



File Code: 1950-1

Date: April 28, 2009

Dear Interested Party,

Your input is being sought on a proposal to offer guided snowcat skiing and summer hiking opportunities near Crested Butte. This outfitter/guide service would be authorized by special use permit to Irwin Backcountry Guides, LLC (IBG). This letter and attached map provide you with detailed information about the purpose and need, the proposed action, decisions to be made, and preliminary issues that have been identified by the Forest Service. Your specific comments will be analyzed by a team of resource specialists to develop significant issues concerning the proposed action, develop measures to mitigate potential effects, and develop possible alternatives to the proposed action that meet the stated purpose and need. Please refer to the "Public Involvement" section of this letter for additional information about submitting comments.

Background

Snowcat skiing and other outfitted activities above Lake Irwin were previously permitted via a Forest Service special use permit from 1986-2002. The latter years of the permit authorized 2,300 service days for winter uses which covered snowcat skiing, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing and other winter activities. In actuality, almost all of the winter service days were utilized by the permittee for snowcat skiing. Additionally, 438 service days were issued for horseback riding and 185 days for hiking, backpacking and peak climbing.

In September 2007 the Irwin Lodge and associated private lands were bought by Scarp Ridge LLC. On June 10, 2008 the Forest Service received a proposal from Irwin Backcountry Guides, LLC to offer guided snowcat skiing and hiking opportunities in the former Irwin Lodge permit area using the Scarp Ridge LLC private lands as their base. After screening the proposal (per 36 CFR 251.54) the Forest Service accepted the proposal as an application on February 18, 2009. The application must now be analyzed per National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements. The NEPA process will proceed according to federal Council of Environmental Quality regulations (40 CFR Parts 1500-1508).

The management emphasis for this area as identified in the Amended Land and Resource Management Plan for the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison (GMUG) National Forests (Forest Plan), is Management Area 2B – Rural or Roaded-Natural Recreation. The Recreation Opportunity Spectrum category for the area is semi-primitive motorized and roaded-natural.

The 1995 Decision Notice for "Dispersed Winter Recreation in the Crested Butte Area" allows commercial snowcat touring/skiing in the "Irwin" winter travel management area. GMUG winter travel management also allows for cross-country snowmobile and snowcat use in this location.



The proposed snowcat ski operation is within an inventoried roadless area: RARE II #181: Raggeds. Road construction or reconstruction is not being proposed for this project. Incidental tree removal will be necessary in some locations to allow safe snowcat access.

Purpose and Need for Action

The primary purpose and need for this project is to restore commercially-guided snowcat skiing and hiking opportunities in the Lake Irwin/Scarp Ridge area. Previous Forest Service management decisions have determined this area to be generally suitable for these activities. This project would restore a unique winter recreational experience previously offered in the Crested Butte area over a 15-year period. Consistent with GMUG Forest Plan goals, this project would (1) help meet demand for dispersed recreation outside of wilderness and (2) provide the opportunity for economic growth of industries and communities dependent upon Forest outputs, including tourism.

Proposed Action

The proposed action is to provide commercially guided opportunities for winter snowcat skiing and summer hiking, backpacking and peak climbing activities on NFS lands in the Crested Butte area. The special use permit issued would be a 10-year priority permit (for outfitter-guide activities) with approximately 2300 service days for snowcat skiing and 350 service days for summer activities.

The objectives of IBG are to provide a safe, comfortable, unique and memorable backcountry skiing and riding experience. From the top of Scarp Ridge, the proposed permit area would serve a variety of terrain varying from gently gladed areas and open, treeless bowls to steep faces, cliff bands and narrow chutes. Exposure is generally in the southern quadrant; snow conditions will vary over time, dependent on temperature, sun exposure, and wind. The location, terrain, quality and quantity of snow in this area in addition to previous knowledge of quality skiing/riding areas and suitable pick-up/drop-off locations would help contribute to the objectives set forth by IBG.

