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Backcountry Ski Guiding Permit Sparks Concern

One-year trial permit allows commercial guiding service to lead skiers in portion of Middle Fork

By [Tristan Scott](#) // Dec 31, 2017



The Middle Fork Flathead River. Beacon File Photo

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A flurry of concern has been swirling around the Flathead National Forest's decision to grant a temporary, one-year trial permit allowing a Columbia Falls-based guiding service to lead backcountry ski tours in three drainages of the Middle Fork Flathead River near Essex.

Some of the apprehension centers on safety and wildlife protection, while others have bristled at the prospect of adding recreational pressure in one of the most pristine backcountry zones in the region, a river corridor encompassing portions of the Essex, Dickey and Paola creek drainages flanked by the Great Bear Wilderness and Glacier National Park.

Still others simply want to protect their local powder stashes, but the volume of complaints ringing through the backcountry skiing community prompted forest officials to put some side rails on the permit granted to Glacier Adventure Guides and which runs through March 31.

“We did modify it slightly based on some of the comments of concern we received,” Hungry Horse District Ranger Rob Davies said. “This was permitted on a one-year trial basis to see how it works, not only for us as managers but also for businesses to determine whether this is a viable venture. It is in keeping with a growing national emphasis to explore allowing more recreational opportunities on our national forests.”

Davies, who announced the issuance of the temporary permit in a news release, said he received approximately 15 comments, primarily from backcountry skiers.

Because the permit was issued on a temporary basis, Davies said the U.S. Forest Service does not require a public scoping period or environmental assessment, a point that rankled opponents of the permit application who say the process and subsequent permit lacked public input.

Jerry Croskrey, a longtime landowner in Essex and dedicated backcountry ski enthusiast, said he was dismayed when he learned about the permit on the social media platform Twitter rather than through a more diplomatic scoping process.

“The Middle Fork corridor is some of the best easy access daytrip backcountry skiing around, and does not need the added pressure of commercial guide outfits. With overcrowding comes poor etiquette and safety issues,” he said. “You are inviting people with little or no experience into places that take years to figure out, and with that of course comes experience.”

According to Davies, the permit conforms to standard temporary permit land-use, allowing Glacier Adventure Guides to pay \$600 for 150 user days, with each user day amounting to the equivalent of one person going out skiing in the backcountry for the day — a group of six people, the maximum amount the permit allows, would therefore account for six user days. That is the equivalent of 25 trips, assuming each trip is fully booked.

In response to public comment, Davies said officials reduced the maximum group size down from eight as well as the number of user days down from 200.

“We thought we would reduce the size of the party to try to lessen the perceived crowding,” Davies said. “I haven’t skied every drainage in the Middle Fork, but there are roughly 20 drainages between the boundaries of Glacier National Park and the Great Bear Wilderness, and this permit only allows guiding in three of those drainages. I am not interested in pursuing outfitter interests in wilderness areas. I think the protection of solitude is too important. But this could offer an opportunity to accommodate the growing interest in backcountry skiing and do it safely.”

The permit requires the guides to have completed a Level 2 avalanche training course, Davies said, adding that the guides employed by Glacier Adventure Guides owner Greg Fortin are experienced.

Still, on Dec. 18 a group of conservation groups submitted a formal objection to the temporary permit, listing a host of concerns in a letter to Flathead Forest Supervisor Chip Weber and Regional Forester Leanne Marten.

The groups are: Alliance for the Wild Rockies; Conservation Congress; Friends of the Bitterroot; Friends of the Wild Swan; Idaho Sporting Congress; Speak Up for Wildlife Foundation; Swan View Coalition; and Wilderness Watch.

In the letter, the groups say the permit violates the public involvement process required by the National Environmental Policy Act and the U.S Forest Service Handbook, both of which require scoping to determine potential consequences. The letter also details a “firestorm” of interagency controversy generated by the issuance of the permit, including objections by fisheries and wildlife biologists concerned about potential impacts.

“Without asking for public comment how do we establish if there is a need or if this conflicts with public interest?” wrote Pat Van Emeren, a fisheries biologist with the Flathead National Forest, in an internal email obtained by the objecting groups through a Freedom of Information Act request. “I think there will be a lot of opposition to this and it’s already a done deal ... What I question is how do we issue a permit without public scoping or without internal discussion? ... Conflict with mountain goat winter range? Use of lynx in the area? Or do we really know because we didn’t vet this permit internally? ... Smells worse than a dead fish to me!”

However, Davies said Forest Service regulations and policy are clear on the agency’s authority to grant the one-year temporary permit without scoping or analysis, emphasizing that a long-term permit, if pursued, would be far more stringent and rigorous.

The temporary permit merely serves as a trial balloon to determine if the activity aligns with the mission of the national forest.

That explanation didn’t sit well with Keith Hammer, executive director of Swan View Coalition.

“The whole problem is they didn’t ask for public comment at the outset,” Hammer said. “They left everyone in the dark.”

CORRECTION: Due to inaccurate information conveyed to the Beacon, an earlier version of this article incorrectly identified the Glacier-Two Medicine Alliance as having objected to the permit. The group did not participate in the objection that was filed.