Steamboat

STEAMBOAT RESORT IMPROVEMENTS PROJECT AND PROJECT-SPECIFIC FOREST PLAN AMENDMENT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

APRIL 2021

USDA Forest Service
Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland
Rocky Mountain Region

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

APE	Area of Potential Effect
BA	Biological Assessment
BE	Biological Evaluation
BEIG	Built Environment Image Guide
BMP	Best Management Practice
CCC	Comfortable Carrying Capacity
CDA	Connected Disturbed Area
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
CFS	Cubic Feet Per Second
CRCT	Colorado River Cutthroat Trout
CWA	Clean Water Act
DAU	Data Analysis Unit
EA	Environmental Assessment
FEIS	Final Environmental Impact Statement
ID Team	Interdisciplinary Team
LAU	Lynx Analysis Unit
MBRTB	Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland
MDP	Master Development Plan
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NFS	National Forest System
NHPA	National Historic Preservation Act
NOPA	Notice of Proposed Action
NRHP	National Register of Historic Places
PDC	Project Design Criteria
PEM	Palustrine Emergent Wetlands
PSS	Palustrine Scrub-Shrub Wetlands
ROD	Record of Decision
SOLC	Species of Local Concern
SSRC	Steamboat Ski and Resort Corporation
SUP	Special Use Permit
US/U.S.	United States
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USFWS	United States Fish and Wildlife Service
VMS	Visual Management System
VQO	Visual Quality Objective
WIZ	Water Influence Zone

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Chapter 1.
Purpose and Need

1.1 BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Steamboat Ski Resort (Steamboat) has submitted a proposal to the United States Forest Service (Forest Service) requesting the analysis and approval of various ski area improvements. The Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland (MBRTB) has prepared this environmental assessment (EA) in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant federal and state laws and regulations. It discloses potential direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental effects on the human and biological environment anticipated to result from implementation of the proposed action. Additionally, it is intended to ensure that planning efforts reflect the opportunities and constraints posed by the immediate and surrounding area and that the project minimizes potential resource conflict.

This EA serves as a summary document; technical reports providing detailed information on each resource analyzed in this EA are summarized within each resource section. These technical reports can be found on the Forest Service *webpage*. This EA also tiers to the analysis and decision presented in the *2018 Steamboat Ski Resort Final EIS* and *Record of Decision* (2018 FEIS/ROD), where appropriate.

The entire project file can be found at the Hahns Peak/Bears Ears Ranger District office of the MBRTB located at 925 Weiss Drive, Steamboat Springs, CO 80487, available upon request.

Steamboat Ski Resort (Steamboat) is owned and operated by Steamboat Ski and Resort Corporation (SSRC). The ski area is located within the City of Steamboat Springs, approximately 110 miles northwest of Denver, Colorado (refer to **Figure 1**). The portion of the ski area on National Forest System (NFS) lands is within the Routt National Forest and managed by the Forest Service under a special use permit (SUP). The portions of the proposed action on NFS lands are located entirely within the existing SUP boundary. All project components are included in the accepted *2019 Steamboat Resort Master Development Plan Amendment* (2019 MDP). The *1998 Routt National Forest Revised Land and Resource Management Plan* (1998 Forest Plan) provides general standards and guidelines for Steamboat's activities and operations on NFS lands (USDA Forest Service 1998). The SUP and associated summer and winter operating plans, as well as other resource management documents, provide more specific guidance for ski area operations and projects.

Figure 1. Vicinity Map

1.2 PURPOSE AND NEED OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

The need for the proposed action is established by the Forest Service's responsibility to respond to proposals to develop, maintain, and revise land use plans on NFS lands under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (*43 U.S. Code § 1712*).

The purpose of Steamboat's proposal is to:

- Support Forest Service permittee and partner in providing winter-based recreation opportunities. This project, along with the 2018 FEIS/ROD, would help increase business resilience to shifts in visitor/guest use and changing/irregular weather patterns.
- Provide a range of winter-resort based opportunities and amenities to forest visitors to the ski area, from beginner to expert.
- Ensure facilities and enhancements align with Steamboat's 2019 MDP.
- Improve access to Sunshine Peak and reduce ingress/egress time to this area.
- Provide for a better managed, yet natural appearing, experience in the Fish Creek area. This would allow qualified skiers and riders to access more advanced terrain and reduce safety and rescue concerns in the Fish Creek area.