Winter Snowcat Skiing

The winter proposal is to provide day-use only, guided snowcat skiing in the Scarp Ridge/Lake Irwin geographic area between December 1 and April 30 (weather dependent). The permit area would encompass 2,003 acres from Robinson Basin to Independence Basin up to the top of Scarp Ridge and down to Lake Irwin. Of the 2,003 acres, approximately 1,762 acres are NFS lands and the remaining 241 acres are private lands. The base of operations would occur above Lake Irwin on private lands owned by Scarp Ridge, LLC. (IBG would need to secure approval from all private landowners in order to operate on, or gain access across, private lands.)

The former Irwin Lodge permit included Elk Basin in the permit area. This area is not being considered in this analysis due to the lack of use of Elk Basin for snowcat skiing in the previous permit and on-going clean-up efforts at Standard Mine.

2,300 service days would be issued for snowcat skiing during the winter season. A service day is assessed when a client is being commercially-guided for any part of a day whether the client is out for 8 minutes or 8 hours. 2,300 service days was also the amount authorized under the former Irwin Lodge permit. IBG will likely utilize less than 2,300 service days until they become more established after a few years of operation.

The daily cost for guided snowcat skiing would be about \$375/day. The “local” price would be \$200/day but all of these costs are subject to change. Initially, IBG plans to operate on a 4-day schedule: Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. This too is subject to change depending on client demand and weather/snow conditions.

IBG plans to guide up to 12 customers per day with up to two snowcats in operation. The client to guide ratio would be a maximum of 6 clients to 1 guide (6:1). In some scenarios, the client to guide ratio would be 4:1. IBG would employ up to 5 full-time and 3 part-time staff. Staff would generally include a mountain manager, assistant mountain manager, dispatcher, transportation director and guides.

A guided snowcat skiing trip would generally last for 6-7 hours starting at around 8:00 am. Customers would be shuttled to the Kebler Pass Trailhead from Crested Butte where they would be met by an IBG snowcat with an indoor-capacity up to 15 people. From the Kebler Pass Trailhead the snowcat would travel to the Movie Cabin base camp located on private lands above Lake Irwin. Access to the Movie Cabin would follow Kebler Pass Road (Gunnison County Road 12), Lake Irwin Campground Road (Forest Service Road (FSR) 826), Green Lake Road (FSR 826.1D) and Irwin Lodge Road (FSR 826.1C). Snowmobiles and other tracked over-the-snow vehicles (e.g., UTV’s) associated with this operation would also follow this route.

The Movie Cabin (elevation 10,200 feet) is a 450 square foot cabin outfitted with a wood fireplace, seating area, and an incinerator toilet. Extra food, water and emergency overnight gear will be cached at the Movie Cabin base camp. Overnight accommodations on private lands are a potential offer in the future but there are currently no plans to restore the former Irwin Lodge or to have immediate overnight accommodations for clients.

IBG would work closely with Snotrackers Snowmobile Club to coordinate, assist and support the grooming of Kebler Pass Road and Lake Irwin Campground Road. IBG would continue to groom lower Green Lake Road and Irwin Lodge Road to access the private lands base camp. While traveling on these roads IBG snowcats and other large tracked snow vehicles will allow public users to pass by either slowing down or stopping. All access pertaining to this operation would follow this route and would not involve any crossing of Lake Irwin itself.

To reduce congestion at the Kebler Pass Trailhead customers and most IBG employees will be required to be shuttled to the trailhead from town. IBG will be authorized to have limited employee vehicle parking at the trailhead (2 parking spots). Parking for their snowcats and some snowmobiles would occur on their private lands above Lake Irwin. Limited and occasional parking for their snowcat(s) may be necessary at the Kebler Pass Trailhead depending on weather, safety and other factors. Parking of a few IBG snowmobiles would occur at the Kebler Pass Trailhead.

Fueling of IBG snowcat(s) and snowmobiles would occur at the Kebler Pass Trailhead with future plans to locate a fueling shed on their private lands above Lake Irwin. IBG currently uses an external fuel tank mounted in the bed of a pick-up truck for fueling at the trailhead.

