United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Ecological Services
5353 Yellowstone Road, Suite 308A
Cheyenne, Wyoming 82009

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ER 18/253

SEP 13 2018

Patricia O'Connor, Forest Supervisor
Bridger Teton National Forest
P.O. Box 1880, 340 N. Cache
Jackson, Wyoming 83001

Dear Ms. O'Connor:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) provides the following comments in response to Bridger-Teton National Forest's (Forest) August 3, 2018, notice of intent (NOI) to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Snow King Mountain Resort On-mountain Improvements Project (Project). The Snow King Resort (Resort) operates, in part, under a special use permit with the U.S. Forest Service. The EIS will evaluate the Resort's master development plan, which includes a multi-year plan to improve and expand facilities at the Resort. The proposed action includes updating existing facilities and developing new winter and summer recreation opportunities. Our comments and recommendations are provided pursuant to the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended, (16 U.S.C. 1531 et seq.; ESA).

The Project area is within the Snow King Mountain Resort, located at the edge of Jackson, Teton County, Wyoming. The Project includes the following elements:

- A new ski school/teaching center on the ridgeline west of the Snow King summit.
- Development of skiing in the natural bowl on the back side, south of the Snow King summit. This southernmost portion of the current special use permit area is suitable for development of low-intermediate and intermediate level ski terrain, complementing the summit teaching center.
- A 67-acre permit boundary adjustment on the front side, east of the existing permit area, to accommodate part of a summit access road/novice skiway, intermediate-level terrain lower on the slope (including groomed runs and tree and glade skiing), and a novice route down from Rafferty lift (via the access road/novice skiway).
- An 89-acre permit boundary adjustment on the front side west of the existing permit area to accommodate a summit teaching center, another part of the summit access road/novice skiway, and expert-level tree and glade skiing.

- New ski terrain totaling about 97.5 acres (groomed runs and teaching terrain).
- Upgrading the existing Summit lift to a gondola, and installation of one new chair lift, two teaching area conveyors, and one surface lift.
- On-mountain facilities (the summit restaurant/guest services building and ski patrol facility, a temporary ski patrol building at the top of Cougar, an observatory and planetarium at the summit, a wedding venue west of the summit building, and a year-round yurt camp at the southern point of the permit area).
- 147.1 acres of added snowmaking (with few exceptions, all existing and proposed runs).
- Improved and expanded lighting for night skiing.
- Front-side mountain bike trails and a back-side mountain bike zone.
- Hiking trails between the summit and the west base, west of Exhibition run.
- A zip line from the summit to the west base area, paralleling the Summit lift.

Canada lynx

The Project area is located within the Flat Creek Lynx Analysis Unit (LAU) and is within lynx designated critical habitat. On March 23, 2007, the Service issued a biological opinion on the effects of the Northern Rockies Lynx Amendment on the Distinct Population Segment (DPS) of lynx in the contiguous United States, in accordance with section 7 of the ESA, also known as the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction (NRLMD). The biological opinion was identified as the first-tier of a tiered consultation framework, with the review of subsequent projects that may affect lynx as being the second-tier of consultation. Under the framework, second-tier biological opinions would be issued when proposed actions result in adverse effects to lynx that were not fully analyzed in the first-tier biological opinion. We recommend the EIS evaluate the effects of the Project on lynx and determine whether there are effects that should be analyzed in a second-tier consultation.

