it is difficult to load and unload foot traffic from the existing fixed-grip Agassiz chairlift, which limits the summer recreation opportunities available to guests. Replacing the existing chairlift with a detachable chairlift-gondola combination would allow foot passengers to easily load during the summer or winter months. The inclusion of closed cabins would substantially improve the ability to evacuate persons who may become sick (altitude related issues are common) or require medical attention while at the top of the lift. Finally, the provision of gondola cabins would provide a more enjoyable experience during periods of cool temperatures, wind or light rain and allow the *Sky Ride* to continue to operate.

Although uphill capacity is not proposed to be increased, the replacement and upgrade of the existing Agassiz chairlift would address loading inefficiencies associated with the existing fixed-grip chairlift. Further, the proposed replacement would improve the recreation experience at Arizona Snowbowl, better meeting the expectations of skiing guests and allowing a limited number of foot passengers to enjoy the *Sky Ride* during the winter season.

Proposed Action

The existing Agassiz fixed-grip triple chairlift would be replaced and upgraded with a detachable combination chairlift and gondola referred to as a “chondola” or “telemix.” The upgraded chairlift and gondola combination would be installed as a top drive lift, and adequate power would be installed from the top terminal of the existing Grand Canyon Express chairlift to the upgraded Agassiz top terminal. Power would be trenched into the ground from the top terminal



of the Grand Canyon Express chairlift to the upgraded Agassiz top terminal by way of the *Upper Ridge* ski trail. This ground disturbance was previously approved in the 2005 *Record of Decision for Arizona Snowbowl Facilities Improvements Final EIS*, which included the installation of snowmaking infrastructure along the *Upper Ridge* ski trail. Currently proposed power would follow the previously approved snowmaking disturbance corridor. The additional electrical capacity would be co-located with planned/approved snowmaking utilities and would include associated infrastructure (e.g. conductors and transformers).

The existing capacity of the Agassiz chairlift is not proposed to be increased at this time and would be similar to that of the existing chairlift with the addition of gondola cabins being placed about every fourth or fifth carrier. However, with the inclusion of detachable technology, the ride time on the new lift would be roughly half of the existing lift – or, twice as fast. Further, the inclusion of detachable technology would reduce the ride time without any measurable difference in operational noise and could potentially reduce the current noise levels associated with operation of the aging Agassiz chairlift.

The proposed Agassiz chairlift-gondola combination would occupy the exact 6,112 linear foot alignment of the existing Agassiz chairlift; however, a minor amount of tree clearing would be necessary to accommodate the wider lift corridor associated with the chairlift-gondola combination (as required by tramway regulations). The existing lift corridor is roughly 30 feet wide, and vegetation has been cleared to 15 feet on either side of the chairlift's center line. The proposed chairlift would require a 60-foot wide corridor, extending the clearing to 30 feet (existing plus proposed) on either side of the chairlift's center line, and resulting in approximately 1.9 acres of overstory vegetation removal along the alignment. It is anticipated that the proposed Agassiz chairlift replacement would require no more than the current 26 towers associated with the existing chairlift. The proposed upgrade would require the replacement of the existing towers and tower foundations, resulting in less than 0.1 acre of ground disturbance for the roughly 26 new towers.

Additionally, the configuration for unloading at the top terminal would necessitate regrading and the installation of retaining walls. Included with the bottom terminal area of disturbance is the construction of a small gondola cabin storage and maintenance building, approximately 30 feet wide by 85 feet long. This building would be located adjacent (and attached) to the proposed Agassiz bottom terminal and would require grading and some vegetation removal. Proposed ground disturbance would accommodate a concrete retaining wall necessary for the construction of this structure, and would extend toward the existing *Santa Fe* ski trail. Construction of the top and bottom terminal configurations is anticipated to result in 0.9 acres of ground disturbance (0.3 acres for the bottom terminal and 0.6 acres at and around the proposed top terminal location). Additionally, 0.1 acres of overstory vegetation removal would occur adjacent to the bottom terminal to accommodate vehicle parking at the gondola cabin storage and maintenance building.

Corridor widening, terminal grading, and the installation of tower foundations is proposed to occur within approximately 3.0 acres of overall disturbance. In combination with the previously approved ground disturbance for necessary power connections, the project would total 3.4 acres of disturbance. The following table summarizes the total disturbance associated with the

proposed Agassiz chairlift upgrade, which is also depicted in the attached figure.

Table 1: Summary of Disturbance by Proposed Project Component

Project Component	Type	Acreage
Lift Corridor Widening	Overstory Vegetation Removal	1.9
Replaced Lift Tower Foundations	Ground Disturbance	0.1
Replaced/Upgraded Lift Terminals	Ground Disturbance	0.9
	Overstory Vegetation Removal	0.1
Total Proposed Disturbance		3.0
Lift Power and Associated Infrastructure	Previously Approved Ground Disturbance	0.4
Total Project Ground Disturbance		3.4

Construction activities, vehicle parking, and materials staging would primarily occur in the previously disturbed and sparsely vegetated area adjacent the bottom terminal of the Agassiz chairlift.

Tree clearing would primarily be completed by masticating standing trees on-site with a tracked masticator or a spider excavator. Additionally, trees may also be cut by hand sawyers and skidded down the existing lift line to designated landing zones where appropriate. As tramway code requires a certain clearance envelope, this methodology would allow precise control over the required number of trees removed while minimizing the ground impacts of skidding

A helicopter would primarily be used for tower, and other lift infrastructure removal, new concrete, and new tower installation; however, in areas where existing access roads are present and proximate to lift infrastructure a crane may also be used.

Proposed Decision

Due to the minimal amount of disturbance associated with the construction of the proposed chairlift replacement, the Coconino National Forest is considering categorically excluding this project from analysis in an environmental assessment (EA) or environmental impact statement (EIS). For a proposed action to be categorically excluded from further analysis in an EA or EIS, it must fit one of the categories contained in Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 Chapter 30. The proposed chairlift upgrade fits into category of “*Approval, modification, or continuation of minor special uses of NFS lands that require less than five contiguous acres of land*” as outlined in 36 CFR 220.6(e)(3).

Public Involvement

Please submit your comments within 30 days of receiving this letter. Written comments must be

submitted to: Recreation and Wilderness Staff Officer, Flagstaff Ranger District, 5075 N. Hwy. 89, Flagstaff, AZ 86004, FAX (928) 526-0866. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, excluding holidays.

Persons commenting should include: 1) name, address, telephone number, organization represented, if any; 2) title of the project of concern “Agassiz Chairlift Replacement Project,” and 3) specific facts and supporting reasons for me to consider.

Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.docx) should be sent to comments-southwestern-coconino-flagstaff@fs.fed.us.

Per Agricultural Act of 2014, Pub. L. No 113-79 (i.e. Farm Bill), Section 8006(a), the Forest Service no longer offers notice, comment, or appeal opportunities for categorically excluded projects pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215. However, the Forest Service will continue to scope such projects and does invite public input. I will consider all comments that I receive including those submitted anonymously, but only those who provide contact information will be notified of my decision. Please note that all comments received, including the names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project and will be available for public inspection.

To request further information, please feel free to contact the project leader, Brian Poturalski, at bpoturalski@fs.fed.us.

Sincerely,

/s/ Laura Jo West

LAURA JO WEST

Forest Supervisor

cc: Mike Dechter, Andy Stevenson, Mike Elson