



File Code: 1950/2720

Date: August 1, 2007

The Ketchum Ranger District is providing you an opportunity to comment on a proposal to issue Sun Valley Helicopter Ski Guides (SVHSG) a new special use authorization for outfitted and guided heli-skiing on National Forest System (NFS) lands. This new authorization would be for a term of 10 years rather than 5 years but otherwise would not differ from SVHSG's current permit. This notice invites comments from the public and other agencies on environmental issues and concerns that could affect the scope of our review of this proposed action.

Background and Purpose

The Forest Service regulates occupancy and use of NFS lands by outfitters and guides through issuance of special use permits. Outfitters and guides (O&G) provide unique recreational opportunities to people without the knowledge, skills and equipment to participate on their own. They also provide information and education about NFS resources to their clientele. As a result, permitting O&G operations fulfills an important role in meeting the Forest Service's recreational and educational mandates.

Until April 2005, O&G permits were issued for terms of up to 5 years. At that time, Forest Service regulations were revised to extend the maximum term to 10 years (see Final Directive, Federal Register Vol. 70, No. 71, April 14, 2005). The directive documenting this revision cited three reasons:

To Support Small Business – The longer term provides greater business continuity for planning and investing, reducing an identified constraint to small business sustainability.

To Streamline Special Use Administration – The longer term decreases Forest Service administrative costs by reducing the analysis and processing required to issue special use authorizations.

To Be Consistent with Other Agencies – The longer term is consistent with the permitting policies of the Bureau of Land Management and the National Park Service, which is important because many O&G operations include lands administered by more than one of these agencies.

This directive was subsequently incorporated into the Forest Service Handbook, 2709.11 – Special Uses Handbook, Chapter 40 – Special Uses Administration, 41.53 Outfitters and Guides, 41.53j Permit Terms and Conditions, point 1, which reads: “For new applicants, authorize use for up to 1 year. For holders assigned priority use, use may be authorized for up to 10 years.”

The directive also revised the Forest Service's National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) procedures governing administration of O&G permits. It stipulated that extending the term of O&G permits fell into a category of actions for which no extraordinary circumstances exist which would require preparation of an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement. This aspect of the directive was also incorporated into the Forest Service Handbook, 1909.15 – Environmental Policy and Procedures Handbook, Chapter 30 – Categorical Exclusion from Documentation, 31.12 Categories Established by the Chief, no. 15, which reads:



Issuance of a new special use authorization for a new term to replace an existing or expired special use authorization when the only changes are administrative, there are no changes to the authorized facilities or increases in the scope or intensity of authorized activities, and the applicant or holder is in full compliance with the terms and conditions of the special use authorization.

Agency-wide direction (file code 2700/2340, *Revised Outfitter and Guide Policy, Ten-year Permit Term* issued April 29, 2005) is to move ahead with issuance of 10-year authorizations to O&G permittees that request it and that meet certain basic, administrative requirements.

Proposed Action

In accordance with the direction outlined above, the Forest Service proposes to issue SVHSG a new permit with a 10-year term. Other than changing the term from 5 years to 10 years, a proposed new base of operations on private land (currently anticipated to be Sun Valley Gun Club), and elimination of the Pioneer Yurt (due to its sale to Sun Valley Trekking, another authorized outfitter) the new permit would include exactly the same terms and conditions as their current permit. The Durrance area would remain closed.

SVHSG's current permit was issued on November 8, 2002, and would expire on December 31, 2007. Their current operation is in compliance with the terms of the current permit. On the basis of these considerations, we anticipate authorizing the new permit under the categorical exclusion noted above. An internal review and public scoping is being conducted to identify any extraordinary circumstances that would preclude application of this categorical exclusion.

Project Location

The heli-ski permit area includes portions of the Ketchum and Fairfield Ranger Districts and Sawtooth National Recreation Area (SNRA). See the attached map. The Ketchum Ranger District administers the permit for the Sawtooth National Forest.

Scoping Process

With this scoping document, the Forest Service is initiating environmental review of the proposed new special use authorization. The purpose of this scoping exercise is to determine whether there are any environmental issues and concerns that warrant further analysis before we make any decisions regarding the new permit.

Comments on this proposal will be accepted for 30 days after the publication date of this notice. Written comments provide the best record of your concerns. Comments should be addressed to:

Kurt Nelson
District Ranger
Ketchum Ranger District
P.O. Box 2356
Ketchum, ID 83340
or
comments-intermtn-sawtooth-ketchum@fs.fed.us



For more information, please contact Joe Miczulski, Recreation Program Manager/Winter Sports Specialist, at the Ketchum Ranger District, 208-622-5371. Thank you for your interest in the management of National Forest lands.

Sincerely,

/S/ Kurt J. Nelson

KURT J. NELSON
District Ranger

Enclosure:

Figure 1 (on reverse side).

