

I. PURPOSE AND NEED

A. INTRODUCTION

Mt. Rose Ski Tahoe (hereinafter, Mt. Rose) is located along the Mt. Rose Highway (SH-431) between Lake Tahoe and Reno, Nevada (Figure I-1). The ski area is approximately 25 miles from downtown Reno and 11 miles from Incline Village on the northeast shore of Lake Tahoe. Mt. Rose offers the closest skiing and riding of all the Tahoe-area resorts to the Reno/Tahoe International Airport.¹

The ski area is operated on a mix of National Forest System (NFS), County, and private lands on Slide Mountain, in Washoe County, Nevada. Mt. Rose currently operates under a combination of three special use permits (SUPs) from the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest (HTNF) and a lease and Concession Agreement from Washoe County, Nevada. Additionally, a substantial portion of the resort is located on private lands owned by Mt. Rose. The overall ski area is composed of the Mt. Rose side, situated on the north side of Slide Mountain proper, and the East Bowl side, which lies on the eastern flanks of Slide Mountain. The East Bowl side is comprised of NFS and County lands. NFS lands on the East Bowl side are permitted under a 40-year SUP encompassing approximately 560 acres. The Mt. Rose side is composed primarily of private lands; however, a 30-acre parcel of NFS lands is permitted under a separate, shorter duration SUP. On the north slopes of Slide Mountain is an area known as The Chutes. While portions of the Chutes are within the Mt. Rose private land, the majority of the Chutes are on NFS land – primarily outside of the current Mt. Rose SUP area. The entire Chutes area is considered out-of-bounds and is closed to skiing.

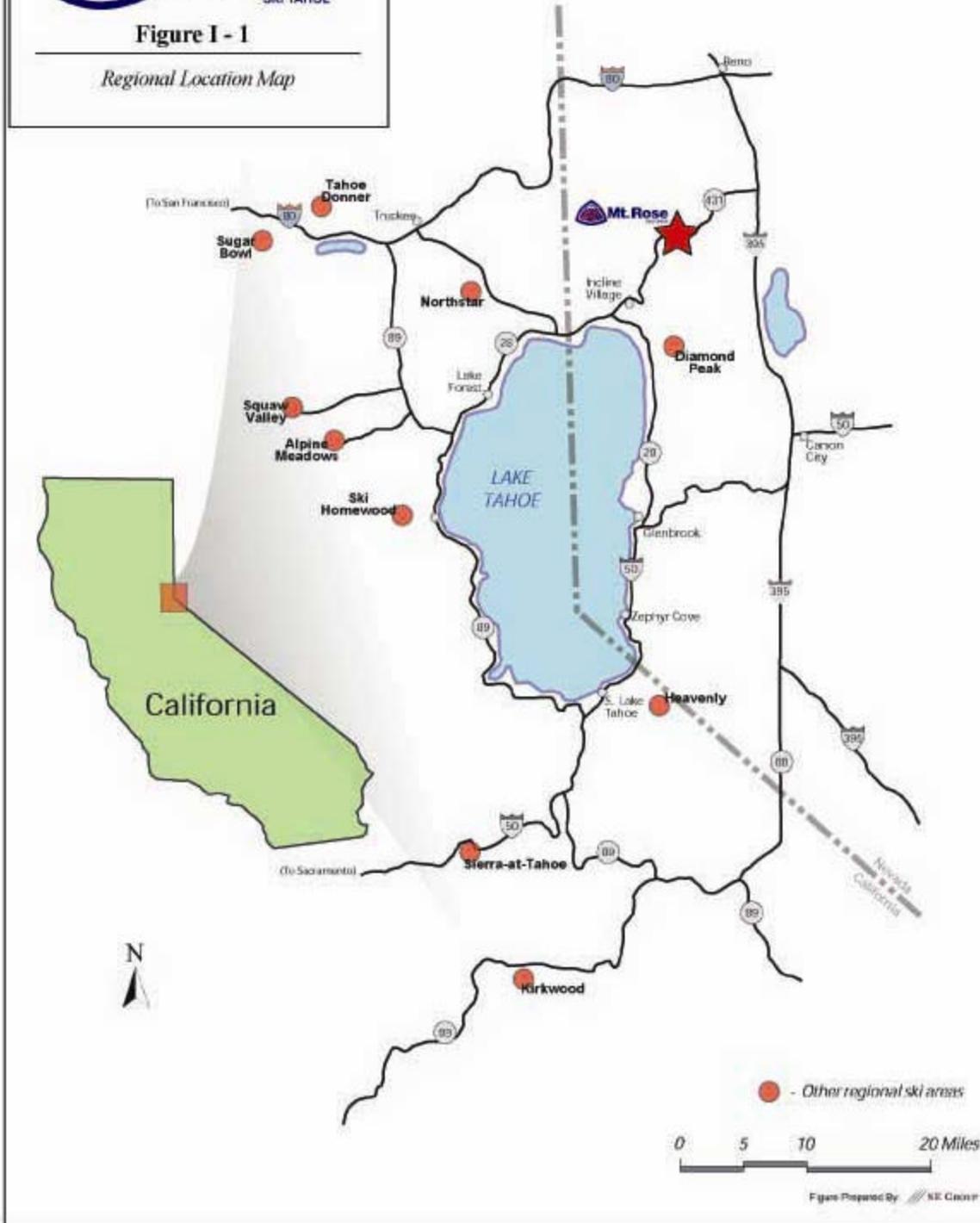
The lift network at Mt. Rose currently consists of one high-speed detachable six-place chairlift (Northwest Magnum 6); two fixed-grip quad chairs (Zephyr and Ponderosa); two fixed-grip triple chairs (Lakeview and Galena); and one surface lift. Total uphill lift capacity at the resort is 11,000 skiers-per-hour. The skiing terrain distribution at Mt. Rose consists of approximately 12 percent beginner, 64 percent intermediate, and 24 percent advanced ability level. Numerous unnamed gladed areas within the SUP supplement forty-three named trails. Snowmaking currently occurs on 28 percent of the private land at the Mt. Rose side; while there is no snowmaking on the East Bowl side.

