



**MOUNTAIN HIGH**  
RESORT

**Chapter I**

# **MOUNTAIN HIGH RESORT 2001 MASTER DEVELOPMENT PLAN**

## **ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT**

Santa Clara/Mojave Rivers Ranger District  
Angeles National Forest  
Los Angeles County, California

February 2004

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### **I. PURPOSE AND NEED**

#### **A. INTRODUCTION**

Mountain High Resort (MHR) is situated in the San Gabriel Mountain Range of Southern California, 33 miles from San Bernardino, 47 miles from Riverside, and 75 miles from Los Angeles proper. MHR is located entirely on National Forest System (NFS) lands within the Santa Clara/Mojave Rivers Ranger District of the Angeles National Forest (ANF). The resort's facilities are operated under a 40-year special use permit (SUP) administered by the US Forest Service (Forest Service).

In June 1997, Mountain High Resort Properties, Inc. – a wholly owned subsidiary of Oaktree Capital Management, LLC – purchased MHR from the Mountain High/Holiday Hill Corporation. The sale of the resort triggered the issuance of a new, 40-year SUP.

The MHR complex is composed of two nearly adjacent developed recreational areas. The western-most area, known as Mountain High West (MHR West), and the eastern-most area, known as Mountain High East (MHR East), are operated as one entity and are linked by shuttle service. The combined SUP for MHR East and West encompasses approximately 351 acres of NFS lands.

MHR contributes to the rural economies of Wrightwood and other down-valley communities. While MHR primarily services day-use guests, it competes directly with other local and regional destination resorts, principally Bear Mountain Ski Resort, Snow Summit Mountain Resort, and Snow Valley Mountain Resort. Because both MHR East and West are entirely on NFS lands, all proposals for development are at Forest Service discretion and must comply with ANF Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) direction.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the Forest Plan does not permit construction of public overnight accommodations within a ski area's permit boundary; therefore, no overnight accommodations are proposed.

## **B. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION**

This document analyzes all of the improvements identified in the April 2001 Mountain High Resort Master Development Plan (2001 MDP). The Forest Service agreed to analyze the improvements detailed in the 2001 MDP collectively as the original Proposed Action in this Environmental Assessment (EA). After initial analysis and review, the original Proposed Action was eliminated from further analysis due to anticipated significant effects to visual and cultural resources. The ID Team developed two additional action alternatives to analyze fully in this EA. Refer to Chapter II for more information.

The 2001 MDP provides a summary of the guest experience. It identifies issues with lifts, trails, buildings, and parking. The capacity of MHR's existing lift network is 6,500 guests-at-one-time. Analyzed statistically, the existing skiing terrain is capable of accommodating approximately 6,900 guests; however, terrain constraints and specific features in the MHR West base area create congested areas. It is also noted that beginner terrain is difficult to access from MHR's base areas.

MHR's existing guest service space is approximately 46,200 square feet and can comfortably accommodate approximately 4,260 guests. Food service seats are limited to 878, which can accommodate approximately 3,073 guests, at an industry norm turnover rate of 3.5. Guest services are currently located in aging modular buildings that are not Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant and were not designed to accommodate the level of use they currently experience.

The principal goal of the 2001 MDP is to provide enhanced services and opportunities for the recreating public on NFS lands by creating a state-of-the-art facility that provides crucial base area and on-mountain amenities. It is intended to better accommodate *existing use levels* and enhance the recreation experience by providing improved and expanded services within the confines of public health and safety regulations. The 2001 MDP offers direction that leads to a series of prioritized improvements proposed for implementation over the next three to five years.

With full implementation of the 2001 MDP, MHR would substantially enhance:

- Base area guest service facilities
- Ski school facilities and teaching terrain
- Parking efficiency and vehicle circulation
- Skier circulation in the MHR West base area

Elements of MHR's proposal analyzed within this EA are grouped into four categories: buildings, parking, lifts, and terrain. In order to meet the stated purpose and need for the proposal, the two action alternatives include a variation on the project elements summarized below.

Remove the existing modular buildings at the MHR West base area and replace them with a single, modern Day Lodge.

Reconstruct the water tank at MHR West to provide necessary fire suppression for the proposed Day Lodge.

Expand the parking area at MHR West to improve the on-mountain capacities and parking availability. Expand the SUP boundary to include the proposed parking modification and the MHR West exit road.

Create a designated beginner skiing area and improve overall circulation at MHR West with a re-grade of the slopes in conjunction with the installation of a beginner double chairlift adjacent to the lower portion of the existing Snowflake Chairlift at MHR West and two surface conveyor lifts on the teaching terrain at MHR West.

Additionally, relocate the bottom terminal of the Snowflake, Coyote, and Roadrunner chairlifts to improve access for guests utilizing improved base area facilities.

Construct a grooming equipment maintenance, storage, and fueling facility at MHR West near the existing Bullwheel Saloon. This facility would be accessed via a road constructed immediately north of the proposed Day Lodge and west of the Bullwheel Saloon.