1.3 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND IDENTIFICATION OF ISSUES

In July of 2020, a notice of proposed action (NOPA) was mailed to community residents, interested individuals, public agencies, tribal governments, and other organizations. This notice was specifically designed to elicit comments, concerns, and issues pertaining to the proposed action. A legal notice was published on July 9, 2020 in the Laramie Boomerang, the newspaper of record for the MBRTB, announcing the opportunity to comment on the proposed action. A virtual open house was held on July 17, 2020, to provide an opportunity for the public to learn more about the project and ask questions. The comment period closed on August 10, 2020. A total of 81 comment letters were received.

The Forest Service considered the information gathered through this public scoping along with the input of the Forest Service Interdisciplinary Team (ID Team) in identifying specific resources that require in-depth analysis in **Chapter 3** of this EA. Resources and issues that are analyzed in detail in this EA are included in **Table 1**. The issue statements listed below are assessed in greater detail in their respective sections in **Chapter 3**. As discussed in each resource section, project design criteria (PDC) have been incorporated in the design of the proposed action to address the issue statements.

Table 1. Issues Analyzed in Detail

Resource Area	Issue
Recreation	The proposed action would improve skier access, circulation, and facilities for beginner to intermediate skiers in the Sunshine Peak area.
	The proposed action would improve visitor access, egress, and safety for skiers in the Fish Creek area. Skiers who use Fish Creek Canyon as "sidecountry" could be displaced by the proposed action.
	The proposed action could result in seasonal user conflicts, particularly in the Fish Creek area as a result of the egress trail, and elsewhere in Steamboat's existing SUP area during construction of the projects.
	The proposed action would improve mountain operations and efficiency across the ski area by providing reliable and consistent snow coverage in areas of high use, adding capacity to the lift network, facilitating better travel across the resort for visitors, and improving ski trail layout and circulation in key locations.
Scenery	Sunset reflection on gondola windows and night lighting aspects of the proposed action could lower the Visual Quality Objective (VQO) of the area. Warning signs and fencing in the Fish Creek area may be highly visible in view of the trail by summer visitors.
Cultural Resources	Ground disturbing activities associated with implementation of the proposed action have the potential to disturb archaeological resources.
Botany	Sensitive plant species such as the Rabbit Ears gilia could be affected by the proposed action.
	The proposed action could affect hollyhock.
Wildlife	Proposed project components have the potential to impact Canada Lynx.
	Proposed project components have the potential to impact raptors.
Hydrology	Proposed project components have the potential to impact stream health, flow, and riparian vegetation in Priest Creek, Beaver Creek, and Fish Creek.
Soils	Soil disturbance due to vegetation removal and grading may displace organic material and soil surface layers, cause compaction, decreased soil structure and increased erosion and sedimentation potential. Permanent structures would result in increased impermeable surfaces, which may cause increased runoff and higher mass movement potential.
Wetlands	Proposed project components have the potential to impact wetland communities. Overstory vegetation removal and wetland dewater could affect wetland integrity.

Additional resources and issues were considered beyond those included in **Table 1** but were ultimately not carried forward into detailed analysis. The project area is not located within an Inventoried Roadless Area. Additionally, the project area does not contain any Wild and Scenic rivers, Wilderness/ Wilderness Study Areas, prime and unique farmlands, floodplains, or areas of critical environmental concern. Additional resources and issues not carried forward and their rationale are included in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Resources and Issues Not Carried Forward

Resource Area	Issue
Air Quality and Climate Change	The existing condition for air quality and climate change was presented in the 2018 FEIS/ROD. The proposed action would impact air quality and climate change due to short-term construction equipment and lift operation. These impacts are anticipated to be minor and within the effects disclosed in the 2018 FEIS/ROD.
Forest Health, Fire, and Timber	The proposed action would likely require disposal of slash through burning. No meaningful detrimental effects to forest health, fire, or timber management would occur.
Traffic and Parking	The proposed action would likely create a small increase in annual visitation which would generate additional, but negligible, vehicular traffic on roadways. Parking resources would not be meaningfully impacted by the proposed action. These impacts are anticipated to be minor and within the effects disclosed in the 2018 FEIS/ROD.
Socioeconomics	The proposed action would not meaningfully alter employment opportunities and is not anticipated to impact social resources within the community. The project has the possibility to have short-term economic impacts due to construction related activities. The project would also have minimal long-term economic impacts in the context of the overall economic area, as the proposed project could generate additional skier visitation and revenue. These impacts are anticipated to be minor and within the effects disclosed in the 2018 FEIS/ROD.
Environmental Justice	The proposed action would not disproportionately affect low income or minority populations because those portions of populations would still have the same or similar access to public lands and dispersed recreation opportunities

