



United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Ecological Services
Colorado Field Office
755 Parfet Street, Suite 361
Lakewood, Colorado 80215



IN REPLY REFER TO:
ES/CO:USFS/PSICC
Mail Stop 65412

JAN 31 2005

CEM

Mr. Charles Medina
District Ranger
Pike and San Isabel National Forests
Salida Ranger District
325 W. Rainbow Boulevard
Salida, Colorado 81201

Dear Mr. Medina:

This responds to your letter and biological evaluation (BE) dated December 22, 2004 regarding the effects of the proposed expansion of the Monarch Ski and Snowboard Area to include the Mirkwood Basin in Chaffee County, Colorado. Additional project information was provided by your office through email on January 14, 2005 and by fax on January 20, 2005. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is concerned about the protection of threatened and endangered species, as well as species that are candidates or proposed for official listing as threatened or endangered (Federal Register, Vol. 69, No. 62, March 31, 2004). You requested concurrence with your determination that the proposed project "may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect" the Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*), and that there will be "no effect" to the Uncompahgre fritillary butterfly (*Boloria acrocnemis*) and the boreal toad (*Bufo boreas boreas*). These comments have been prepared under the provisions of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA), as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531 et. seq.).

It is the Service's understanding that the project consists of an 128-acre expansion of the Monarch Ski and Snowboard Area (Monarch Ski Area) into the already permitted Mirkwood Basin. Powder Monarch LLC is currently permitted by the USFS (Pike and San Isabel National Forest) under a Special Use Permit (SUP) to operate a snowcat-assisted backcountry skiing/riding in the Mirkwood, Dog Haven, and No Name basins, which are located adjacent and northeast of the Monarch Ski Area. The Pike and San Isabel National Forest LRMP has designated the entire ski area and snowcat tour SUP area, including the Mirkwood Basin, as a 1B1 Winter Sports Management Emphasis Area.

The proposed expansion would include the upper portion of only Mirkwood Basin and would provide "hike-in" access to skiers and, through its inclusion in Monarch Ski Area's SUP, would provide a means for avalanche control, rescue responsibility, and area closure in the event of unstable avalanche conditions. Under the proposed action, no improvements or modifications are needed or proposed with this boundary expansion nor any type of activity not already occurring (i.e., no new trail creation, grooming, vegetation removal, facility development, or ground disturbance of any kind) will take place. In addition to the existing snowcat-assisted ski and snow board use in Mirkwood Basin and adjacent basins, Mirkwood Basin also is currently experiencing some low level use by hike-in skiers.

It is anticipated that the increased use of Mirkwood Basin by hike-in skiers will likely shift some of the snow-cat use out of Mirkwood Basin and into Dog Haven and No Name basins. Although the proposed action will likely result in an increased skier use in Mirkwood Basin and an increased snow-cat-assisted use in Dog Haven and No Name basins, this change is expected to have only an insignificant or discountable effect on the Canada lynx for the following reasons, 1) no vegetation removal or ground disturbances will occur, 2) the existing pattern of winter use will remain in Mirkwood Basin (i.e., based on the topography and forest structure, hike-in skiers are likely to access Mirkwood Basin by the same ridgeline as is currently used by the snowcat-assisted skiers and hike-in skiers are likely to utilize the same less-densely forested areas of the basin as the snowcat-assisted skiers), 3) the existing pattern of winter use will also remain in Dog Haven and No Name Basins, 4) densely forested areas exist within Mirkwood Basin, as well as in adjacent areas to the basin, and these areas should continue to provide areas of diurnal security cover and winter foraging habitat, and 5) the annual skier use days in the basins currently permitted by the SUP will remain unchanged. The permitted use is 1,500 user days per year, although the actual use is typically only half of permitted use.

The project area is located within the Monarch Pass Lynx Analysis Unit (LAU) and the Poncha Linkage Area. The proposed action complies with the guidelines outlined in the Canada Lynx Conservation Assessment and Strategy (LCAS). Denning habitat within the LAU will remain greater than 10 percent of the lynx habitat in the LAU. Management actions will not change more than 15 percent of lynx habitat within the LAU to unsuitable within a 10 year period; and unsuitable habitat within the LAU will remain under the 30 percent unsuitable LCAS standard. The connectivity of the Poncha Linkage Area will not be affected by the proposed action. The proposed project will have an insignificant and discountable effect on Canada lynx. Based on the information provided, the Service concurs that this project "may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect" the Canada lynx, and that there will be "no effect" to the Uncompahgre fritillary butterfly and the boreal toad.

If any species that are Federally-listed, proposed for Federal listing, or candidate for Federal listing are found at the project site, or if project plans change, this office should be contacted to determine if further consultation will be required. If you require additional information, please contact Leslie Ellwood of this office at (303) 275-2383.

Sincerely,


Susan C. Linner
Colorado Field Supervisor

cc: FWSR6/Grand Junction ES
FWSR6/Helena ES

Ref: Projects\USFS\FikeSanIsabelNP\0501\COP\SICC\MonarchPassCL