

Snow-making is also proposed, but full implementation is not planned until snow-retention information on the trail has been collected over several snow seasons. In general, snow-making and grooming will not take place between the hours of 8 p.m. and 7 a.m. Snow-making generally only takes place early in the ski season (November–December). It is estimated that a total of 60 hours would be required for snow-making activities for the entire ski season. Times of day for snow-making vary and are dependent upon ambient temperatures around 32 degrees Fahrenheit (°F). In general, the trail will be groomed once daily, although on heavily trafficked days an additional grooming pass may be considered.

VISUAL CONTEXT

Mammoth is the most identifiable and largest Eastern Sierra Nevada alpine resort. Mammoth is located within a valley floor (actually within a portion of an ancient caldera²) surrounded by moderately to steeply rising slopes on the south, west, and north. Physical and visual access into Mammoth commences from the east at the State Highway 203 and U.S. 395 interchange. Traveling westerly directly into town, urbanization typical of a destination resort dominates the immediate horizontal view. State Highway 203 consistently rises as it proceeds west, which directs the eye upward toward the mountains. Mammoth Mountain, located directly to west of the Town provides a prominent visual backdrop. Again, mountains rise quickly to the south and north.

During all seasons it is apparent that Mammoth Mountain has been altered to accommodate skiing. Stands of Jeffrey pines are interspersed among large, extended open areas. Ski lifts and roadways are seen on the face of the mountain, particularly to the west. The mountains to the south and north do not have the degree of physical alteration apparent on Mammoth Mountain; however, several roadways can be seen on these slopes from the valley floor.

The proposed Ski Back Trail is located within a relatively localized and narrow area between State Highway 203 and existing residential development. The proposed trail alignment, State Highway 203 and residential development are oriented in general west to east direction. State Highway 203 is located to the north and at a higher elevation than the proposed trail alignment. The residential development is located to the south of and at a lower elevation than the proposed trail alignment.

This area has a moderately dense cover of Jeffrey pines (*Pinus jeffreyi*), with trees ranging from several inches to nearly 80 ft above the ground surface. In addition, red fir (*Abies magnifica*) populates the proposed ski back trail area. The understory is a mixture of manzanita type shrub, buff ground cover, and fallen woody debris.

The dominant cover in sunny, open areas consists of greenleaf manzanita (*Arctostaphylos patula*), pinemat manzanita (*Arctostaphylos nevadensis*), tobacco brush (*Ceanothus velutinus*), big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*), and antelope bitterbrush (*Purshia*

² A caldera is a large depression commonly formed by collapse of the ground following explosive eruption of a large body of stored magma (Wright and Pierson, 1992, Living with Volcanoes, The U.S. Geological Survey's Volcano Hazards Program: U.S. Geological Survey Circular, 1973).

tridentata). The dominant cover on shaded slopes consists of less common shrubs; understory is comprised mainly of herbaceous perennials and grasses, including nude buckwheat (*Eriogonim nudum*) and bottlebrush squirreltail (*Sitanion hystrix*). Although State Highway 203 and the residential areas are relatively close to each other, there are only a few areas along this entire proposed alignment where these facilities are visible to each other due to the elevation differences and existing stands of trees.

POLICY CONTEXT

The Inyo National Forest Land and Resources Management Plan (INFLRMP 1988) was developed to provide an “integrated, multiple resource management direction for all Forest resources” and thereby contributes to defining the area’s land use and visual policy context.

Chapter 2 of the INFLRMP describes the issues and concerns of this unit. For visual resources, the following list of concerns is provided:

- Maintain and manage for visual quality
- Resolve conflicts between visual quality and other resources
- Maintain or enhance current visual resources and scenic attractions

The following response is provided for these concerns: The Forest Standards and Guidelines set the stage for management of visual resources. Each management prescription includes an assigned Visual Quality Objective (VQO).

Chapter 3 of the INFLRMP provides a summary analysis of the management situation for each of the resources within this region. It is noted in this chapter that the “Mammoth and June Lake communities and associated winter sports development represent the most significant visual impacts within the Forest boundary.” This section further notes that “additional winter sports development . . . could cause major visual resource disruptions during the planning period” and that there is a need to establish direction for applying VQOs to such developments.

Chapter 3 also emphasizes the need to maintain the visual resources values of the INF, particularly as it is viewed from Highway 395. Finally, this chapter recognizes the following:

The Plan emphasizes a continued high level of visual quality for its economic and social benefits to local communities and to millions of annual recreation visitors. This emphasis is expressed by assigning VQOs to specific acres of land that are consistent with the overall management direction for that land.

Applicable Management Direction statements are provided in Chapter 4 of the INFLRMP. The following Management Direction applies to the proposed project:

- Maintain foregrounds and middlegrounds of the (scenic) corridors of the following travel routes to Retention and/or Partial Retention VQOs as inventoried, but not (lower) than Partial Retention:
 1. Highways officially designated by the State as California State and County Scenic Highways.

2. California State Scenic Highway System reroutes as designated in the September 1970 Master Plan. [These] highways include:
 - State Highway 120, west of U.S. 395 to Tioga Pass;
 - U.S. 395;
 - State Highway 158;
 - State Highway 203; and
 - State Highway 168.

The Mammoth area can be partially viewed from U.S. 395 and State Highway 203. Although the specific proposed project will not be visible from U.S. 395, it is within the immediate foreground and foreground view distances of State Highway 203. (It will be noted in the following site-specific visual analysis that although the proposed project is within immediate foreground and foreground distances, the majority of it cannot be seen from State Highway 203 due to elevation differences and existing tree cover.)

In Chapter 4 of the INFLRMP, the management direction for visual resources within this area is described as meeting or exceeding “the Partial Retention [VQO] for runs, lifts, and base areas as seen at middleground distances from Sensitivity Level 1 routes and occupancy sites.”

It appears that the Management Direction of maintaining the Partial Retention VQO would therefore apply to the proposed project.

METHODOLOGY

In order to accurately assess the potential visual impacts of the proposed project, two methodologies were employed: a regional approach and a site-specific approach.

Scenery Management System

The Scenery Management System (SMS) is a regional approach to understanding and classifying the visual context of an area as established by the United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service Division (*Agricultural Handbook No. 701*, December 1995). The SMS creates an inventory and analysis of aesthetic values while attempting to determine the relative value and importance of scenery in a national forest.

The SMS establishes a series of components to analyze in a rational sequential format in order to arrive at a set of visual goals and objectives for Forest Service lands. The initial component is the Ecological Unit Description, which describes the basic physical and biological elements of the study area. The Landscape Character Description is developed by characterizing the existing landscape and describing its unique, natural elements. Once this general description is established, Scenic Attractiveness Classes are developed: Class A (Distinctive), Class B (Typical), and Class C (Indistinctive). Scenic Attractiveness Classes attempt to further describe the existing landscape in terms of line, color, form, texture, and the combined context. Scenic Integrity is also described, mapped, and categorized in qualitative rankings ranging from Very High to Unacceptably Low.