Within the permit area there would be approximately 11.5 miles of groomed snowcat trails used to access skier/rider pickup and drop-off locations. These trails would be approximately 15 feet wide to accommodate IBG snowcats and snowmobiles. Many of these snowcat trails are the same ones that were used by the previous permit holder over a 15-year period. The exceptions are a proposed snowcat trail that would lead into Independence Basin from the bottom and a snowcat trail to access the west rim of Robinson Basin. The lower Independence Basin snowcat trail would eliminate always having to come in from the top of Independence for skier/rider drop-off/pickup which is a much longer route. Additionally this trail would allow quicker ingress/egress in case of emergency situations in that area. The trail to the west rim of Robinson Basin would allow the access needed to transport a snowcat-mounted “avalauncher” in order to mitigate avalanche danger in upper Robinson Basin. GMUG winter travel management direction currently allows for cross-country and commercial snowcat/snowmobile use in this area.

No summer maintenance would be required on the snowcat trails with the exception of incidental tree removal to accommodate snowcat access. Tree removal could occur either in the summer, fall or winter depending on biologist recommendation. The attached map indicates the areas of likely tree removal – trees to be removed are spruce/fir and amount to approximately 100 trees.

An Avalanche Mitigation Plan (or “Snow Safety Plan”) will be part of the annual Operating Plan which is required by the Forest Service special use permit. The snow safety plan will include information on snow pack stability evaluation, avalanche hazard mitigation, wet snow avalanches, guide and ski operations, and public and private safety measures. As proposed, avalanche mitigation techniques will include terrain avoidance, ski and boot packing, skier traffic and compaction, and explosives use. All use and storage of explosives would strictly adhere to local, state and federal regulations. Other required components of their annual Operating Plan will include a Safety Plan and Transportation Plan.

The Snow Safety Team would create the avalanche hazard mitigation plan for each day. The Snow Safety Team would consist of the Mountain Manager, Assistant Mountain Manager, Transportation Director and Dispatcher. The Avalanche Control Team (Mountain Manager and Assistant Mountain Manager, or other qualified personnel) would perform appropriate mitigation techniques to adequately test slope stability while minimizing their exposure to avalanche hazards. Based on stability evaluation in addition to avalanche mitigation results the mountain manager and assistant mountain manager would determine which terrain is opened for the day.

No public closures of the permit area would be implemented during avalanche mitigation efforts with the exception of private lands that may be roped off or posted as closed. Rather, IBG would post safety signs in several locations around the permit area and during avalanche mitigation work would post a lookout(s) to ensure that the public is well informed of avalanche mitigation activities taking place. Furthermore, information about the snowcat skiing operation, snow safety, and the mapped permit boundaries would be communicated at the Kebler Pass Trailhead, in local newspapers and magazines, on the radio, at the Kebler “Y”, and throughout the permitted

area. IBG would also communicate their operations and snow safety program with local snowmobile tour and rental companies, other affected parties, and with the Crested Butte Avalanche Center to inform and educate backcountry users. This is similar to the operations that took place during the 15 years of guided snowcat skiing and avalanche mitigation work in this area.

Once at the Movie Cabin, clients would be given an avalanche safety briefing before each day's skiing activities, along with slope-side explanation and demonstration by the guides. Clients will be issued avalanche beacons, probe and shovel prior to any skiing or riding in the permit area. Snowcats, snowmobiles and radio/cell phone communication would all be available in case of any emergencies (IBG has a cell phone repeater at the Movie Cabin). Additionally, 3 heli-spot locations have been identified in the permit area (see map) in case urgent "flight for life" helicopter transport is needed. The Guide Team would carry appropriate winter and avalanche rescue gear and would use appropriate travel techniques to minimize exposure to avalanche terrain.

Weather Station

A weather station is being proposed near the top of Scarp Ridge (see map) in order to provide more accurate forecasting and avalanche mitigation as it pertains to the Snow Safety Plan.

The weather station would consist of a 10-12 foot metal tower that measures wind speed, direction, duration and temperature. The base area of the tower would measure approximately 2'x2' and would be secured to the ground by rebar or metal spikes – a permanent concrete base would not be required. The weather data could be collected by radio but would also be accessible by one of the snowcat trails (see map).

