



ROCKY MOUNTAIN WILD



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Opponents of Wolf Creek Village Slam Forest Service Approval

Monte Vista, CO - Today the U. S. Forest Service, in spite of widespread opposition, announced its intention to approve a land exchange that would allow construction of a city of 10,000 people near the top of Wolf Creek Pass in southwestern Colorado.

"The effects of this approval could be devastating", stated Christine Canaly, Executive Director of the San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council. "An important migration route for the threatened Canada lynx could be destroyed. There would be strong negative impacts to habitat for other wildlife, and to wetlands, scenery, and winter traffic safety as well".

The proposal would trade approximately 205 federal acres for 177 acres of private land within the boundaries of the Rio Grande National Forest. Part of the federal land exchange proposal would connect the private land to U.S. Highway 160, thus securing more convenient access to the developer's private inholding.

"With snow covering this area above 10,000 feet for up to eight months of the year, this is certainly not an appropriate locale to build a city of any size", noted Jimbo Buickerood, Public Land Coordinator for the San Juan Citizens Alliance. "For this locale near the top of Wolf Creek Pass, the public has expressed a strong interest in allowing the area to remain a refuge to wildlife with some recreational visitation," Buickerood noted, "rather than a trophy-style development accessed through a major new highway interchange that would be wildly out of character with the surrounding landscape."

"The City at Wolf Creek is not a good idea. It's the wrong kind of use for Wolf Creek Pass which is perched atop the Continental Divide and is surrounded by wilderness, unroaded

areas, wetlands, and irreplaceable wildlife habitat.” says Matt Sandler, Attorney with Rocky Mountain Wild.

Forest Service approval of the proposal is especially inappropriate given its history. The Rio Grande National Forest determined that a land exchange was not in the public interest next to the Wolf Creek Ski Area back in 1986. However, due to political interference, the local Forest Service office was forced to reverse this decision and approve the creation of a private inholding desired by the developer. The same political pressure is now pushing the Forest Service to approve another land exchange, one that would connect the developer’s property created via the earlier exchange with Highway 160.

“The exchange is still not in the public interest.” says Christine Canaly, Director of the San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council. “Political pressure is what made this happen back then, and is what keeps pushing it forward.”

The Forest Service continues to thwart the full disclosure of information concerning the project. The Forest Service has again withheld the public record of interaction between themselves and the project proponents. In response to a lawsuit filed September 9, 2014, the Forest Service has admitted that it violated deadlines that required further explanation of the withholding of documents requested on February 27, 2014 under the Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA. The Forest Service continues to withhold requested records, which it also did in conjunction with the previous Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), where agency documents revealed political influence, including offers of Washington Redskins’ tickets for EIS preparers. The Forest Service’s refusal to comply with FOIA in 2014 suggests the pattern of improper dealings between the Forest Service and Texas billionaire Red McCombs’ team may plague the new decision.

This project is a net loss for the people who know and love this region.” says Canaly. “Not only is the proposed ‘Village at Wolf Creek’ not likely to substantially help local businesses, but it also has the potential to be economically harmful to local business by drawing away from existing businesses in South Fork and Pagosa Springs. It is a political land exchange that further damages the public interests.”

Unfortunately, the Forest Service has so far dismissed many other possible alternatives suggested by local citizens and organizations such as the federal government buying the private land parcel and placing it back into public lands.

“We will continue to challenge the proposed approval of the land exchange”, stated Sandler.

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- <http://friendsofwolfcreek.org>
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