1.4 CONSISTENCY WITH FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL POLICY

As part of this analysis, the proposed action and purpose and need were reviewed to determine consistency with management goals, objectives, and standards and guidelines that are general requirements for the administration of NFS lands as set forth by the *1998 Forest Plan*. For detailed information on management direction established by the *1998 Forest Plan* that is applicable for this project, please refer to pages 2 and 3 of the *NOPA*. This project would be required to adhere to those state and local policies identified in Section 1.11 of the 2018 FEIS/ROD.

Chapter 2.
Description of Alternatives

2.1 PROPOSED ACTION

A detailed description of the individual project components follows. Pending Forest Service approval, Steamboat anticipates that construction could begin during the summer of 2021.

The Steamboat project consists of a variety of terrain and road improvements, lift network improvements, additional snowmaking, and the construction of the Sunshine Restaurant and associated utilities across the Steamboat SUP area (see **Figure 2: Lift, Terrain, and Snowmaking Improvements**, and **Figure 3: Sunshine Restaurant, Utilities, and Associated Infrastructure**). Additionally, a forest plan amendment is being proposed to address project activities proposed in proximity of known active and inactive raptor nest areas. Natural resource considerations (e.g., wetland avoidance and wildlife protection measures) have been accounted for in the planning of this project, and the result is a low-impact design considering the spatial extent of the project. No organized summer use of the projects is proposed: exceptions include necessary maintenance and individual events that would use the Sunshine Peak restaurant and upper Wild Blue Gondola.

2.1.1 Terrain and Road Improvements

The terrain and road improvements would include the following components:

Operational Boundary Adjustment, Egress Trail, and Bridge

Steamboat's operational boundary would be increased by 260 acres to encompass the Fish Creek terrain that is present within Steamboat's SUP area. Currently within the Fish Creek area, skier exit paths are not readily defined and often involve hiking. To create a safer and more efficient path for ski patrol toboggan evacuations and to guide skiers, an approximately 10,400-foot-long and 12-foot-wide groomed egress snow trail would be established. The egress snow trail would begin at Fish Creek, roughly parallel the previously approved but not constructed *Trail F* alignment, cross through areas of previously approved hazard tree removal (approved in the 2018 FEIS/ROD), and cross Burgess Creek via a proposed bridge to connect with the existing BC Skiway. The egress snow trail would require approximately 2.5 acres of adjacent hazard tree removal that was not included in the 2018 FEIS/ROD. Permanent boundary fence, fence posts, and signage may also be installed to define the operational boundary and additional signs and ropes would be installed within the terrain to report hazards and identify best routes.

Modifications to Sundial

Improvements to *Sundial*, including the straightening of the trail to merge better with *Tomahawk*, the widening of the bottom of the trail, and the blasting of large boulders, is proposed concurrent with the installation of snowmaking infrastructure on the trail.

The improvements would widen and smooth the ski trail and make the transition into *Tomahawk* easier for skiers. Approximately 3 acres of ground disturbance would occur from the straightening, widening, and boulder blasting on *Sundial*.

Road Improvements

The Why Not Road and surrounding area is proposed for grading and improvement. The road would be rerouted, and the surrounding area would be graded, flattened, and large boulders would be removed. Additional slope storage, storage buildings, a mechanized gate, and other features may be constructed within the graded area. The activities associated with the Why Not Road improvements may require the rerouting of bike trails, which would be identified during final site design. Approximately 11 acres of land would be disturbed for the Why Not Road improvements.

The Four Points Road is also proposed to be upgraded above the Four Points Lodge to the top terminal of the Storm Peak Express chairlift. The road would be upgraded to a similar condition as the road segment below the Four Points Lodge. The road would be graded and widened and would have large boulders removed, with a focus on improving the existing switchbacks, to improve access for maintenance vehicles. Approximately 1.6 miles of road would be improved. The road would be expanded to be about 15 feet wide and switchbacks would be graded and widened to be approximately 20 feet wide, as necessary. Drainage on the road segment would also be improved. Overall, the road improvement would result in approximately 5.5 acres of ground disturbance.

