

SUMMER OPS

SUMMER OPS ON FOREST SERVICE LAND

Follow the screening criteria to smooth the way to approval.

By Rick Kahl

The Recreational Opportunities Act of 2011 allows winter resorts on Forest Service land to develop a range of off-season activities, within limits. The Act focuses on development in human-powered and low-impact activities, and activities that are consistent with the overall uses of the National Forest. Still, the devil is often in the details, and the agency—along with



A panel discussion at SAM Summer Ops Camp in September focuses on how to implement the Recreational Opportunities Act. Panelists (L to R): Sean Wetterberg, U.S. Forest Service; Dave Fields, Snowbird; Jamie Barrow, Vail Resorts; Roger Poirier, U.S. Forest Service.

many winter resorts—is still adjusting to the idea of expanded activities outside of ski season.

Sean Wetterberg, U.S. Forest Service Winter Sports program manager, notes that the agency has created “screening criteria” to help it identify what activities will or will not be permitted. These are outlined in the Forest Service Manual 2300, “Recreation, Wilderness, and Related Resource Management,” Chapter 2340, section 2343.14. This brief, four-page section includes an almost step-by-step

guide that can ease the approval process.

Among its main points, the manual says that summer or year-round non-ski-related activities should:

- not change the primary purpose of the ski area
 - encourage outdoor recreation and enjoyment of nature and provide natural resource-based recreation
 - not exceed the level of development for snow sports
 - harmonize with the natural environment
- » cont.

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The screening criteria specifically allows some activities—zip lines, mountain biking, disc golf, and ropes courses (i.e., aerial adventure parks)—and bans others—tennis, water parks and slides, swimming pools, golf courses, and amusement parks. *(The entire list of criteria is in the full version of this story online.)*

SE Group's director of environmental services Travis Beck says the criteria, in effect, create "a form that winter resorts can populate and shows how each activity/proposal is consistent with the manual. It's a pretty clear road map, we think, for areas and planners to look at and see what the FS wants out of the planning document and the process."

"Come to us with plans that fit the unique niche that we're offering," says Wetterberg. "It shouldn't look like Elich Gardens; it should fit the environment."

IT'S COMPLICATED

Still, as clear as the criteria are, Wetterberg cautions that there will be incon-

sistencies in reviewing proposals, due to differences in the individual forest plans across the U.S., and to "perceptions of what's appropriate." Local foresters in different regions may come to different conclusions about similar proposals.

Another complication: both resorts and the FS are undergoing a cultural shift. Although the FS has allowed limited activities in summer at ski areas for a long time, this was inconsistent with prior legislation. Some local foresters questioned this summer philosophy. "We've done what we can to raise awareness in the agency to get people to come along," Wetterberg says. "For some, it's a pretty significant change from how we've dealt with recreation in the past."

FS officials note that in the three-step approval process—master plan, NEPA process, and post-NEPA review—the post-NEPA review can take a little longer than for, say, a new lift. "Since this is all new, the Forest Service has to make decisions where there are more unknowns,"

says White River National Forest mountain sports program manager Roger Poirier. "We need a lot more information on the details of what's being proposed."

Of course, summer operations are also new for resorts, so how should they proceed?

"Reach out to colleagues who have gone through the process," says Wetterberg. "Talk to other resorts first for lessons learned." These include Vail, Breckenridge, Copper, Red River, N.M., and Snowmass. The pioneers have plowed the way, answering some of the basic questions "so other resorts don't have to go through the same things over and over," says Beck.

"As a planner, we advise clients to do some market analysis," says Beck. "You don't just say, 'another ski area is seeing success with A, we should do the same thing.' You have to understand the demographics and the context of the ski area. If you have a big drive-by market, that's different from an area that doesn't." ■

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