¹ For its size, Mt. Rose is considered the ski resort closest to any international airport in the world.



Figure I - 1

Regional Location Map



Mt. Rose Ski Tahoe

Mt. Rose/Slide Mountain 2001 Facilities Improvements Plan, Environmental Assessment

Chapter I – Purpose and Need

The NEPA Process

All environmental analyses associated with projects on the HTNF are tiered to the 1986 Toiyabe National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). Projects and activities within the Forest Plan are subjected to environmental analysis as they are planned for implementation and must comply with FSM 1950.

The Proposed Action constitutes a federal action (because it necessitates federal approvals and would occur on federal land), which has the potential to affect the quality of the human environment on public lands administered by the Forest Service. Therefore, the Proposed Action must be analyzed pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). Under NEPA, Federal Agencies must carefully consider environmental concerns in their decision-making process and provide relevant information to the public for review and comment. A Forest Service Interdisciplinary Team (ID Team) has determined that completion of an environmental assessment will fulfill the requirements of the NEPA by analyzing the potential site-specific and cumulative effects likely to result with implementation of the Proposed Action.

B. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION²

An important perspective of this proposal is that Mt. Rose thoroughly understands the expectations of its clientele and strives to continuously improve upon the skiing³ experiences offered to the public. The Forest Service and Mt. Rose cooperatively determined three broad issues most immediate for improving the recreational experience at Mt. Rose. From these issues, the Proposed Action was developed. The Proposed Action focuses on the key amenities and infrastructure that would most benefit guests from an overall recreational perspective: modernized facilities; improved terrain; more diverse skiing opportunities; and improved uphill lift capacity. The project proposal concentrates the majority of the improvements on the East Bowl side; it also focuses on expanding skiing terrain to areas outside of the current SUP area. Additionally, the proposal is intended to establish the planning and development direction for the resort over the next five-to-seven years. Subsequent to this site-specific environmental review, projects ultimately receiving approval will be incorporated into an “approved” Mt. Rose/Slide Mountain Master Development Plan.

PURPOSE #1:

To diversify the skiing terrain and amenities offered, meeting the demands and preferences of the recreating public.

A. Existing Condition:

Although 24 percent of the skiing terrain at Mt. Rose is considered to provide “advanced” ability skiing, the resort currently provides very little expert level terrain. Recent advances in skiing equipment and ability levels have created a high demand for expert level skiing experiences. Where this demand is not met, often times the public will resort to skiing out-of-bounds and back

² A detailed description of the Proposed Action is provided in Chapter II.

³ At ski areas, one may see people using Alpine, snowboard, telemark, cross-country, and other specialized ski equipment, such as that used by individuals with disabilities or other skiers. Accordingly, the terms “ski, skier, and skiing” as used within this document encompass all lift-served sliding sports typically associated with a winter sports resort.

country areas, which are not managed for safety.

Need:

To provide a patrolled and maintained expert level skiing opportunity at Mt. Rose.