2.1.2 Lift Network Improvements

The following lift network improvements are proposed:

Upper Wild Blue Gondola

The proposed upper Wild Blue Gondola would extend the previously analyzed Bashor Gondola (now lower Wild Blue Gondola) to the top of Sunshine Peak. The previously analyzed lower Wild Blue Gondola alignment originated in the base area with the top terminal located at the bottom of Bashor Bowl and was located entirely on private land (refer to 2018 FEIS/ROD). This alignment was analyzed as approximately 4,460 feet in length.

The proposed Wild Blue Gondola alignment would follow a similar alignment as the previously approved Bashor Gondola in the 2018 FEIS/ROD. The lower segment would extend from the base area to Bashor Bowl and then to the top of Sunshine Peak near the top terminal of the Sundown Express chairlift. The midstation would be located in the same location as the previously analyzed top Bashor Gondola terminal. Both the upper and lower components of the Wild Blue Gondola would be top drive in design. The proposed upper Wild Blue Gondola alignment would be approximately 11,800 feet in length. Grading would be required at the top terminal to facilitate loading and unloading and skier circulation.

Removal of Priest Creek Chairlift

The Priest Creek chairlift would be removed by removing top and bottom terminals and chairlift towers. Lift towers would be removed from their foundation using a helicopter. The towers would be flown to a staging area located at Rainbow Saddle and driven to the base area using existing mountain roads.

Depending on site-specific conditions, tower and terminal foundations would be abandoned in place or chipped down to grade if determined to obstruct the skiing experience. No additional disturbance would be required as part of the Priest Creek chairlift removal project.

Replacement of Sundown Express Chairlift

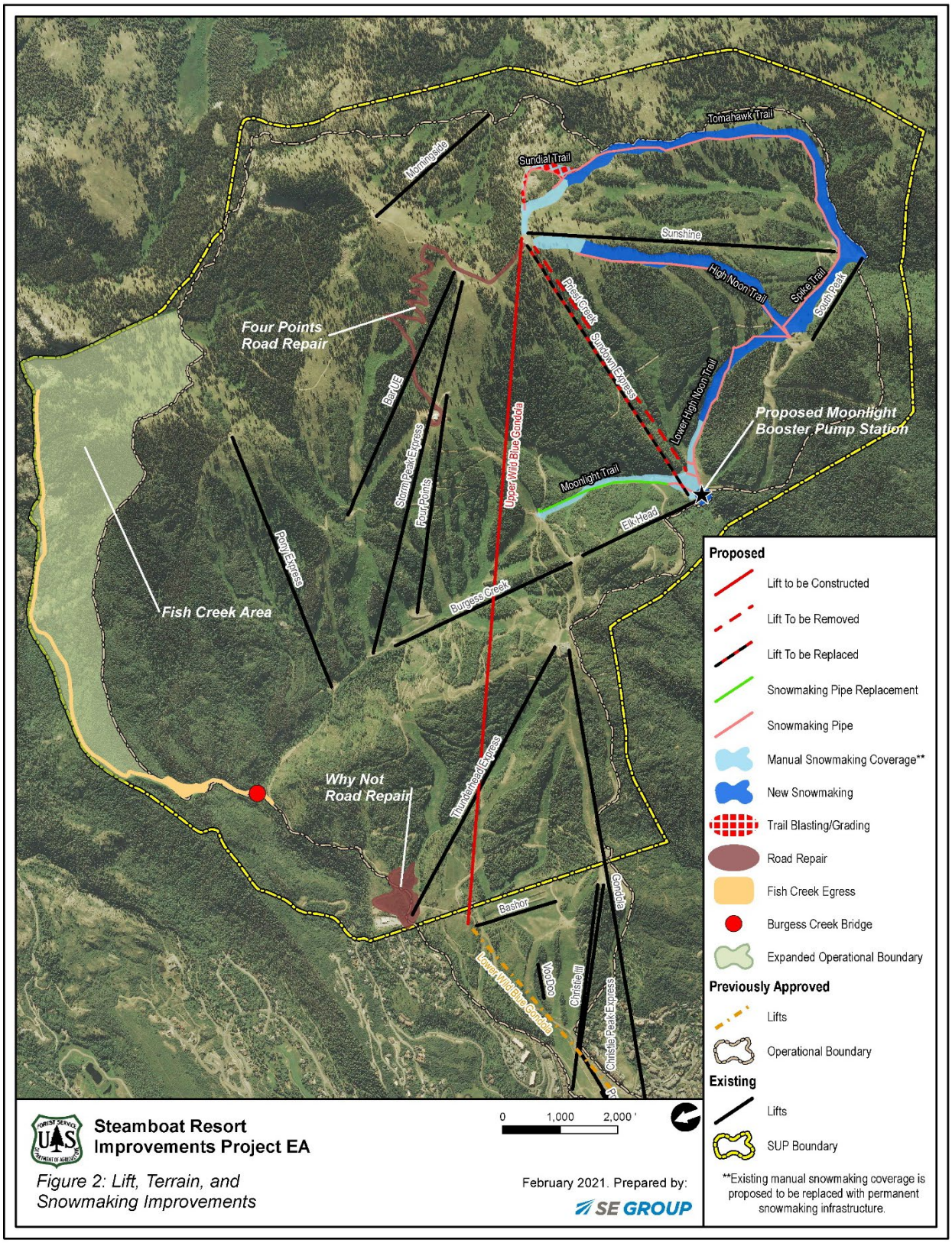
The Sundown Express chairlift would be upgraded from a detachable quad to a detachable six-person chairlift. The top and bottom terminals and the chairlift corridor alignment would remain unchanged. However, the chairlift corridor width would likely be increased by 10 feet depending on the engineering of the upgraded chairlift. Depending on site-specific conditions, tree clearing would only be needed to accommodate the lift aerial corridor and would not necessarily require additional ground disturbance. Existing tower foundations would be used where possible, but several new tower foundation locations may be required, and other existing tower foundations may be abandoned in place.

