



File Code: 1950-1

Date: March 20, 2009

Dear Interested Party:

Your input is being sought on a proposed winter backcountry ski hut to be constructed and operated by Alfred A. Braun Hut System, Inc. This letter and attached maps provide you with detailed information about the purpose and need, the proposed action, decisions to be made, and preliminary issues that have been identified by the Forest Service. Your specific comments will be analyzed by an interdisciplinary team of resource specialists to develop significant issues concerning the proposed action, develop measures to mitigate potential effects, and develop possible alternatives to the proposed action that meet the stated purpose and need. Please refer to the “Public Involvement” section of this letter for additional information about submitting comments.

Background

The proposed hut would be located approximately 1.5 miles south of Taylor Pass and 0.3 miles east of the Taylor Pass Divide Road (FSR 761.1D). The proposed hut, known as the “Taylor Pass Hut”, would be the 7th hut to be operated by the Braun Hut System. The Braun Hut System has operated six ski huts around Ashcroft and along Richmond Ridge (on the White River NF) for over 40 years. All the Braun Huts exist and operate on National Forest System lands under special use permit and are available to the public from November 1 through May 31.

The management emphasis for this area as identified in the Amended Land and Resource Management Plan for the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison (GMUG) National Forests (Forest Plan), is Management Area 7A – Wood Fiber Production. The Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) category for the area around the proposed hut is semi-primitive motorized. GMUG winter travel management allows for cross-country snowmobile use in this location.

The proposed hut location is within an inventoried roadless area: RARE II #180: Elk Mountain-Collegiate. Road and trail construction or reconstruction is not being proposed for this project.

Purpose and Need for Action

The primary purpose and need for this project is to improve winter backcountry hut recreation opportunities. The proposed hut location would allow multiple opportunities for winter hut-to-hut travel utilizing the Friends Hut and the existing Braun Huts. Consistent with GMUG Forest Plan objectives, this project would (1) help meet demand for dispersed recreation outside of wilderness and (2) provide the opportunity for economic growth of industries and communities dependent upon Forest outputs, including tourism.



Proposed Action

A rustic, backcountry, high altitude, **winter use only** ski hut is being proposed to be built just south of Taylor Pass on the Gunnison Ranger District. The proposed hut would be located at 11,750 feet elevation near timberline (T12S, R84W, SW ¼ of Section 14). The proposed 800 square-foot hut would be off-grid utilizing solar, propane and wood. It would be constructed primarily of wood and stone with a capacity for 8 skiers. The hut would be comparable in scope and scale to the Friends Hut on the Gunnison Ranger District or the Markley Hut on the White River NF. Construction would occur in summer 2009 or 2010 depending on the timing of the decision.

Similar to the other Braun Huts, hut amenities would include: wood stove heat, firewood, propane burners for cooking, photovoltaic lighting, cookware, dishes, mattresses, pillows, and toilet paper. Hut users melt snow for water. No dogs are allowed at Braun Huts.

The hut would have an attached firewood storage shed, a nearby ADA-compliant outhouse, and a small outside deck for ingress/egress and gathering. It would have a grey-water septic system with a small leach field for disposal of sink/gray water (under 20 gallons/week). The outhouse proposed is either a traditional vault toilet or composting unit. The hut and associated structures would comply with the architectural guidelines indicated in the Forest Service Built Environment Image Guide.

Hut users would access the proposed hut via cross-country over-the-snow travel relying on winter backcountry navigation techniques. Similar to the other Braun Huts and the Friends Hut, winter routes to the proposed hut would not be marked or maintained on the ground and would travel through avalanche-prone terrain.

It is anticipated that 80% of the users of this hut would originate from the Aspen side (Express Creek Road or Richmond Ridge Road) and 20% from the Crested Butte side (Friends Hut route via Brush Creek). It is not anticipated that many users would originate from Taylor Park since access is more difficult and driving distances are longer. No new parking areas are being proposed for hut users – hut users would utilize existing parking areas for the Braun Huts on the Aspen side and the Friends Hut on the Crested Butte side. Based on current parking capacity, it is not anticipated that the existing parking areas would have to be expanded due to the presence of a new hut.

The hut would be open to the public by reservation from November 1 through May 31. Hut fees are currently set at \$25 per person per night although these fees are subject to change.

Hut Construction Details

Construction materials would be trucked to the Cooper Basin staging area from the Aspen area via Castle Creek Road. Castle Creek Road intersects with the Iron Mine Road approximately 11 miles south of Aspen. The staging area would be located approximately one mile further south on the Iron Mine Road near the Lindley Hut on the White River NF.

From this staging area materials would be flown by helicopter to the proposed hut site. The advantages of this staging area are that it is accessed off of the paved Castle Creek Road, it is located along a good road (Iron Mine Road) that is gated and closed to the general public, and it is located at a higher elevation closer to the proposed hut site thus reducing elevation gain and flight time.

It is estimated that four days of helicopter use would be required resulting in a total of approximately 80 trips (40,000 – 60,000 lbs.). The timing of helicopter use would be in June, July or August (avoiding hunting seasons). The distance from the staging area to the proposed hut site is approximately 2.3 miles direct. Due to load restrictions, the flight path may require following Express Creek Road and over Taylor Pass itself.

Hut construction and marshalling of materials would take place either in summer 2009 or summer 2010.