B. Existing Condition:

Snowboarding currently constitutes 35 percent of the overall visitation at Mt. Rose. Presently, the resort does not provide an array of specific amenities for its snowboarding guests.

Need:

To enhance the resort's appeal by providing a lift-served halfpipe and terrain park specifically for snowboarding guests.

PURPOSE #2:

To increase utilization of the East Bowl by providing a reliable, consistent, quality skiing experience, and by upgrading skier service facilities. This will additionally serve to decrease the current over utilization of the Mt. Rose side and allow the two portions of the resort to operate as one cohesive ski area.

A. Existing Condition:

Due to a current lack of snowmaking, inordinately rocky and irregular terrain, and antiquated base area facilities, the East Bowl side of the resort is significantly underutilized and frequently does not open until after the peak holiday period.

Need:

The proposed improvements would enhance the guest experience within the East Bowl by upgrading existing infrastructure and terrain and by adding snowmaking capabilities. The improvements proposed for the East Bowl have been designed to energize this portion of the resort, thereby relieving overcrowded conditions on the Mt. Rose side.

B. Existing Condition:

Although snowmaking coverage is proposed for much of the East Bowl terrain, limited water availability and conservation will constrain the depth of machine-produced snow. Due to the irregular and rocky nature of the East Bowl terrain, a reliable early season or low snow year skiing product cannot be assured by relying solely on snowmaking.

Need:

Grading and smoothing strategic portions of the East Bowl terrain will allow a more effective use of limited water resources for snowmaking coverage, resulting in a more reliable skiing product.

PURPOSE #3:

To clarify the management and streamline the administration of the NFS lands within and surrounding Mt. Rose.

A. Existing Condition:

Mt. Rose currently operates under multiple SUPs, each with varying terms and conditions.

Need:

To consolidate the existing SUPs, which will simplify and improve permit administration for the Forest Service.

B. Existing Condition:

Because the Mt. Rose facility predates the establishment of the current HTNF Forest Plan, portions of the existing ski area do not meet current direction for visual quality management.

Need:

As a portion of the Proposed Action, the Forest Plan would be amended to correct the current inconsistency between plan direction and the existing and proposed ski area facilities.

C. Existing Condition:

In addition to the ski area's use of the mountain, the summit of Slide Mountain also hosts an expansive electronics and communication site. This use is administered under separate SUPs to a series of communications users. The communications users require year-round access for maintenance purposes; currently they access the top of the mountain via trucks in the summer and over-the-snow vehicles in the winter. The summer traffic creates an issue within the Forest Service's Mt. Rose campground. Additionally, there is a potential for skiers and snow vehicles to encounter each other on the west side of the resort during the winter season.

Need:

To effectively manage vehicles accessing the summit of Slide Mountain by creating or improving distinct winter and summer travel routes.

C. SCOPING AND IDENTIFICATION OF KEY ISSUES

SCOPING AND IDENTIFICATION OF ISSUES TO BE ANALYZED

Approximately 265 scoping letters for the 2001 Mt. Rose/Slide Mountain Facilities Improvements Proposal were mailed on November 27, 2001. Interested or potentially affected members of the public, as well as local, state, and federal governmental agencies were included on the Forest Service mailing list. Ninety-three comments letters were received in response.

A legal notice, published in the Reno Gazette-Journal on November 30, 2001, announced the initiation of the NEPA process and invited public participation and comments. The scoping letter and legal notice announced a public open house that was held on December 5, 2001 at the Peppermill Hotel in Reno. The public open house served to introduce the proposal, explain the NEPA process, and collect input. Forty-three people attended the public open house.

In conjunction with the general public scoping, the comments of other state, local and federal agencies, as well as special organizations were specifically elicited and include the following:

Alpine Co. Board of Supervisors	NV Division of Environmental Protection/Bureau of Water Quality
Alpine Enterprise	NV Division of State Lands
Blue Ribbon Coalition	NV Division of Wildlife
Central Sierra Wilderness Watch	NV Division of Forestry
City of Reno Planning Department	NV State Clearinghouse
Douglas County Manager	NV State Parks/Dist. II
ERMI	NV Wildlife Federation
Friends of Hope Valley	PMB360
Friends of Mount Rose	Record-Courier
Friends of Nevada Wilderness	Reno Gazette-Journal
Friends of Peavine	Reno-Sparks Tribal Council
Governor of Nevada	Resource Concepts, Inc.
Hope Valley Resort	Sierra Club - Toiyabe Chapter
JBR Environmental Consultants	So. Lake Tahoe Snowmobile Association
KOLO-TV	SPOC/NV State Clearinghouse
KTVN-TV	State Historic Preservation Office
Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit (HTNF)	State of Nevada/Assembly
Legislative Council Bureau	State of Nevada/Senate
Lieutenant Governor of Nevada	Tahoe Daily Tribune
Mountain Top Communications	Tahoe Regional Planning Agency
Mule Deer Foundation, Reno Chapter	Truckee Meadows Regional Planning
National Wildlife Federation, Inc.	US Environmental Protection Agency
Natural Heritage Program	US Fish And Wildlife Service
Natural Resources Conservation Service	Washoe Co. Community Development
Nevada Appeal	Washoe Co. Board of Commissioners
Nevada Commission on Tourism	Washoe Co. Department of Parks & Recreation
Nevada Public Land Access Coalition	Washoe County Community Development
Nevada Wildlife Federation	Wilderness Society
NV Department of Conservation & Natural Resources	Wilderness Watch
NV Division of Environmental Protection/Bureau of Air Quality	

