

WOLF CREEK PASS LANDSCAPE LINKAGE

DESCRIPTION AND STATUS

Wolf Creek Pass straddles the Continental Divide between two of the largest intact wilderness areas in the Southern Rockies – the Weminuche and South San Juans. It is a critical area for the movement of wildlife such as lynx and wolverine. Recently, the Forest Service finalized a Record of Decision (ROD) which will set the stage for a large scale development the size of Aspen with up to 8,000 year-round visitors in some of the most important wildlife habitat in the heart of the West. If this development goes forward, one of the most important wildlife corridors in the Southern Rockies would be forever lost in addition to other serious effects on water, fire safety, and the scenic beauty of our wild spaces. ***Our goal is to maintain Wolf Creek Pass as a connectivity corridor and climate refugia as mountain habitats shift towards higher elevations in the Southern Rockies, and to improve security for listed or candidate species.***

Request

Wolf Creek Pass should be protected in perpetuity as a climate refugia of national importance. There is a timely opportunity for the Administration to pull or delay this decision and any associated real estate transactions until an independent reviewing officer is assigned to fully analyze the impacts of the development. A broad-based alliance of organizations would like to see an independent review of the ROD based on the project proponent's continued and undue influence on the Forest Service during the decision-making process. Some of these organizations are now preparing to file a complaint in Federal Court challenging the ROD.

ISSUES OF IMPORTANCE

- Wolf Creek Pass has been identified by a diverse coalition of conservation and land-based organizations as a top connectivity priority in the West in need of protection in the face of climate change.
- At an elevation of 10,850 feet, Wolf Creek Pass frequently accumulates the largest snowpack in the Southern Rockies, averaging 400 inches of snowfall per year. Consequently, the San Juan Mountains have been identified as a priority location for potential future wolverine reintroduction.
- The Forest Service continues to narrow the scope of its environmental review by overstating the Developer's right to road access and understating the federal authority to protect the National Forest from impacts of the "Village at Wolf Creek" project. This is in direct violation of the National Environmental Policy Act. ***The manipulation of the analysis means that direct and cumulative impacts of constructing and operating the proposed Village will escape Forest Service analysis and public disclosure.*** Forest Service Officials have been misled on their actual power to deny the proposal, place conditions on the land exchange, or mitigate impacts by enforcing existing easements.



-OVER-

The easement created with the original 1986 land exchange requires an actual development plan be submitted to the Forest Service for review and approval, or denial if the plan is not consistent with protection of the National Forest and the Wolf Creek Ski Area.

- The Forest Service has gone to great lengths to suppress thousands of pages of communications that altered the structure and narrowed the scope of the environmental review and Forest Service power to protect the National Forest. A Federal Court Order requiring weekly releases of these documents is now underway, but it has taken a year and a half of legal wrangling to obtain Forest Service cooperation.
- The Forest Service has not subjected its analysis or decisions to independent review within the agency. The reviewing officer assigned to the Objections, Maribeth Gustafson, Deputy Regional Forester, was also heavily involved in directing the development of the Environmental Impact Statement content, the draft decision, the objection response, communications plans, and most likely, the Final Decision itself. The as-yet incomplete set of documents requested through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) litigation confirm that Ms. Gustafson served as reviewing officer of a decision she approved and directed.
- Increased traffic in the narrow mountain corridor and related road safety issues like wildlife-vehicle collisions are a major concern. Personal vehicles, buses, delivery trucks, and construction machinery will all be competing for space on this two-lane highway, increasing risk for the motoring public and wildlife.
- Tax payer dollars will be needed to upgrade Highway 160 and to construct a grade separated interchange at the Village site. These funds will be diverted from other important transportation projects around the state.
- Cost to bring power to the site is estimated at \$7 million. To offset this cost, the project proponent has proposed on-site electrical generation with propane or liquefied natural gas - adding more trucks to the highway.
- The “Village” will increase pressure on local emergency services (fire trucks, EMT, ambulances) to service a development that is over 25 miles from the nearest town, and at an elevation that is likely to result in many altitude related issues.
- Impacts to ground water, and the dewatering of the headwaters of the Rio Grande and San Juan rivers, have not been adequately analyzed.
- The Wolf Creek Ski Area is unique, small, and remote and will be forever changed by the “Village”.
- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has acknowledged that “few options exist to avoid, minimize, or mitigate the anticipated effects” of the large scale development on lynx and originally proposed strong conservation measures to protect the species. However, much weaker measures, that ultimately mirror those suggested by the project proponent, are contained in the Biological Opinion.

Projected Buildout of Wolf Creek Pass

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- <http://friendsofwolfcreek.org>
- <http://rockymountainwild.org>
- <http://slvec.org>
- <http://sanjuancitizens.org>
- <http://chamapeak.org>

