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Missoulian OpEd

— By Greg Lind

Lolo Peak

Let's not repeat the mistakes of Snowbasin

A recent front-page article in the Missoulian, Sunday, Oct., 22, featured Bitterroot Resort's chief executive officer Jim Gill (former executive of Breckenridge and Jackson Hole) expounding on the grandiose scheme for Tom Maclay's property and 12,000 acres of adjacent national forest lands. "In this part of Montana, you really need elevation to be successful," Gill said. "Having a lift to the top of Lolo Peak would give Bitterroot Resort the largest vertical drop in North America."

So far, the draft version of the updated forest land management plans for the Lolo and Bitterroot National Forests retain designations that protect Lolo Peak and vicinity as backcountry, recognizing the high values for wildlife and water, for hunting and hiking, and for the protection of a rare larch community of the Carlton Ridge Research Natural Area. The majority of comments on the draft plan opposed allowing development on Lolo Peak. The final forest plans are due out next spring.

But will Maclay and backers—who have already cut ski runs into the private lands and illegally logged on national forest land in the Research Natural Area—accept a final decision if it nixes their grand plan?

The potential for Congress manipulating agency decisions is a real concern, and one with precedent. One decade ago, Congress turned over 1,377 acres of national forest to a Utah ski resort developer by slipping the Snowbasin Land Exchange Bill into an omnibus public lands bill. The land trade also exempted the planned ski development from public review as required by NEPA (the National Environmental Policy Act).

The Snowbasin story begins with a modest family ski area that was purchased in 1984 by Earl Holding (ranked #59th richest American in 2006), then owner of Sinclair Oil, Sun Valley and Little America Hotels. His plans for new lifts, runs, lodges and

condos depended on converting public land, known for superlative cross country ski trails and for its ecological service of safeguarding Ogden's water supply.

After pushing unsuccessfully for large land trades with the Forest Service, Holding saw his opportunity in 1996. As a member of the Salt Lake Olympic Committee, he arranged for several of the 2002 events to be held at Snowbasin. He then convinced Utah Senator Orrin Hatch and Representative Jim Hansen that it was imperative to trade lands to make room for the Olympic events. Utah Senator Bob Bennett secured the last minute passage of the land trade within the omnibus bill. The public received fragmented land parcels in northern Utah, while Holding got 90 percent more land than the Olympic facilities required.

Today, the subsidies and special treatment continue for Snowbasin. Most recently, taxpayers footed the bill for a \$15 million road to serve the four-season resort. Holding is moving forward with building condominiums, vacation homes, and a golf course—the real profits of ski resorts today.

What's the lesson for Montana? Just as in Snowbasin, the Bitterroot Resort backers are counting on privatizing the use of national forest lands to realize highest profits. Former Congressman Pat Williams told the Missoula City Club last January that someone "up high" came to Maclay and asked if he "wanted to slam-dunk this...they'd like to do it for the development," but that Maclay at that point said no.

However, during the upcoming lame duck Congressional session, certain Montana congressmen could easily act on behalf of Bitterroot Resort by forcing the Forest Service to change the land designation. We can't be vigilant enough in our efforts to assure that the future of Lolo Peak reflects a fair process, the will of the public, and values the irreplaceable qualities of roadless lands, wildlife habitat and our water supply.

As a state senator representing parts of Missoula County that include Lolo, I'm concerned for the rights of all constituents, and for the resource. I urge you to write to both Senators Conrad Burns and Max Baucus, as well as Representative Denny Rehberg to let them know we won't stand for any end runs that treat our precious public lands as expendable commercial resources available to the highest bidder.