

Salt Alta Ski Area Concerns and Issues

December 19, 2018

Alta Ski Area Boundary (Current Status)

- Special Use Permit with US Forest Service
 - Approximately 1700 acres are permitted for lift served skiing in the Albion Basin and Collins Gulch drainages.
 - Approximately 254 acres on Patsey Marely ridge is currently designated as an avalanche control area in the Special Use Permit. (Alta Ski Area can go through a Forest Service process to change its designation to allow lift served skiing on Patsy Marely ridge).
- Approximately, 200 acres of private land in Grizzly Gulch which adjoins Solitude Ski Resort are used by Alta Ski Area for snowcat skiing operations. Alta purchased these lands years ago as an area that can be used to accommodate recreational growth and for a possible connection between Big and Little Cottonwood Canyons. Grizzly Gulch is currently also used by the backcountry skiing community for skiing and to access other backcountry terrain.

What is the Grizzly Gulch Controversy?

- Alta's ownership of Grizzly Gulch allows Alta and Solitude to connect their resorts via ski lifts or a gondola. This would allow visitors to move back and forth between Big and Little Cottonwood Canyons and would be an attractive summer activity for the public. This would provide an economic benefit to resorts and State of Utah and attract visitors to Utah. Special interest groups are opposed to a lift served connection between Big and Little Cottonwood Canyons.
- Alta ownership of Grizzly Gulch helps Alta preserve the quality of the Alta ski experience by providing lift served skiing on its private lands for recreational growth. Special interest groups are opposed to Alta using Grizzly Gulch to accommodate growth. They fear that lifts in Grizzly Gulch would make it easier for people to access other backcountry areas and take away the skiing they currently enjoy on Alta's private lands in Grizzly Gulch.

The Land Exchange

- For many years, the Forest Service and ski areas have been working on a land exchange which would result in base area lands owned by the Forest Service to be traded for mountain properties owned by the ski areas. The proposed draft legislation resulting from the Mountain Accord authorized the US Forest Service to trade federally owned base area lands for ski area owned private mountain lands. It is much easier for the ski areas to maintain and improve ski area infrastructure to accommodate growth on private lands than public lands and the US Forest Service would prefer to use their resources to manage mountain lands.
- Alta agreed to include its private lands in Grizzly Gulch in the proposed land exchange on conditions, one of those conditions was a direct public transportation connection between Big

Cottonwood Canyon and Little Cottonwood Canyon such as a tunnel. After the Mountain Accord legislative language failed to move forward because it only contained a promise for transportation improvements, UDOT indicated the resources required for a direct connection between Big and Little Cottonwood canyons could not be justified and should be used for other transportation needs.

- Since the conditions for including Grizzly Gulch in the land exchange are not moving forward and to preserve Alta's flexibility to accommodate growth and provide an over-the-snow connection between Big and Little Cottonwood Canyons, Alta removed its private lands in Grizzly Gulch from the proposed land exchange.
- Special interest groups and the CWC led by Ralph Becker are actively trying to pressure Alta to include its private lands in Grizzly Gulch in the land exchange or block Alta's ability to use those lands to accommodate growth and connect to Big Cottonwood Canyon. A variety of tactics and campaigns are being used to put pressure on Alta.
- On November 19th, 2018, the CWC voted to remove Alta from the proposed draft legislation which also removes Alta's authorization to exchange land with the Forest Service. While disguised as attempt to hold Alta harmless and move the legislation forward, Alta Ski Area sees this as strongarm play to pressure Alta to include its private lands in Grizzly Gulch in the land exchange by removing Alta's legislative authorization to trade 500 other acres for base area land, including lands on the North side of Little Cottonwood Canyon that are actively used by the backcountry skiing community.
- The proposed legislation still contains authorizations for Snowbird, Solitude and Brighton to trade private mountain lands for base area lands with no restrictions and Salt Lake City Department of Public Utilities (SLCDPU) has promised they will increase their surplus water contracts for snowmaking water. SLCDPU has taken the position that Alta's surplus water contract for snowmaking will not be increased if it will include its private lands in Grizzly Gulch in the proposed land exchange.

Legislation Concerns

The Mountain Accord process was intended to develop solutions for transportation, economic development, recreation use and environmental protections. The Bill introduced by Representative Chaffetz in 2016 primarily focused on creation of a conservation and recreation area, wilderness adjustments and authorized the land exchange between the ski areas and Forest Service. It only contained a promise to move forward transportation solutions which led to its demise. Alta Ski Area has the following questions and concerns regarding the revised draft legislation being proposed by the Central Wasatch Commission;

