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Deal puts snow plan on hold

Story by: Christian Knight

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Mt. Hood Meadows will have much less power – and technology – than its officials had hoped for to pad the slopes for skiers and snowboarders if another El Nino winter delivers another miserable snowpack this year.

This is the result of a compromise upon which Meadows and Friends of Mt. Hood agreed late last week.

As part of the deal, Dave Riley, general manager for Mt. Hood Meadows, agreed to scrap his March plan to place 10 to 15 snowguns, 45 hydrants – and the underground hoses that feed them – throughout the 11-lift ski area until the public has had a chance to comment on the plan for such an endeavor.

In lieu of scrapping the original proposal he had intended for the upcoming season, Riley agreed to purchase two more snowguns – not 40 – and to feed them through above-the-ground hoses. Meadows will most likely place the two additional guns at Eric's Corner and lower North Canyon.

“It was very important to provide some artificial snow in this location because often that is the spot that delays the opening of Mt. Hood Express and Shooting Star Express, even when the snow is really good up there,” Riley was quoted in a Friends of Mt. Hood press release.

In the meantime, Riley will be drafting and submitting a new plan for a more extensive snowmaking system that would both cover more terrain and disturb more ground.

“The scope of his new proposal has grown so much that there’s no way we can do it with a Categorical Exclusion (CE),” said Doug Jones, Mount Hood National Forest permit specialist for Mt. Hood Meadows.

Jones said the new plan will likely call for a four-million gallon water tank, which construction crews will place in a grove of mountain hemlocks.

The Forest Service generally grants Categorical Exclusions to operations that disturb less than five acres of National Forest land.

Riley's original plan would have disturbed about 4.5 acres. Jones is not sure how many acres his new plan will disturb, but is certain it will be significantly more than five.

As a result, the public will have 30 days to comment on it, 45 days to appeal it. The National Forest Service will then have 45 days to respond to the public's appeal and 30 days to process the entire transaction.

Riley's original plan asked to divert up to 1.5 cubic feet per second of water from the headwaters of the East Fork of the Hood River into a million-gallon tank that crews would have installed near a string of small wetlands.

Meadows would have placed the 78-foot-wide tank alongside the same gravel road on which the ski area has already built a water treatment facility and a junkyard that contains accumulated scrap metal from old projects.

To create space for the tank, Meadows would have cut eight to 10 mountain hemlocks.

The water treatment facility and the junk yard are both within 100 yards of the East Fork of the Hood River.

But because the plan called for the disturbance of less than five acres of land, Mount Hood National Forest could have qualified it under Categorical Exclusion, thus shutting the public out of the process.

"We were thinking it could be Categorical Exclusion," Jones said.

If Meadows had qualified for the CE without any legal challenges, it could have installed the snowmaking system by this upcoming ski season.

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