

**Overstressing Mt. Hood:
No right way to do the wrong thing**

Date Published: September 24, 2003

Special to the News
By Kate McCarthy

The Treasure

The Mt. Hood summit held recently at Timberline Lodge was an inspirational gathering of people seeking a vision for Mt. Hood, Oregon's much loved icon. "Save the mountain from over-development" seemed the overwhelming sentiment from the audience, according to their comments.

Alpine areas are rare in Oregon, and Mt. Hood is the only glaciated mountain in the Mount Hood National Forest. To many, the mountain in its natural state is one of Oregon's greatest treasures.

With five ski areas on its slopes, more than any other mountain in the United States, Mt. Hood's resources are already overstressed. Skiing, snowboarding, and developed recreation already have their fair share of the mountain. Enough is enough.

The Spin

Mt. Hood Meadows' propagandists would have us believe that the company is environmentally sensitive, wants what is best for the community, and can successfully develop an "ecologically friendly" resort added to the existing burden of commercial interests ringing the mountain.

Today's ski industry, unlike the ski areas of earlier rope tow days, takes a heavy toll on mountain resources and beauty. Downhill Slide, a book by Hal Clifford, is a study of the current ski industry. Clifford writes, "Skiing has morphed from a more or less environmentally benign outdoor experience into a destructive, extractive industry." In a chapter titled From Rope Tows to Real Estate, he writes, "... skiing is no longer an end in itself ... ; instead, skiing has been transformed into a come-hither amenity to sell real estate." And later, "The ski industry appears committed to an aggressive spin campaign to portray itself as environmentally friendly in the face of countervailing facts."

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, commenting on ski development in 2000, wrote, "No other land management prescription on the forest directly results in more stream depletion, wetland impacts, air pollution, permanent vegetation change, or permanent habitat loss, including direct and indirect impacts that are permanent, irreversible and irretrievable."

So let's not buy into Mt. Hood Meadows' greenwashing public relations.

The History

I have seen the changes to Mt. Hood myself. In the past I have camped for days at a time in the once-beautiful "Glacier Meadows" that became the Mt. Hood Meadows ski area. I know the damage that has been done.

In the beginning the Forest Service permit for the proposed ski area was carefully drawn to provide strict protection of a very special area of unusual beauty and resource value. There were to be no roads above the base area and no bulldozers on the slope. Much work was to be done by hand. A 1965 article in the Hood River News showed a map where the (one!) proposed lift would be located.

But the public was blindsided by what actually occurred.

In spite of the strict regulations in the Forest Service permit, the developers (the same company that still runs the area) came like a herd of bulls in a china shop. The core of the area was gutted. Bulldozers and chainsaws transformed the land. Forest and meadow were scraped bare and recontoured. Ridges and the face of the mountain were blasted and

reshaped for ski runs. The hydrology was disrupted, streams plugged, wetlands filled. Beautiful, flowered meadows were buried under many feet of fill; acres of parking lots were built; tumbling, flower-bordered streams were replaced by 3,000 feet of culverts; and roads laced the mountainside. Habitat has been fragmented and destroyed, and mountain forest, including high alpine trees, have been clear-cut.

Many of these changes appear to have been done illegally, and much of the damage is "permanent, irreversible and irretrievable."

In 1977, the Regional Forester wrote to Franklin Drake, the (then and now) majority owner of Mt. Hood Meadows, "As you know, the Mt. Hood area is probably the most popular and heavily used area in the Northwest. For many types of outdoor recreation the Mt. Hood area is now being fully utilized and, in some cases, overused." That was more than 25 years ago.

The Present

The damage continues, both at Mt. Hood Meadows and Cooper Spur Ski Areas. Mt. Hood Meadows continues to propose big new projects, and to encourage more overuse.

Mt. Hood is more in need of protection than promotion. I believe it is not in the public interest to continue to promote pouring more people onto Mt. Hood, using mass-market commercialism to hammer the mountain. This is particularly true when support is needed for alternative opportunities for recreation, such as low-intensity, low-impact, back-country sports which leave the mountain in its natural state.

The Cooper Spur Proposals

Northside expansion proposals are outstandingly ill-advised. The north side of Mt. Hood is perhaps the worst choice for a destination resort. The snow is marginal and, except for the already developed practice hill at the Cooper Spur Ski Area, the terrain is poor. The area straddles an important wildlife corridor and habitat area. A resort would seriously impact the traditional and treasured back-country use, the adjacent national wilderness area, and the historic area that includes the Tilly Jane Trail and the Cloud Cap Inn. And the destination resort would necessarily jeopardize the Crystal Springs domestic watershed. It is well to remember that water is the most important resource the mountain provides. A resort, with all its impacts, would place our watershed at risk.

Moreover, we have already a fine destination resort: Hood River, with its great variety of available overnight accommodations, restaurants and retail stores.

In short, there are much better places for job creation and intensive real estate development than on the fragile north slope of already overstressed Mt. Hood.

The Threat

Mt. Hood Meadows' enthusiasm for crowding more people onto our mountain and for real estate speculation appears to have no bounds: an attitude of limitless expansion, a future of never-ending cumulative damage. The pressures of real estate speculation could turn our valley into a collection of 10-acre ranchettes and hobby farms. I believe this is not the vision most people seek—either for Oregon's treasured icon, Mt. Hood, or for our beautiful and bountiful valley.

There is no right way to do the wrong thing!

Kate McCarthy lives in Parkdale.