Construct a multi-purpose, ski/snowboard learning center near the base of the Easy Rider Chairlift and add a beginner surface tow adjacent to the MHR East base facilities.

Construct an additional parking lot on the north side of Highway 2 for guests and employees, across from MHR East with a storage barn along the northeast edge of this proposed parking lot.



**MOUNTAIN HIGH**  
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*Location Map*  
*Figure I-1*  
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### **C. FOREST PLAN CONSISTENCY**

Management direction in the Forest Plan states that permits for improvements to existing ski areas on the ANF will only be considered after submittal and approval by the Forest Service of master development plans.<sup>2</sup> In response to this direction, MHR submitted its 2001 MDP to the Forest Service, which identifies all of the projects included in the original Proposed Action currently under National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review.

This analysis also includes a review of the Forest Plan for any potential areas of inconsistency between MHR's proposal and Forest Service management direction. The project was analyzed using standards and guidelines provided by general forest direction and Management Prescription 5. Based on, but not limited to, the following criteria, no inconsistencies were identified between the original Proposed Action and the Forest Plan.

- MHR is located within Management Prescription 5 – *Recreation Opportunities in the Oak and Woodlands and Conifer Forests*
- the SUP has an identified recreational opportunity spectrum (ROS) of *Rural*
- dual visual quality objectives of *Retention* and *Partial Retention* are identified for various portions of the SUP

### **D. DECISION TO BE MADE**

The Forest Supervisor of the ANF is the responsible official for this proposal. This EA is not a decision document; it is intended to disclose potential effects associated with implementation of the alternatives. The purpose of this document is to assist the responsible official in arriving at an informed decision based on accurate and relevant information. The decision to be made is whether to approve, in part or in whole, the MHR 2001 MDP.

The responsible official is not required to choose one single alternative but may decide to approve specific components from among varying alternatives, thereby creating a new alternative.

### **E. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

A public scoping letter was sent to approximately 155 people on April 13, 2001. The scoping period extended through May 23, 2001. In addition, a public open house was held at MHR on April 26, 2001. Approximately 20 people attended.

Comments and concerns raised during the public meeting included:

- Realignment of the Blue Ridge Trail and effects to hikers
- Operation of mountain bike singletrack trails
- Effects of improved/expanded parking on capacity, vehicle circulation, and traffic congestion
- Possible creation of an express lane between Wrightwood and MHR, as well as utilization of the employee road between MHR East and West for shuttle buses

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<sup>2</sup> USDA Forest Service, Angeles National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, pg. 4-116, 1987

General questions and comments raised during the public open house were answered directly, if appropriate, or were recorded and subsequently addressed in this EA.

Comments expressed in writing included:

- Increases to current traffic congestion on Highway 2, including drivers making U-turns between MHR East and West
- Effects on vegetation
- Safety issues associated with pedestrians crossing Highway 2 from the proposed parking lot at MHR East
- Potential for permit boundary expansion to connect MHR East and West
- Potential for increased noise
- Potential for visual disturbance for passersby on Highway 2
- Increased guest attendance due to heightened guest satisfaction

In addition, an informational letter was written specifically for tribes who were identified by the Forest Service archeologist as having potential interest in the original Proposed Action. Ninety-four letters were sent to tribal representatives; no responses were received.

Copies of the mailing lists, public notices, and written comments received in response to the public open house and scoping letter are available for review in the project file at the Santa Clara/Mojave Rivers Ranger District. Appendix A contains a list of respondents to the scoping mailing.

Major themes that emerged through scoping were analyzed and considered by the Forest Service Interdisciplinary Team (ID Team). As described in Chapter II, additional alternatives were formulated as a result of issues raised internally and by the public.

## **F. ISSUES**

### **Issue Statements**

Issues are points of debate or dispute usually referring to environmental effects. There are two types of issues discussed in this document: major issues and tracking issues.

Major issues are those that require project-specific mitigation measures or design elements to address the anticipated effects that proposed activities might have upon the resource(s) of concern. The description of a major issue includes a background statement, which provides further clarification and detail about the issue, followed by the indicators, which describe how the issue is analyzed within the environmental analysis.

Issues that do not necessitate the formulation of an additional alternative or specific mitigation measures are tracking issues and are tracked throughout the document. Tracking issues are also utilized to evaluate and disclose compliance with State and Federal regulations and requirements.

