

Lookout eyes \$20M project

Expansion would open new peak, runs, 2 chairlifts

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LOOKOUT PASS - The mountain boasts three chair lifts, 34 named runs and a wide variety of terrain, but Lookout Pass Ski and Recreation Area could get even bigger if a large-scale expansion plan is met with Forest Service approval.

According to president and CEO Phil Edholm, Lookout Pass plans to eventually open a new peak (Peak 2) on the west side of the existing ski area. Several intermediate and expert runs will be cleared, and two additional chairlifts will be erected.

The 20-year, multi-phase project will cost an estimated \$20 million.

Edholm submitted the plan to the Forest Service last March. On Sept. 7, Lookout Pass associates met with Forest Service personnel to discuss the expansion.

“(The Forest Service) wanted to review the logic behind the plan,” Edholm explained.

High on the continental divide, the ski area operates on Forest Service land in both Idaho and Montana. Peak 2 - which rises 6,200 feet above sea level - is located near the St. Regis Basin, a popular area for winter recreationists.

“I’ve spent a lot of time designing the expansion so it does not interfere with the mountaineers and snowmobiling community,” Edholm said. “What we’re trying to do is create an overall Lookout Pass land use plan.”

Kent Wellner, the recreational program manager for the Idaho Panhandle National Forest, said the Forest Service will now gather more information from the skiers, snowmobilers, snowshoers and mountaineers who recreate in the proposed expansion area. Forest Service personnel will meet with groups from Washington, Idaho and Montana, Wellner added, ensuring that users from all three states are represented.

If user groups agree to the plan, the Forest Service’s next step will be a thorough analysis of the expansion under the guidelines of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

“It’s both an internal and external process,” Wellner said. “Any time we affect something on the ground in a national forest, we have to do environmental analysis.”

The NEPA process will allow for public comment, Wellner said.

Every phase of the Lookout Pass plan will require analysis. If the expansion blueprints stand up to NEPA scrutiny, the plan will move forward.

Phase I will involve multiple runs and at least one chair lift on Peak 2 - details are not completely finalized, Wellner said Friday. That phase will cost about \$2 million, Edholm said.

The second peak would offer groomed runs and excellent non-groomed terrain, Edholm said.

“You’re getting into high-quality powder up there,” he added.

The plan calls for an access run off Rainbow Ridge, a popular intermediate track on the Chair 2 side of the mountain. Skiers would cruise down the access route and ride a chair to the summit of Peak 2.

“What we’re proposing now is on the west aspect of our mountain,” Edholm said. “The whole effort is based on the fact that I see a need here.”

Edholm has also explored alternative energy options, he said, including cutting-edge fuel cell technology.