



Contact: Mike Blakeman, Public Affairs
(719) 852-6212, (719)-850-2360 (cell)

Opinion

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The Current State of the Wolf Creek Access EIS By Jeni Evans, Deputy Forest Supervisor

Recently I put on hold the Wolf Creek Access Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Now I want to take a moment to describe the events that led to my decision.

First a quick history. Leavell-McCombs Joint Venture (LMJV) owns about 288 acres of land which sits a short distance south of US Highway 160 directly below Wolf Creek Ski Area. LMJV plans to build the Village at Wolf Creek on their land. Since their private property is surrounded by National Forest System land, in 2004 LMJV submitted an application to the Rio Grande National Forest for road access and a utility corridor across federal land.

As many readers know, this led to the Forest conducting the first analysis on LMJV's request for access. In March 2006, the Forest released the final EIS and record of decision, which was soon challenged in court. In August of 2007, Dan Dallas became the new forest supervisor for the Rio Grande National Forest and he quickly pushed for a settlement with the plaintiffs in the court case in order to take a fresh look at the proposed access.

The Forest began a new EIS in September 2008 after receiving a new application from LMJV for permanent road access. We decided to approach this EIS differently by pulling together a team of federal employees to conduct the analysis instead of a third party contractor. We also invited right up front several agencies and Mineral County to participate in the EIS process.

The primary purpose of the Wolf Creek Access EIS is to analyze the potential environmental impacts of the requested access road across the national forest. We will also analyze the potential impacts of the "connected actions," which are the proposed Village and an access interchange on the highway. For this reason, we must have a clear and accurate development plan of the proposed Village.

Before the public meetings, we received information that the development plan submitted with the application was outdated. Rather than cancel the meetings, I decided to keep the process moving forward, but extended the scoping period from October 31 to December 31. I also told LMJV that they needed to submit a new or amended application with an updated development plan.

I now have decided to put a hold on the project since it has become apparent that we don't really know if or when we will receive a new or amended application that meets our criteria. The EIS team, and the other agencies involved with the analysis, can't do their work, and the public can't provide meaningful input without a clear idea of what the Village will look like.

If we receive a new or amended application, we will reinitiate the EIS process with a new Notice of Intent and public input period.

I am committed to ensuring that Wolf Creek Access EIS process is transparent to all, so that the public can provide meaningful input that helps guide our analysis. With that in mind, I want to encourage everyone who is interested in this project to visit our website regularly as we will continue to update the site as new information becomes available.

For more information about the Wolf Creek Access EIS visit the Rio Grande National Forest website at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/riogrande/projects/forcomment/village/index.shtml>.

Jeni Evans is the deputy forest supervisor at the San Luis Valley Public Lands Center and the primary Forest Service liaison for the Wolf Creek Access EIS.

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