2.1.3 Sunshine Peak Snowmaking

Approximately 70.3 acres of new snowmaking coverage is proposed in the Sunshine Peak area, with an additional 15 acres planned for permanent snowmaking infrastructure that is currently covered by manual snowmaking techniques and grooming. Snowmaking would occur between October and January and would depend on suitable and stable temperatures as well as seasonal snow coverage needs. Water for snowmaking is obtained from an existing diversion point on the Yampa River approximately 4,000 feet from the base area. Based on preliminary calculations, approximately 59.8 acre-feet of additional water would be required for the expanded snowmaking operations. All water used for snowmaking would be accommodated under SSRC's existing water rights.

Approximately 21,200 linear feet of snowmaking pipeline would be installed for the 70.3 acres of new snowmaking coverage. The pipes are planned on *Upper* and *Lower High Noon*, *Upper* and *Lower Tomahawk*, *Spike*, and *Sundial*. This includes approximately 2,400 feet of snowmaking pipeline to be replaced on *Moonlight*. The diameter of the *Moonlight* snowmaking pipeline would be increased from 6 inches to 8 inches to increase pipe capacity. A booster pump station containing two snowmaking pumps would also be installed on *Moonlight*, adjacent to the base of the Priest Creek chairlift, to provide adequate pressure for snowmaking operations in the Sunshine Peak area.

Figure 2. Lift, Terrain, and Snowmaking Improvements



2.1.4 Sunshine Restaurant

Steamboat proposes to add a restaurant and associated infrastructure—including a sewer system, potable water tank, water supply line, and electricity—to its on-mountain infrastructure. The restaurant would be constructed near the top terminals of the proposed Wild Blue Gondola and the existing Sundown Express chairlift, just east and south of the existing trail sign at Sunshine Peak. The restaurant would offer a seating capacity for approximately 350 guests. Construction of this facility would require grading and ground disturbance for foundation work and access. The restaurant would be approximately 17,000 square feet over two floors and would be similar in footprint to the existing Four Points Lodge. A 40,000-gallon underground fire suppression and potable water tank and propane tank would be constructed alongside the proposed restaurant. If site conditions make underground construction infeasible, the water tank would be constructed above ground and blended with the surrounding environment to the extent possible. Approximately 1.6 acres of ground disturbance would occur as part of the Sunshine Restaurant project.

Following construction of the Sunshine Restaurant, patrol functions currently staged out of the existing Sunshine Peak patrol headquarters facility may be moved into the new building and the existing building would either be used for other functions (such as storage or ready room for avalanche charge assembly) or demolished.

2.1.5 Utilities

At the time of this proposal, two options have been identified to provide sewer and electricity to the proposed Sunshine Restaurant. In addition, two options have been identified for potable water. Feasibility of these options is dependent on civil engineering analysis that would be completed concurrent with or following the NEPA process. These options are described in greater detail below.