## **Major Issues**

### **1) Visual Quality**

State Highway 2, the Angeles Crest Highway, is a 55-mile long US Forest Service Scenic Byway and State Scenic Highway that winds along the spine of the San Gabriel Mountains, from I-210 in La Canada to Mountain Top Junction at SR-138. Scenic highway designation is intended to protect and enhance California's natural scenic beauty and to protect the social and economic values provided by the state's scenic resources through maintaining and protecting the intrinsic qualities along the Byway. This includes:

- Protection from encroachment of inappropriate land uses
- Mitigation of uses which detract from scenic values by proper siting, landscaping, or screening;
- Making development more compatible with the environment by requiring building siting, height, colors and materials that are harmonious with the surroundings
- Protection of hillsides by allowing only low-density development on steep slopes and along ridgelines

#### Indicators

- Visual Quality Objectives assigned to the SUP area
- Visual simulations of the affected viewsheds from critical viewpoints as determined by the Forest Service

### **2) Big Pines Meadow**

#### Background

The Big Pines Meadow, adjacent to MHR West's lower parking lot and Highway 2, is a unique riparian resource. Proposed project activities have potential to affect meadow vegetation and/or hydrology.

#### Indicators

- Proximity of proposed projects at MHR West to the Big Pines Meadow
- Potential for increased sediment delivery/runoff into the Big Pines Meadow from proposed projects

### **3) Heritage Resources**

#### Background

Big Pines Park is the first large public recreation facility that was developed for the people of Los Angeles; it is also the County's first alpine park. Remaining historic park buildings and structures are regarded for their creative and distinctive style of architecture and designed landscaping. The Big Pines Historic District (BPHD) encompasses boundaries of the original Big Pines Park (760 acres of County lands, later transferred to the ANF in 1940) in the immediate vicinity of Big Pines Divide. It also encompasses 3,500 additional acres to the west and northwest of Big Pines Divide. The original Proposed Action has potential to affect qualities

(i.e. location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association) used to determine National Register eligibility and properties.<sup>3</sup>

#### Indicators

- Architectural style, size, and scale of the proposed Day Lodge to correspond with setting and feel of BPHD
- Physical and visual proximity of the proposed projects, including parking lots and buildings, to historic structures as well as size and scale of these project elements
- Loss or retention of vegetation used for visual screening of proposed projects from the BPHD

#### **Tracking Issues**

##### Loss of Wildlife Habitat

How would the potential loss of granary trees, Jeffrey pine and Black oaks, affect acorn woodpeckers?

##### Parking and Traffic

Peak day parking demand currently exceeds MHR's parking capacity causing guests to park along the Highway 2. Would the original Proposed Action alleviate or exacerbate the existing problems associated with parking and traffic?

##### Loss of Vegetation

Would removal of vegetation and ground-disturbing activities contribute to a general loss of wildlife habitat, erosion, and/or slope instability?

##### Effects to Blue Ridge Trail/Pacific Crest Trail

How would proposed construction of the new parking lot at MHR West affect hikers on the Blue Ridge and Pacific Crest trails?

#### **G. ISSUES CONSIDERED BUT ELIMINATED FROM FURTHER ANALYSIS**

Several issues were raised but are not specifically addressed within this analysis. They are either unrelated to the decision to be made, have already been decided by another decision process, are irrelevant to the decision to be made, and/or are the products of conjecture and are not supported by fact. These issues include:

##### **Impacts to the local economy of Wrightwood**

Social and economic effects were dismissed from analysis because the original Proposed Action is not considered to be sufficiently large in scale to create a discernable effect to Wrightwood. The original Proposed Action would not inherently increase visitation at MHR, but rather it would improve the present facilities to more appropriately accommodate existing visitation. Based on MHR's recent seasonal visitation numbers, guest volumes are expected to increase independent of approval of either of the action alternatives.

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<sup>3</sup> 36 CFR §60.4

**Effects to fish habitat**

No fish-bearing streams occur within or adjacent to the project area.

**Utilizing the road between MHR East and West for access between facilities**

The possibility of utilizing an existing dirt road between MHR East and West for access between facilities was discussed. It was dropped due to safety concerns associated with the width and grades of the existing road, as well as necessary vegetation removal and pavement for bringing the road up to an acceptable condition for public use.

**Traffic congestion**

While traffic congestion on Highway 2 is an issue acknowledged by both the Forest Service and MHR, this issue was dismissed from analysis because the original Proposed Action is not designed to increase guest attendance at MHR. The resort currently experiences visitation greater than its services and facilities are capable of accommodating; therefore, the original Proposed Action was designed to improve MHR's facilities to and better accommodate existing visitation. Traffic flow and congestion on Highway 2 are out of the Forest Service's jurisdiction as are California Department of Transportation (CalTrans) issues.

**Effects to roadless areas**

The projects analyzed within this document are within the proposed boundary of MHR's SUP area, which does not contain any roadless areas; therefore, there would not be any effects to roadless areas as a result of this proposal.

**Potential effects to hikers on the Blue Ridge and Pacific Crest trails due to increased numbers of mountain bikers**

Because the original Proposed Action was modified mid-way through the NEPA process and no longer proposes the development of a lift-served mountain biking program, this issue was dropped from analysis.

**Issues related to summer concerts and events**

The original Proposed Action was modified mid-way through the NEPA process and no longer proposes an increase in permitted summer activities. Any potential summer events would require individual and site-specific review and approval by the Forest Service.