The construction crew (approximately 4 people) would occasionally camp on-site at the proposed hut site to reduce travel time and traffic on Castle Creek Road, Express Creek Road and Taylor Pass Divide Road. The construction crew would park along Taylor Pass Divide Road and hike in to the hut site which is approximately 0.3 miles east of the Taylor Pass Divide Road. A permanent or temporary access road or access trail from Taylor Pass Divide Road to the proposed hut site is not being proposed. Rather the crew would walk in cross-country utilizing different routes to the site each time in order to prevent creation of a trail.

Heavy equipment (e.g. dozers, backhoes, etc.) will not be required for hut construction. The building anchors and support posts for the primary building beams will be hand-dug utilizing an air compressor and generator (if required). Once the primary understructure is in place, the cross beams and decking will create the working subfloor and the rest of the construction project will proceed normally. Holes required for the outhouse and septic system will likewise be hand-dug using hut volunteers primarily. Any concrete used on site will be hand-mixed from sacked quickcrete. All these materials would be flown in by helicopter.

Hut Maintenance Details

Summertime heavy maintenance of the hut would take place primarily via two pickup truck trips per year, one in the summer, and one in the fall, to a nearby location on Taylor Pass Divide Road (to and from there on foot) for hut supplies delivery and end of season shut down and cleaning. Summertime access route would include Castle Creek Road – Express Creek – Taylor Pass Divide Road.

During the winter/spring months maintenance and re-supply of materials at the hut would be accomplished by skis or snowmobiles (with sled) accessing the hut once or twice a month over-the-snow. Over-the-snow access for maintenance trips would be via Richmond Ridge Road – Taylor Pass – Taylor Pass Divide Road. No specific ski or snowmobile trail would be identified between Taylor Pass Divide Road and the hut site – this is consistent with travel management direction for this area which is “open” to cross-country winter motorized vehicle use and nonmotorized use.

Regular and ongoing maintenance activities, such as firewood and propane tank delivery, would be delivered to the hut over-the-snow by snowmobile and/or sled with cargo drag, in the spring months of April and May. Over the snow access would be dependent upon hard-pack snow conditions of sufficient depth to prevent resource damage.

Off-season hut visits (summer and fall) would be by foot from Taylor Pass Divide Road, averaging twice per month, to monitor site conditions and security. Summertime access route would include Castle Creek Road – Express Creek Road – Taylor Pass Divide Road.

Overall hut maintenance trips would average twice a month year round or approximately 24 trips annually.

Decision Framework

The Environmental Assessment (EA) will document the analysis of site-specific, on-the-ground activities. It will not be a general management plan for the greater Taylor Pass area. The analysis documented in the EA will be tiered to the respective Forest Plan for each Forest. It will not reanalyze management area allocations already specified in the Forest Plan nor will it seek to reexamine federal regulations or Forest Service policy regarding recreation/special uses on National Forest System lands.

The GMUG Forest Supervisor and White River Forest Supervisor will be the Responsible Officials with respect to those activities taking place on each Forest. Their decision for proposed activities on each Forest will be stated in a joint Decision Notice based on one Environmental Assessment. Both Forest Supervisors will sign the joint Decision Notice. Given the purpose and need, the Responsible Officials will review the proposed action, other alternatives and design criteria/mitigation measures in order to make the following decisions:

1. Whether or not to authorize new construction of the hut, long-term commercial use of the hut, construction staging area, access and other support activities to meet the stated purpose and need on National Forest System lands within the Project Area.
2. If an action alternative is selected, under what conditions hut construction and associated activities would be conducted.

Issues

The Forest Service will separate issues into two groups: significant and non-significant issues. Significant issues will be those directly or indirectly caused by implementing the proposed action. Non-significant issues will be those that are: 1) outside the scope of the proposed action; 2) already decided by law, regulation, Forest Plan, or other higher level decision; 3) irrelevant to the decision to be made; or 4) conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence.

Preliminary issues that have been identified by the interdisciplinary team of specialists assigned to this project include: effects of the proposed action on wildlife, particularly Canada lynx and

elk; effects on existing recreation use in the area, effects on water quality and alpine vegetation/soils; visual effects, and effects on roadless characteristics.

The significance of preliminary issues identified by the interdisciplinary team for this project along with issues identified through public scoping will be evaluated and determined during the process of completing the environmental analysis and developing alternatives to the proposed action including the evaluation of a No Action alternative.

Public Involvement

This project will be listed on the Schedule of Proposed Actions for the GMUG and White River NF. Comments concerning this proposal and issues to be addressed in the EA must be submitted within 30 days of the Legal Notice publication of this proposal in the Grand Junction Daily Sentinel and Glenwood Springs Post Independent. The publication date in each newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period for this analysis. Those wishing to comment should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. The regulations prohibit extending the length of the comment period.

The purpose of this comment period is to provide an opportunity for the public to provide early and meaningful participation on a proposed action prior to a decision being made by the Responsible Official. This opportunity to comment will serve as both scoping for this project under the requirements of NEPA, and the 30-day comment period required in accordance with 36 CFR 215. Those who provide comments or otherwise express interest during this comment period are eligible to appeal the decision pursuant to 36 CFR part 215 regulations.

Written comments must be submitted to: Taylor Pass Hut Project, c/o Bill Jackson, 216 N. Colorado St., Gunnison, CO 81230 or by fax: 970-642-4425. The Gunnison District Office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00am – 4:30pm, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc) to wfbjackson@fs.fed.us.

The proposed action description and other information are available from the Gunnison District Office and the following project website: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/gmug/policy/#recreation>

If you require additional information concerning this proposal please contact Bill Jackson at (970) 642-4439.

Sincerely,

/s/ Corey P. Wong (for)
CHARLES S. RICHMOND
Forest Supervisor