

MacDonald Pass isn't suitable for biathlons

No place along the Continental Divide is more important to the movement of wildlife — or is more threatened — than Helena's own MacDonald Pass.

The continental divide, backdrop for the capitol city, behaves similarly to a major artery in the human body, but in this case the artery allows for the flow of elk, bears, marten, moose, wolves, wolverine, lynx and a host of other wildlife to and from essential habitats throughout the ecosystem. The ability of wildlife to move about on the landscape is crucial for sustaining healthy, genetically diverse populations and to assure that island habitats remain available to wildlife. And, similar to what occurs when the body's arteries clog or become constricted, the movement of wildlife becomes inhibited or preempted when human developments are constructed in the movement corridor.

Such encroachment is about to happen on our continental divide wildlife corridor. Within the narrowest segment of public land in the corridor, the Montana Army National

Your Turn

Guard (MANG) plans to construct 5 buildings, a 50 car parking lot, 10.3 miles of trails — all 20 feet wide; and then the site would be used 10 months of the year for biathlon facilities maintenance, training and events. If allowed at the MacDonald Pass location, this development will seriously inhibit the flow of wildlife through our landscape.

A decision is about to be made by the Helena Forest Supervisor, whether to grant a 25 year permit to the MANG to construct facilities and use MacDonald Pass for military training to develop skiing and rifle marksmanship and to represent the National Guard in competitions. As described in the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the project, Montana was selected over other western states because it supposedly met all the criteria for such a facility.

One of the things that was NOT described in the EA was that the site lacks adequate

snow — an essential feature. According to the EA, a minimum of 10-12 inches of snowpack is necessary to support grooming of the 20 foot wide trails for biathlete competitions. Not only did the EA inadequately address the issue of snow, it utilized precipitation information (not snowpack data) from sites that were substantially higher in elevation than MacDonald Pass. This occurred even though excellent data existed from only 9 miles away, at Chessman Reservoir. The Chessman data set consists of 72 years of actual snowpack records. The Chessman data clearly reveals that even on an aspect that is more conducive to snow retention than MacDonald Pass, insufficient snowpack exists to meet the needs of a regulation biathlon facility. And the climatic trend clearly reveals decreasing precipitation and increasing temperatures - conditions not conducive to snow production. And, the actual location at MacDonald Pass is on a southeast aspect where snow retention is even less likely.

We wonder why such a large investment in time and money has been spent on a project that demands adequate snow depths yet the chosen site lacks that essential attribute. We wonder why the MANG did not invest the four hours of time it would have taken to research snowpack data from the Natural Resources Conservation Service that is universally available on-line. We wonder why the proposal is being made at MacDonald Pass when the consequences of such a development would needlessly plug the most restricted segment of public land along Montana's main artery for wildlife movement. The lack of snow is only one of many issues that renders the EA for MacDonald Pass inadequate. As concerned sportsmen and citizens, we are hopeful that Helena National Forest officials will agree that MacDonald Pass is not a suitable location for the Montana Army National Guard's biathlon project.

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