Summer Hiking, Backpacking and Peak Climbing

The summer proposal is to provide guided hiking, backpacking and peak climbing opportunities to the public. The summer season would be from June 1 to October 1. 350 service days would be issued for summer activities – these days are broken down below by activity:

50 service days for summer peak climbing on the following peaks:

Owens/Purple Peak	10 days
Mt. Axtell	10 days
Carbon Peak	10 days
Whetsone Mtn.	10 days
Ruby Peak	10 days

300 service days for summer hiking and backpacking (would only authorize two trips per week/per trail; no more than 10 clients per trip):

Carbon Trail (Trail #436)	100 days
Dyke Trail (Trail #837)	50 days

Ridge 70 Trail (Trail #419)	50 days
Scarp Ridge Trail (Trail #421)	50 days
Irwin Lake Trail and Spur (Trail #370 and 370.1A)	50 days

All of these trails were authorized for summer use in the former Irwin Lodge permit.

Decision Framework

The Environmental Assessment (EA) will document the analysis of site-specific, on-the-ground activities. It will not be a general management plan for the greater Kebler Pass/Irwin area. The analysis documented in the EA will be tiered to the GMUG Forest Plan. It will not reanalyze management area allocations already specified in the Forest Plan nor will it seek to reexamine winter travel management direction, federal regulations or Forest Service policy regarding recreation/special uses on National Forest System lands.

The Gunnison District Ranger will be the Responsible Officials with respect to the proposed outfitter/guide activities taking place on NFS lands. The decision for proposed outfitter/guide activities on the Gunnison Ranger District will be stated in a Decision Notice based on the environmental analysis. The GMUG Forest Supervisor will be the Responsible Official with respect to the authorization of a weather station on NFS lands. That decision would be documented in a Decision Memo based on the environmental analysis of the weather station. Given the purpose and need, the Responsible Officials will review the proposed action, other alternatives and design criteria/mitigation measures in order to make the following decisions:

1. Whether or not to approve commercially-guided snowcat skiing and summer activities on NFS lands in this area.
2. Whether or not to authorize a weather station on NFS lands.
3. If an action alternative is selected, under what specific conditions snowcat skiing, summer activities and weather station implementation would be conducted.

Issues

The Forest Service will separate issues into two groups: significant and non-significant issues. Significant issues will be those directly or indirectly caused by implementing the proposed action. Non-significant issues will be those that are: 1) outside the scope of the proposed action; 2) already decided by law, regulation, Forest Plan, or other higher level decision; 3) irrelevant to the decision to be made; or 4) conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence.

Preliminary issues that have been identified include potential effects of the proposed action on the following resources: wildlife, particularly Canada lynx; existing recreation use and other permitted special uses; private property owners in the area; wetlands, fens and water quality; timber and alpine vegetation/soils; roadless characteristics and wilderness.

The significance of preliminary issues identified by the interdisciplinary team for this project along with issues identified through public scoping will be evaluated and determined during the

process of completing the environmental analysis and developing alternatives to the proposed action including the evaluation of a No Action alternative.

Public Involvement

This project will be listed on the Schedule of Proposed Actions for the GMUG NF. Comments concerning this proposal and issues to be addressed in the EA must be submitted within 30 days of the Legal Notice publication of this proposal in the Gunnison Country Times. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period for this analysis. Those wishing to comment should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. The regulations prohibit extending the length of the comment period.

The purpose of this comment period is to provide an opportunity for the public to provide early and meaningful participation on a proposed action prior to a decision being made by the Responsible Official. This opportunity to comment will serve as both scoping for this project under the requirements of NEPA, and the 30-day comment period required in accordance with 36 CFR 215. Those who provide comments or otherwise express interest during this comment period are eligible to appeal the decision pursuant to 36 CFR part 215 regulations.

Written comments must be submitted to: Irwin Backcountry Guides Proposal, c/o Bill Jackson, 216 N. Colorado St., Gunnison, CO 81230 or by fax: 970-642-4425. The Gunnison District Office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00am – 4:30pm, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc) to wfjackson@fs.fed.us.

The proposed action description and other information are available from the Gunnison District Office and the following project website: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/gmug/policy/#recreation>

If you require additional information concerning this proposal please contact Bill Jackson at (970) 642-4439.

Sincerely,

/S/ JAMES R. DAWSON

JAMES R. DAWSON
District Ranger

Enclosure