Overall, the disturbance associated with the construction of the utilities for the Sunshine Restaurant and the Sunshine Restaurant itself, depending on the options chosen, would range from approximately 12 to 21 acres of ground disturbance.

Potable Water

Potable water would be provided to the Sunshine Restaurant through the construction of the Beaver Creek pumphouse and collection gallery, the expanded Rendezvous potable water storage tank, and feed line connecting the pumphouse, storage tank, and Sunshine Restaurant. The Beaver Creek pumphouse and collection gallery would be constructed adjacent to the bottom terminal of the South Peak chairlift and would be approximately 10 feet by 10 feet, resulting in less than an acre of disturbance.

Currently, the Rendezvous storage tank has the capacity for 55,000 gallons. The expanded Rendezvous storage tank would need to be approximately double the size of the existing tank and would have a capacity of at least 100,000 gallons. The final size of the expanded storage tank would be based on the final size of the Sunshine Restaurant. The construction of the expanded Rendezvous storage tank would result in approximately 0.5 acre of disturbance.

Potable Water Option A would require installation of a potable water pipeline traveling approximately 9,500 feet from

the Beaver Creek pumphouse along *Spike* to the beginning of *High Noon*, where it would travel up *High Noon* to the Rendezvous storage tank and then on to the Sunshine Restaurant. This would result in approximately 11 acres of disturbance.

Potable Water Option B would entail the potable water line traveling through an approximately 7,630-foot-long pipeline starting at the Beaver Creek pumphouse, traveling along *Spike* then up *Fawn* to the Rendezvous water tank and pumphouse, and from there to the Sunshine Restaurant along *High Noon*. This option would result in approximately 9 acres of disturbance.

Sewer and Electricity

Sewer/Electric Option A includes an approximately 5,120-foot-long sewer and electric line that would be trenched southwest of the proposed facility down *High Noon* and tie into the existing sewer and power lines that currently service the Rendezvous Lodge. The disturbance resulting from this option would be approximately 6 acres. However, if Potable Water Option A is utilized for the project (described below), the disturbance from the Sewer/Electric Option A would be entirely within the 11-acre disturbance of this potable water line and no additional disturbance would result. If Potable Water Option B is used for the project, the disturbance from Sewer/Electric Option A would be approximately 1 acre beyond the 9-acre disturbance associated with the Potable Water Option B.

Therefore, while the theoretical disturbance from Sewer/Electric Option A would be 6 acres, the actual disturbance would either a) be incorporated fully into the disturbance from Potable Water Option A; or b) only result in 1 additional acre of disturbance beyond the disturbance from Potable Water Option B.

Sewer/Electric Option B would require an approximately 6,050-foot-long trench containing both sewer and electrical lines that service the existing Four Points Lodge. This trench would travel from the vicinity of the Rainbow water tank southwest of the Four Points Lodge to the Four Points Lodge itself, then would traverse southeast across the *Storm Peak North* and *Storm Peak South* trails to the *Storm Peak Catwalk* and *Traverse* trails to the proposed restaurant. This option would result in approximately 7 acres of disturbance that cannot be combined with other proposed utility corridors.