- Why do we need a conservation and recreation area? What are the additional environmental protections or recreational opportunities it will provide? Is there something wrong with how the Forest Service is currently managing the public lands in the proposed conservation and recreation area? Why do we need another layer of federal oversight and bureaucracy in our canyons?
- There are currently federal regulations for National Conservation Areas and a different set of regulations for National Recreation Areas. There are no regulations for a National Conservation and Recreation Area which would need to be developed. Does it make sense to create a new federal designation without regulations and consensus on how it would be managed? Does it make sense in an already tight federal budget, to incur costs to create a new federal designation and develop regulations?
- It seems premature to propose legislation to create a conservation and recreation area before developing and achieving consensus on solutions for traffic congestion, economic development and recreational use. What if the conservation and recreation area regulations restrict or prohibit solutions for traffic congestion, economic development and recreational use? How will the conservation and recreation area impact the many landowners whose private property is currently access through federal lands that would be in the conservation and recreation area?
- The proposed legislation includes ski areas in the conservation and recreation area but then indicates it will not affect the management of federal lands within the ski areas that are under permit with the Forest Service. Why not exclude the ski areas from the conservation and recreation area to prevent future conflicts concerning the language of the bill and management of lands with the ski areas? Why are we including the wilderness areas in the conservation and recreation area? They already have a federal designation.

Proposal: Rather than create a new federal designation, a conservation and recreation area, that is controversial and overlays wilderness, significant amounts of private property and ski areas with undefined consequences, the Central Wasatch Conservation and Recreation Act could be modified to remove the creation of a new federal designation while leaving in the provisions to create additional wilderness and the white pine special management area and authorize the exchange of private alpine lands for base area lands in the ski areas. This would allow the development of solutions for transportation, economic development and recreation use without restrictions or unintended consequences of a new federal designation.

Water & Watershed Issues

From Alta Ski Area's perspective, Salt Lake City Department of Public Utilities (SLCDPU) is taking positions outside of their jurisdictional rights and authorization.

- Alta Ski Area has been requesting an increase in its surplus water contract for snowmaking since 2012. Instead of increasing the contract to support Alta Ski Area's investment in snowmaking infrastructure and to be in parity with Snowbird surplus snowmaking water contract. SLCDPU requires Alta Ski Area to request additional surplus water annually.
- Early in 2018, Alta Ski Area resolved a water rights issue downstream that SLCDPU had indicated was a reason that Alta's surplus water contract could not be increased. After resolving this issue, SLCDPU indicated this would allow them to continue to authorize additional water for snowmaking on an annual basis, but not increase the base contract.
- SLCDPU has recently taken the position that an increase in Alta's base contract for surplus water for snowmaking is dependent upon Alta including its private lands in Grizzly Gulch in the land exchange with the Forest Service.
- Alta Ski Area has been purchasing 5-7 M gallons of surplus water from the Town of Alta annually since 1988 for snowmaking. SLCDPU has recently taken the position that the surplus water the ski area is purchasing from the Town of Alta should be included in the ski area's base allocation under its contract with SLCDPU. This would reduce Alta Ski Area's base allocation for snowmaking water by 5-7 M gallons per year.
- SLCDPU has taken the position that their surplus water contract with Alta Ski Area gives them wetlands jurisdiction over federal lands within Alta Ski Area. It is our understanding that the federal government is constitutionally authorized to oversee and manage wetland and watershed issues on federal lands within the ski area and does so through the Army Corps of Engineers and the US Forest Service. SLCDPU has also recently taken unworkable wetland management positions and is striving to apply them within the ski area as watershed protection rights.

Alta's response to special Interest group's claim that Alta's use of its private lands in Grizzly Gulch would be detrimental to the environment and watershed.

For the past 80 years Alta Ski Area has worked in partnership with the US Forest Service, the Town of Alta and Salt Lake Department of Public Utilities to provide recreational opportunities while managing their impact on the environment. Today we have a world class ski area with a healthy forest, vibrant wetlands and clean water. The forest service lands within Alta Ski Area's special use permit receive more care and attention and are healthier than most forest service lands outside of the ski area along the Wasatch Front.

Alta Ski Area's management practices include:

- **Tree and shrub planting.** Alta has been planting trees annually within its special use permit since 1940. Over 25,000 native tree seedlings have been planted since 1991. Since 2010 ski area employees annually hand-pic native tree and shrub seeds which are germinated and grown for three years in a nursery before being planted in Alta. We currently plant 1,500 trees and 500 shrubs annually.
- **Forest Health.** Alta works closely with the forest service to survey and manage the forest stands within the ski area. Annual maintenance includes removing and properly disposing of diseased and infected trees and thinning forest stands to prevent overcrowding that makes them more susceptible to disease, insects and wildfire.
- **Noxious and Invasive Weeds.** Alta has worked to identify, monitor and eliminate noxious weeds, invasive and non-native plant species within the ski area since the 1990's. Annual weed pulls for many years have led to an 80% reduction of weeds within the ski area. Today we find less than 3% weed coverage per 100 acres in Alta.
- **Restoration.** To enhance the restoration of disturbed areas due to ski area improvements or erosion, Alta gathers native seed each summer and fall, germinates seed and plants the seedlings the following summer. Alta currently plants 3,000-5,000 Alta native plants annually. Gathered native seed is also mixed with peat moss used in areas to be restored.
- **Plant Preservation.** Alta strives to preserve native soils and plants impacted by construction projects by saving, watering and transplanting plots of native soils and plants. Often these soils and plants are placed back in their original location after the construction is completed.
- **Trail and Road Management.** Annually Alta maintains and improves roads and trails impacted by visitor use and erosion.