Based upon the scoping response, the Forest Service ID Team prepared a list of potential issues.⁴ Based upon this initial list, the ID Team identified two issues as warranting the formulation of an additional alternative to the Proposed Action.

KEY ISSUES

Forest Service Regional Sensitive Botanical Species

Field surveys conducted in 2001 and 2002 identified the presence of Tahoe draba (*Draba asterophora* var. *asterophora*) within the project area. Region 4 of the Forest Service currently lists Tahoe draba as a Regionally Sensitive species. Portions of the proposed projects have the

⁴ The scoping comment disposition analysis is available in the project file.

potential to impact Tahoe draba individuals and/or aggregations.

Indicator:

Quantification of total number of individual plants or aggregations of plants, which would be affected by proposed ground disturbing activities.

Extent of Overall Ground Disturbing Activities

The Proposed Action entails areas of ground disturbance that would result from the installation of snowmaking infrastructure, ski trail re-contouring, construction of the proposed snowmaking water storage pond, and enlargement of parking areas. Associated effects to soils and vegetation were identified as key issues.

Indicator:

Quantification of the areas (acres) of ground disturbance.

D. FOREST SERVICE MANAGEMENT DIRECTION

Management direction is expressed in terms of both Forest direction and management area direction. Forest direction consists of goals, objectives, and management requirements, which are generally applicable to the entire Forest. Management area direction contains management requirements specific to individual areas within the Forest and are applied in addition to the Forest direction management requirements.

1986 HUMBOLDT-TOIYABE LAND AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN

The Forest Plan for the Toiyabe portion of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest was adopted in 1986. The 1986 Forest Plan established management direction for the Toiyabe National Forest as a whole, as well as for specific management areas within it.

The NFS portions of the Mt. Rose ski area are located in Management Area 2 - Carson Front, as indicated by the Forest Plan. This management area includes all NFS lands south of the Truckee River Canyon and north of the West Fork of the Carson River. Management Area 2 lies directly west of Reno, Carson City, and Minden-Gardnerville. These lands are directly visible from the Carson, Eagle, Washoe, and Truckee Meadows valleys. Key resource values in Management Area 2 are watershed, wildlife, visuals, and dispersed recreation. The Forest Plan states that coordination with federal, state, and local governments will accomplish mutual recreation, wildlife, and watershed objectives. The role of the HTNF is to emphasize dispersed recreation while other agencies and the private sector will provide developed site opportunities.

RELATIONSHIP TO THE 2001 NORTHERN SIERRA FOREST PLAN AMENDMENT

Because it is now over 16 years old, the 1986 Forest Plan fails to reflect the following changes that have occurred in the vicinity of the Carson Ranger District administrative boundaries:

- Rapid population growth⁵

⁵ Washoe and Douglas counties, as well as Carson City (independent), rank within the top ten percent across the nation in terms of growth over the last decade.

- Increasing urban interface management complexities
- Evolving public and community attitudes towards prioritizing the preservation of scenic integrity and open spaces
- Changes in public lands management

The 2001 Amendment to the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan for the Northern Sierra Area Final Environmental Impact Statement (NoSA FEIS) is a result of the age of the existing 1986 Forest Plan. The NoSA FEIS concerns the Northern Sierra planning area of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, which lies along the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in western Nevada and eastern California, and it includes the extent of the Carson Ranger District administrative boundaries. Three management areas for the Forest Plan – Dog Valley, Carson Front, and Alpine – coincide with the Northern Sierra planning area.

