



May 2, 2024

Scott Robinson, District Ranger
Cle Elum Ranger District
803 West 2nd Street
Cle Elum, WA 98922

Submitted online through:

<https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/CommentInput?Project=57415>

Subject: Gold Creek Valley Restoration Project Draft Environmental Assessment

District Ranger Robinson,

On behalf of The Mountaineers, thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the Gold Creek Valley Restoration Project Draft Environmental Assessment.

The Mountaineers, based in Seattle, Washington and founded in 1906, is a nonprofit outdoor education, conservation, and recreation organization whose mission is “to enrich the community by helping people explore, conserve, learn about and enjoy the lands and waters of the Pacific Northwest and beyond.” 1,200 skilled volunteers lead 3,200 outdoor education trips and courses annually for 16,000+ members. Our youth programs provide over 15,000 opportunities each year for young people to get outside. We are a passionate, engaged, and knowledgeable community that cares about the outdoors, and protects the outdoor experience for current and future generations.

The Gold Creek Valley is a valuable resource for Mountaineers educational courses and programs, especially beginner snowshoe trips, youth snowshoe trips, and avalanche safety courses. From urban Seattle elementary school students to adult beginner snowshoe students, Gold Creek Pond has been the backdrop to many joyful first experiences of snow and the beginning of a lifetime of winter recreation.

The Mountaineers is supportive of the purpose and need of the Gold Creek Valley Restoration Project and the long term goal to improve fish and wildlife habitat and restore the hydrology of Gold Creek. We appreciate the project’s efforts to replace the existing recreational facilities. However, we are concerned that the Forest Service has not adequately mitigated for the temporary construction impacts to recreation opportunities at Gold Creek Pond and the surrounding areas, especially for winter recreation.

Unlike many of the neighboring steep peaks, heavily forested landscapes, or commercial ski areas, Gold Creek Pond offers a relatively flat, easily accessible, low cost, and scenic winter recreation destination. It is one of the few areas near the Puget Sound metropolitan region where families, novice recreationists, and mobility-challenged individuals can enjoy winter recreation, especially without entering avalanche terrain or requiring specialized clothing or equipment. The alternative recreation sites identified in the Recreation and Scenic Resources Report do not provide these same opportunities.



Given the value of the Gold Creek Valley for winter recreation, we encourage the Forest Service to consider whether some amount of winter recreation could continue in the project area. While safety and security is of primary importance, the agency should explore options for allowing limited day use access when project work ceases for the winter season. If access is not possible, the proposed project needs to include more substantive plans for offsetting the significant loss of the Gold Creek Valley as a winter recreation destination.

We recommend that the Cle Elum District investigate the feasibility of additional solutions to address the temporary construction impacts to winter recreation suggested by our partners with the Cascade Backcountry Alliance, such as allowing winter recreationists to continue to access F.S. Road 4832-144, allowing recreationists to access the upper valley via trail 1314 by including clear signage and trail markers, expanding parking on Lake Mardee Road, and working with WSDOT to allow parking on the north side of Exit 62 and add a trail connector for cross country skiers and snowshoers to access the Cabin Creek trail system. Additionally, we strongly encourage the District to provide a project map documenting the temporary impacts and recreational closures (both summer and winter) to provide maximum clarity for the public.

The Mountaineers encourages the Cle Elum District to work with your colleagues in the Snoqualmie District and with Washington State Parks to create additional sno-parks at the Denny Creek and Pacific Crest Trail North Parking lots, which will help provide alternative snowshoeing and backcountry skiing access points. We also encourage the Districts to work with the Snoqualmie Pass community to help address the winter parking issues at the Pass, including the added stress caused by this project.

Finally, we support the comments of the Snoqualmie Nordic Club, who object to the planned closure of the Boat Ramp Road during the winter season when snowfall meets the requirements for machine grooming. It is our understanding that this grooming is important for ADA access and the Outdoors for All Foundation's activities.

Thank you for considering our comments on the Gold Creek Valley Restoration Project Draft Environmental Assessment. We appreciate the opportunity to engage in this project, and are grateful for your work to facilitate sustainable recreation access in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest.

Sincerely,

Betsy Robblee
Conservation & Advocacy Director