Alta will continue to manage the forest and wetlands on its private lands in Grizzly Gulch in the same manner as forest service lands within its special use permit.

The Parking Issue

Current Status

- In 2003 the US Forest Service issued a Forest Plan for the Wasatch-Cache National Forest which was intended to provide guidance for the management of the US Forest Lands for the next 10-15 years. https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5347083.pdf A section of the plan is devoted to the Central Wasatch Management Area which contains Millcreek, Big Cottonwood and Little Cottonwood Canyons. (starts on page 4-152). Page 4-160 addresses desired future conditions for roads, trails and access and states that canyon parking lots will not exceed year 2000 levels unless modification is needed for watershed protection or to facilitate mass transit.
- The intent of the Forest Plan seemed to be to cap the parking to encourage development of public transportation options. The Forest Service has held the position the past fifteen years and not permitted any additional parking on public lands at the ski areas and no additional parking at the trailheads in the Canyons. This position has actively been supported by special interest groups like "Save Our Canyons", as well as, the executive director of the Central Wasatch Commission.
- Today we have insufficient parking for the current visitors to the Cottonwood Canyons.
 - Ski areas have more skier capacity on their mountains than available parking on US Forest Service land at their base areas resulting in visitors parking on the shoulders of the state highway to access the ski resorts. This creates public safety and traffic congestion issues.
 - We have trailheads (i.e. the White Pine trailhead in Little Cottonwood Canyon) that have 4-5 times more cars parked on the shoulder of Hwy 210 than in the trailhead parking lot almost every weekend in the summer.
 - We see over 100 cars parking on the shoulders of Hwy 210 every weekend of Oktoberfest creating public safety and congestion issues.
 - The interest in backcountry skiing has exploded since the year 2000. One to Two hundred of the parking spaces in Alta Ski Area's parking lots and within the Town of Alta are used by this community on weekends, holiday and powder days. The Forest Service has not allowed Alta Ski Area to replace parking spaces it developed, maintains and plows which are be used by non-Alta Ski Area patrons.
- Capping the parking on Forest Service lands in the Cottonwood Canyons has not reduced demand or increased public transportation use.
 - Summer visitation numbers continue to increase
 - Skier visits to the Cottonwood Canyons have increased (25%) from 1.2 M in 99-00 to 1.6 M in 16-17 despite the impacts of climate change.
 - UTA ridership increased in the early 2000's but then peaked and has dropped since then despite the ski areas providing free ridership for their season pass holders. Alta currently has less skiers using public transportation today than in the early 2000's. UTA can confirm if this is true for all the ski areas in the Cottonwood Canyons.

- Alta has brought this issue to the attention of the CWC and suggested they include provisions in the legislation to allow parking on public lands to be increased in the Cottonwood Canyons, at least for the current demand levels, if not also for the projected future recreational growth. Unfortunately, they only seem willing to address public transportation improvements and will not acknowledge there are more vehicles coming to the canyons today than they are parking spots.

Our experience is that is difficult to get people out of their cars and onto public transportation. Currently, less than 2% of the visitors to Alta in the winter ride the UTA bus.

Forest Management Plan

A Forest-wide goal is to provide a diverse range of recreation opportunities to a wide segment of the population. The Forest Service has designated Alta Ski Area as a developed recreation area:

4.5 Developed Recreation Areas: These areas include developed facilities such as campgrounds, trailheads, boat docks, and resorts under special use permit as well as adjacent areas associated with these sites. High levels of visitor interaction can be expected where sights and sounds of others are noticeable and there are moderate to high opportunities for social interaction. Access to these areas is primarily by motorized roads with some trails. Visitors can expect higher levels of regulation. Signs and visitor information are noticeable throughout the area. Site development tends toward the Roaded Natural to Rural end of the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS). Facilities vary from rustic using native materials to facilities designed primarily for visitor comfort or convenience and built using synthetic materials. Visitor impacts can be noticeable. Impacts to natural resources are dealt with through various management techniques and regulations. Management visibility is high with managers focusing on public safety, service, education, user ethics, and enforcement.

1.7.2.1 Wasatch Canyons Master Plan

- “The ski resorts must be able to adapt to changes in market size and composition and to innovations in equipment and physical facilities in order to compete in the national market.” (p. 36)
- The largest use in Little Cottonwood Canyon is alpine skiing, including Alta and Snowbird ski areas. “The plan provides for existing Canyon roles to continue.” (p. 74)
- For Little Cottonwood Canyon: “Ski resorts will be required to evaluate and mitigate project traffic impacts associated with proposals which would increase their use capacities.”

State of Utah Resource Management Plan – Recreation and Tourism

Office of Outdoor Recreation

The mission of the Office of Outdoor Recreation is to ensure all Utahns can live an active and healthy lifestyle through outdoor recreation.

- Ensure that the state’s natural assets can sustain economic growth for years to come.
- Help build tourism around the state with the construction and expansion of outdoor recreation amenities.
- With an eye to the state’s changing demographics and future increased demand, we must think ahead, recognize coming challenges, and make outdoor recreation a part of our strategic thinking.