

## A Delicate Balance

The following is a guest editorial. Doug Norlen is a member of the Waldo Wilderness Council, a coalition of conservation and outdoor groups and concerned individuals working to protect the wild lands of the Waldo Region. Norlen was also a member of the Forest Service Interdisciplinary Team that assessed the proposed expansion at Willamette Pass.

Local conservation groups recently filed a Freedom of Information Act Request to the U.S. Forest Service in Eugene to obtain information regarding violations of a special-use permit by the Willamette Pass Ski Corporation (WPSC).

The conservationists, working to protect the Waldo Lake Basin, were stunned to learn of unauth-

orized timber cutting by WPSC. WPSC operates its ski resort on public land under a special-use permit from the U.S. Forest Service. While the latest timber cutting was done on existing runs, all logging requires a timber sale contract. However, the recent logging was done without any timber contract.

The logging is the latest in what may be a series of special-use permit violations by WPSC including a 1983 incident where WPSC twice broke state law by building its ski lodge and septic facility before obtaining a required sewage permit from the Oregon State Department of Environmental Quality.

While USFS Supervisor Mike Kerrick has granted tentative approval to WPSC to allow expansion of its present boundary, a stay of action is currently in effect as a result of an appeal filed by the Waldo Wilderness Council, the Oregon Natural Resources Council, the Eugene Chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America, The Sierra Club, Earth First!, the Survival Center at the University of Oregon and the Emerald Chapter of the Native Plant Society of Oregon.

Conservationists, many of whom are downhill skiers, are not opposed to expansion of the Willamette Pass Ski Area. Conservationists strongly endorse a 69 percent expansion in skier capacity, but cannot in good conscience support the excessive 116 percent expansion plans proposed by WPSC and supported by the USFS.

Since the proposed expansion would have permanent effects upon public land, economic viability of the project is a public concern. The draft Environmental Impact Statement for proposed expansion included an economic analysis which showed Alternative II, the plan endorsed by conservationists, as having the best chance to break even financially. This analysis, however, was withdrawn from the final EIS without any explanation from the USFS. Also, last year, WPSC enjoyed the best snow conditions and most aggressive marketing campaign in its history, yet skier demand failed to reach even 50 percent of USFS estimates.

Expansion at WPSC would affect the Roosevelt Elk habitat and threaten other habitats such as the Gold Lake Bog Research Natural Area which contains rare plants found nowhere else in the world. Expansion also would affect

cougars, bears, martens, bald eagles, and wolverines. De facto wildlands in the proposed Maiden Peak Wilderness also would be affected.

The argument that the strict terms for expansion under a special-use permit would mitigate environmental effects is questionable when WPSC has failed to comply with such permits in the past, as was the case with the lodge expansion.

In addition, any environmentally sound plan for expansion is contingent upon the Forest Service enforcing the terms of the agreement; however, Forest Supervisor Mike Kerrick has failed to prosecute WPSC for any previous violations.

Those of us that are conscientious skiers should endorse an expansion plan that will balance economic and environmental concerns with the desires of the ski-area developer.

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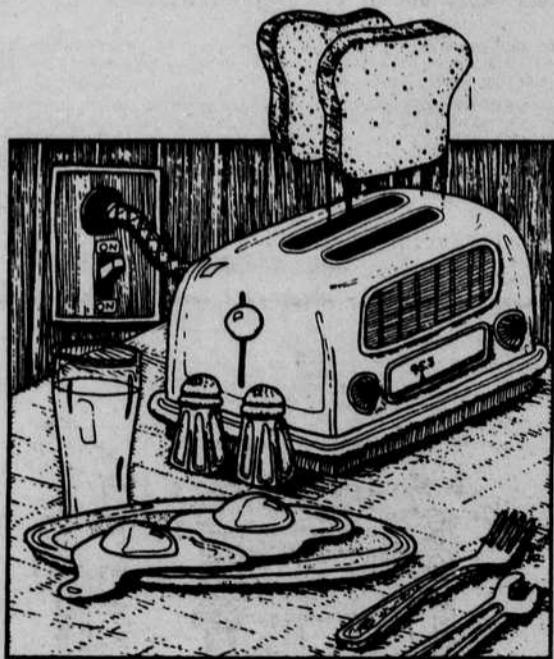
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Keith Nelson, of the U of O Outdoor Program, back-country skiing in the Three Sisters. Photograph by Warren Morgan.

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