

THE OREGONIAN

Resort plans hang on watershed boundaries

February 5, 2003

By Alex Pulaski

The Crystal Springs Water District is pushing to exclude 4,282 acres from consideration for a Mount Hood-area golf and ski resort.

Backers of the resort concept say the water district is seeking to protect three times as much land as is warranted.

But the district, which serves about a quarter of Hood River County's 20,500 residents, contends that the acreage is vital to maintaining its water supply's integrity.

"Put all this development up there and you'd have runoff from sewage, herbicides, pesticides, nitrates from fertilizers, chemical spills," said Bob Duddles, the district's superintendent.

Resort opponents say the water issue is particularly relevant given the environmental record of Mt. Hood Meadows Ski Resort. Meadows' owners hope to build stores, restaurants and as many as 450 homes and hotel rooms near Parkdale.

Meadows settled a federal lawsuit in 2000 in which environmental groups recited a litany of transgressions, including blasting, clear-cutting, wetlands filling and 3,000 feet of streambed being diverted into culverts over two decades.

Without admitting wrongdoing, Meadows agreed to pay the environmental groups' legal and technical fees of as much as \$75,000 and construct a variety of improvements in accordance with federal Clean Water Act requirements.

Dave Riley, Mt. Hood Meadows general manager, acknowledged that the ski area had -- like much of the industry -- committed environmental mistakes.

"Admittedly we do things a lot differently now," Riley said, such as erosion control, recycling and revegetation.

On Crystal Springs, Riley said the district's maps had grossly overstated the area that feeds the spring. He pointed to three other mapping studies -- one by a Meadows consultant, one by the state and one by the district itself -- showing that the zone contributing to the spring is about one-third the size the district now says it is.

Riley has asked officials from the state Department of Human Services to meet with Meadows and water district representatives to see whether they can agree on the dimensions of the Crystal Springs watershed. The state, which earlier had mapped a smaller area, has since endorsed the larger boundary proposed by the water district.

The large area defined by the water district includes roughly half of the 1,400 acres Meadows has

leased from the federal government in the Cooper Spur area and nearly all the 620 acres Meadows received from Hood River County in a land exchange in 2001.

While state authorities attempt to broker an agreement on how large the drinking-water protection area should be, it's up to Hood River County to determine what weight to afford the issue in planning for a resort.

Planning commissioners began meeting two weeks ago to consider rules for siting a destination resort on Mount Hood. They will continue taking public testimony at 7:30 tonight at Hood River Middle School.

Commissioners will be key State law sets out a variety of guidelines for such resort planning, including protections for farmland and especially sensitive big-game habitat. It doesn't prohibit a resort from being situated in a public water supply's watershed.

An attorney for the water district appeared before planning commissioners last week, however, urging them to safeguard Crystal Springs by requiring that the resort be constructed outside the watershed. Such a requirement is within the county's discretion.

Mike Benedict, the county's planning and community development director, said staff had not taken a position on the Crystal Springs issue. Benedict said that county options would include addressing Crystal Springs protection in the current planning process, later in conditional use permitting, or not at all.

Several area residents, such as June Halliday of Parkdale, have told planning commissioners that they intend to hold them responsible for protecting Crystal Springs.

Others, such as Jodie Mears, have given testimony that Meadows would take the "utmost care" to protect the environment. Mears did not mention to planning commissioners that she is also Riley's secretary.

Doug Jones, a lands and permits specialist with the U.S. Forest Service, said in a telephone interview that Meadows has made huge strides in recent years -- roughly coinciding with Riley's tenure -- in becoming more environmentally conscious.

"Their bottom line is to make their company viable and profitable, and obviously we don't always have the same long-term objectives as theirs," Jones said. "But we've all done a lot of learning in the last five or six years, and they're much more in tune with where we'd like them to go."

Environmentalists remain incredulous.

Portland attorney Karl G. Anuta, who filed the suit against Meadows that was settled in 2000, noted that the Forest Service was also named as a defendant.

"One of our arguments," Anuta said, "was that the Forest Service couldn't trust what Meadows would say they would do -- and they said they'd just have to take Meadows at their word."

Alex Pulaski: 503-221-8516; alexpulaski@news.oregonian.com