While the Project includes many proposed activities, only a handful of activities are located within lynx habitat or have the potential to affect lynx. Based on our understanding of the proposed action, the following proposed activities may expand the permanent development footprint within the Project area, and may fragment lynx habitat:

- Intermediate ski run 22
- Advanced ski run 25
- The glading area between intermediate runs 20 and 19; and intermediate runs 4, 5, 7, and further southwest of run 7; and south of the training center
- Clearing for Advanced ski runs 3, 8, 10, 11, 12,and 13; intermediate run 4,5, 7 and 9; summit Gondola, Summit, and Bearcat Glades, and Bearcat
- Proposed hiking trails
- Proposed mountain bike trails
- Proposed ADA Yurt Trail
- Observatory

Removal of lynx habitat could decrease prey availability, affect lynx movement within home ranges, or result in a more fragmented landscape (Interagency Lynx Biology Team 2013). Although the Project is not considered a vegetation management project as described in the

NRLMD, we recommend the EIS include an analysis of the current state of lynx habitat within the Flat Creek LAU. If the NRLMD standards for vegetation management (VES S1 VEG S2 and VEG S6), as well as connectivity and linkage areas (ALL S1) are not currently being met, we recommend the Forest use caution in the further removal of lynx habitat within this LAU.

Few studies have examined how lynx react to human presence. Preliminary information from a study in Colorado suggests some recreation use may be tolerated by lynx but that lynx may avoid areas with concentrated recreation use (Interagency Lynx Biology Team 2013). Lynx collared with global positioning units with home ranges within two highly used recreation areas, were found to be less active during the day and more active at night (Olson et al. 2018). In addition, lynx tend to avoid high-intensity developed recreation: lynx will adjust their behavior or use of habitat in the presence of most dispersed recreation, but they are unable to tolerate high levels of human use that occur at a large resort (Squires et al. 2018). Lynx use of ski areas varies seasonally, with higher use in the spring and summer after the ski season has ended and less use during the winter ski season (Squires et al. 2018).

Due to the potential impacts to lynx and lynx habitat as a result of implementation of the proposed recreation activities, we recommend the EIS include at least one alternative implementing the following the NRLMD human use guidelines for developed recreation: HU G1 (maintaining inter-trail islands), HU G2 (providing lynx nocturnal foraging opportunities), HU G3 (lynx movement and habitat effectiveness), and HU G10 (maintaining security habitat when expanding ski areas and trails). Adopting these guidelines would ensure the proposed activities are designed to minimize the fragmentation of lynx foraging and denning habitat. Reducing the number of new graded/cleared areas, ski runs, bike trails, hiking trails, and buildings within currently contiguous lynx foraging and denning habitats would also reduce the fragmentation of lynx habitat. Alternatively, these Project-related activities could be moved to areas that do not contain lynx habitat. In addition, we recommend the Forest minimize the footprint of new lighted, night ski areas, especially in or adjacent to blocks of contiguous lynx habitat to give lynx the opportunity to forage at night. By implementing these measures the Forest will appreciably reduce the impacts to lynx, lynx denning and foraging habitat, as well as, designated lynx critical habitat within in the Project area.

We appreciate your efforts to ensure the conservation of endangered, threatened, and candidate species. If you have any questions regarding this letter or your responsibilities under the ESA, please contact Lisa Solberg Schwab of my office at the letterhead address or phone (307) 367-5340.

Sincerely,

for Tyler A. Abbott
Field Supervisor
Wyoming Field Office

cc: USFS, BTNF, Wildlife Biologist, Jackson, WY (R. Griebel) (rgriebel@fs.fed.us)
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Literature Cited

Interagency Lynx Biology Team. 2013. Canada lynx conservation assessment and strategy. 3rd edition. USDA Forest Service, USDI Fish and Wildlife Service, USDI Bureau of Land Management, and USDI National Park Service. Forest Service Publication R1-13-19, Missoula, MT. 128 pp.

Olson,L.E., J. R. Squires, E. K. Roberts, J.S. Ivan, and M. Hebblewhite. 2018. Sharing the same slope: behavioral responses of a threatened mesocarnivore to motorized and nonmotorized winter recreation. Ecology and Evolution 00: 1-18.

Squires, J., L. Olson, K. Heinemeyer, M. Hebblewhite, and J. Holbrook. 2018. Winter recreation and forest carnivores: studies of Canada lynx and wolverine. Rocky Mountain Research Station, U.S. Forest Service, MT.