The NoSA FEIS is aimed at achieving desired future conditions for public access, recreation opportunities, scenery, wilderness, watersheds, ecosystem and cultural uses, livestock grazing, mining, and non-recreation special uses. While still pending signature by the Regional Forester, the Record of Decision (ROD) for the NoSA EIS will amend the 1986 Forest Plan, as it applies to the Northern Sierra planning area, as well as the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit Plan and the Stanislaus Land and Resource Management Plan for those portions of the Mount Rose and Carson-Iceberg Wilderness Areas within their boundaries. Portions of the 1986 Forest Plan will be replaced and/or supplemented by the NoSA for the Northern Sierra planning area only. Because the ROD for the NoSA EIS has not been signed, NoSA standards and guidelines have not been incorporated into the resource analyses in Chapter III of this environmental assessment.

RELATIONSHIP TO THE 2001 SIERRA NEVADA FOREST PLAN AMENDMENT FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

The NoSA FEIS was prepared in conjunction with the Sierra Nevada Framework for Conservation and Collaboration process (Sierra Framework). The Sierra Framework consists of an effort by the Forest Service to improve management of Sierra Nevada ecosystems and foster collaborative working relationships with Native American tribes, other agencies, local governments, and the public.⁶

The Forest Service initiated the Sierra Framework process in the early 1990s to address California spotted owl habitat conservation planning and ecosystem management across the entire Sierra Nevada mountain range; portions of which are managed by eleven national forests, including Humboldt-Toiyabe. One outcome of the ongoing Sierra Framework process is the recently completed Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment, referred to here as the Sierra Framework Amendment (SFA). The Record of Decision for the SFA was signed in January 2001, and it updated all forest plans for the national forests of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California and Nevada. This includes the Northern Sierra planning area of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. The SFA addresses: 1) management of old forest ecosystem habitats;

⁶ The NoSA is being developed using the principles created by the Sierra Nevada Framework process.

2) riparian, aquatic, and meadow ecosystem habitats; 3) fires and fuels; 4) noxious weeds; and 5) Lower Westside Hardwood Ecosystems. Decisions from the SFA have been incorporated into the current Forest Plan and provide guidance for the management of those issues. SFA standards and guidelines concerning noxious weeds management can be found in Table II-5 - Potential Effects to be Mitigated and Proposed Mitigation Measures - in Chapter II. SFA direction is also applicable to the *Wetlands* and *Water and Soils* analyses presented in Chapter III of this environmental assessment, and can be found under the “Forest Plan Direction” heading for each analysis.

E. DECISION TO BE MADE

This Environmental Assessment (EA) documents the site-specific environmental analysis for alternatives 1 through 3. The Responsible Official - the Forest Supervisor for the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest - will make a decision based on the site-specific analysis documented for each of the three alternatives analyzed in Chapter III. An important note: the Forest Supervisor is not required to wholly select one of the three alternatives analyzed in Chapter III, but may select components of any or all alternatives, thereby formulating an entirely new alternative. The Forest Supervisor’s selected alternative, and accompanying rationale for the selection, will be documented in a forthcoming Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact.

In addition to determining whether to approve implementation of the Proposed Action analyzed in this document, the Forest Supervisor will also determine which mitigation measures to require. The Forest Supervisor may also require additional mitigation measures not discussed within this document.

F. LIST OF PERMITS AND APPROVALS REQUIRED FOR IMPLEMENTATION

This EA is designed to serve as an analysis document for parallel processes at several levels of government. The Forest Service decision would apply only to projects proposed on NFS lands within Mt. Rose’s SUP area(s). However, potential effects resulting from implementation of the Proposed Action or Alternative 3 on lands and activities administered by other federal, state, and local jurisdictions are also disclosed within this document. The US Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) has developed protocols for the delineation of wetlands. These procedures were followed for the delineation of wetlands within or adjacent to project element areas.⁷ The issuance of a permit under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (CWA) may be necessary for implementation of the Proposed Action or Alternative 3.

Decisions by other jurisdictions to issue approvals related to this proposal may be aided by the analysis presented in this document. While the Forest Service assumes no responsibility for enforcing laws, regulations, or ordinances under the jurisdiction of other governmental agencies, Forest Service regulations require permittees to abide by applicable laws and conditions imposed by other jurisdictions. In addition to requisite Forest Service approvals, the following permits or

⁷ JBR Environmental Consultants performed jurisdictional wetland delineations in The Chutes base area and portions of the East Bowl.

approvals may potentially be required to implement either of the action alternatives:⁸

- US Fish and Wildlife Service, Endangered Species Act, Section 7 Consultation
- State of Nevada Historic Preservation Officer, National Historic Preservation Act, Section 106 Consultation
- Washoe County general construction permit(s)
- NDEP Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan

⁸ This list may not be entirely inclusive.