

Group aims to conserve mountain

Save Mt. Spokane Coalition launches Web petition to gather support to fight ski resort's expansion proposal

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A coalition formed to oppose expansion of alpine skiing on Mount Spokane has turned to the Web to enlist the public's help.

The Save Mt. Spokane Coalition has started an online petition that has already shown the potential power of the Internet.

Signatures have been coming from across the country and around the world in the week since the petition was posted on thepetitionsite.com.

While fewer than 100 signatures had been posted early this week, the reach of the Web shows how it can be used to galvanize public opinion.

People who sign the petition can choose whether to have their names disclosed, and they can make comments.

"Mt. Spokane is a beautiful and valuable natural area and should remain as such," wrote Jena Ponti, a former Spokane resident living in Montana. She was the ninth person to sign the petition on July 1, the day the petition was posted.

Mount Spokane 2000, the organization that runs the ski area, is seeking to expand the ski area to acreage on the northwest flank of the mountain, a move its officials said would enhance the length of the ski season; provide better terrain for learners; and improve safety for skiers who currently stray onto the remote section of the mountain.

Brad McQuarrie, manager of the ski area, said the goal is to "provide the public with the best outdoor recreation we can."

But Chris Bachman of the coalition said the expansion would harm wildlife and damage a mature forest that provides an important conservation area. "The main part of this is to keep the habitat that's there pristine," he said, explaining the area is critical for wildlife migration.

The coalition formed last March includes the Upper Columbia River Group of the Sierra Club, the Spokane Mountaineers and the Lands Council in Spokane.

Currently, the undeveloped forest on the northwest flank is used by snowmobile riders on a lower elevation road and cross-country skiers and snowshoe enthusiast on upper trails. "You can't snowshoe across a ski area," said Bachman, who leads youth groups into the area during the winter.

He said Mount Spokane "is an amazing resource to have that close to town," and it's unfair to turn over an undeveloped section of the mountain to the dominance of alpine skiing.

On the Web

To sign or view the Save Mount Spokane petition, go to the organization's Web site at www.savemtspokane.org and follow the link to the petition. For more information on the proposed expansion, go to www.parks.wa.gov/plans/mtspokane/.

McQuarrie said the proposed expansion of the ski area comes after years of study, master planning work and public comment last year. It includes improvements to existing lodges and facilities. He said the state parks system is currently in the middle of an environmental review of the proposed expansion area near Mount Kit Carson on the western flank.

The new ski runs would likely be located at the site of an early-day ski area on the mountain. Remnants of that operation are still located there, and the former ski runs retain some of their gladelike character, although they have been reverting to forest as time goes on, he said.

Older, more mature segments of forest would not be touched in an expansion of the ski area, he said.

The biggest advantage for the ski area is the geography. The 118-acre portion of the northwest flank eyed for ski expansion is not exposed to the sun during fall and winter, allowing snow to accumulate there more quickly and to remain there longer. Access to the earlier snow could help make the ski area financially successful by allowing it to open by Thanksgiving weekend, an unusual occurrence now.

McQuarrie said that in 2005 the ski area had a record short ski season of 29 days, which was half that of other ski areas in the region. "We were forced to take a look at how do we survive on tough snow years," he said.

In addition, the proposal could include a system for manufacturing snow from stored water to create ski paths near lifts at the lower parts of the mountain early in the season.

Expansion would allow for improved terrain for beginners and create a presence by Ski Patrol workers to keep skiers within the ski area. Currently, some skiers descend the western flank and have to be rescued from the woods or retrieved from homes on the north flank. Skier presence on roads used by snowmobile riders also is a hazard that could be controlled better with the expansion.

Once the environmental review is completed over the next year to 18 months, then the proposal will go back before the State Parks and Recreation Commission for approval, McQuarrie said.