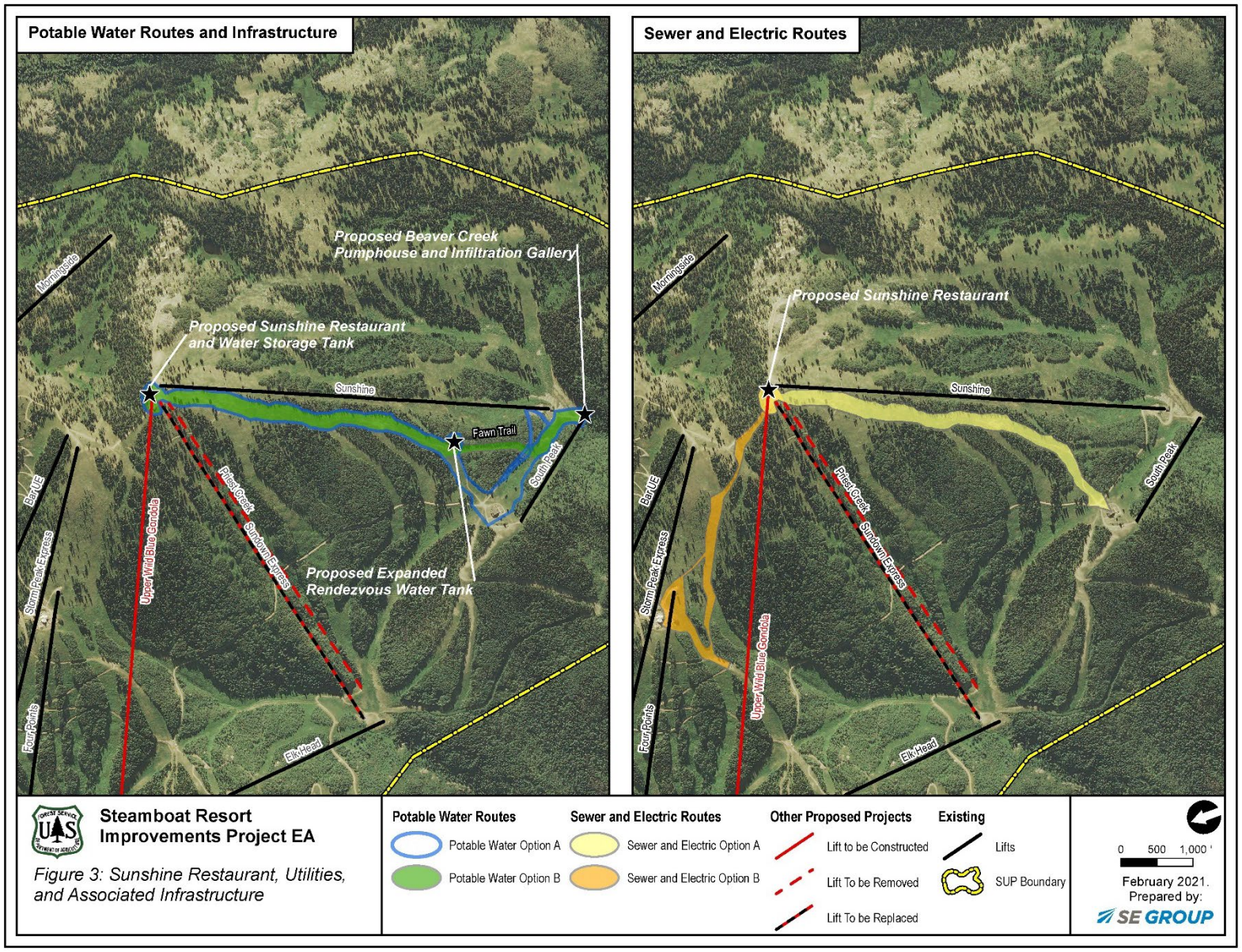
Other Utilities

To improve on-mountain communication and operations, additional power supply lines and fiber optic communication lines are proposed. These lines would be trenched with existing utility lines where possible. Power supply lines would be connected to all new facilities, snowmaking equipment, and chairlift terminals. Power to the midstation of the Wild Blue Gondola would be provided from the nearby existing Thunderhead or Bashor chairlift. Refer to the Sunshine Restaurant and Associated Potable Water and Utilities heading above for a specific description of the power supply provided to the Sunshine Restaurant. Power would be supplied by the Yampa Valley Electric Association, which currently provides electricity to all the base area and on-mountain facilities.

Fiber optic communications would be installed to all new chairlift terminals and the Sunshine Restaurant in order to ensure smooth operations and communications between areas of the mountain. Fiber optic communications to the top of the Sunshine Peak would be provided along the proposed upper Wild Blue Gondola extension.

No additional ground disturbance associated with the power supply and fiber optic communications lines would be required as they would be collocated with the lift lines and other previously described utilities.

Figure 3. Sunshine Restaurant, Utilities, and Associated Infrastructure



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2.1.6 Forest Plan Amendment

The 1998 Forest Plan Threatened, Endangered, Sensitive Species, and Wildlife Standard 6 (Wildlife Standard 6) states that:

> *Protect known active and inactive raptor nest areas. Extent of the protection will be based on proposed management activities, human activities existing before nest establishment, species, topography, vegetative cover, and other factors. A no-disturbance buffer around active nest sites will be required from nest-site selection to fledging (generally March through July). Exceptions may occur when animals are adapted to human activity.*

The proposed action includes activities that would be in proximity of known active and inactive raptor nest areas and construction timing necessary to implement the proposed action would be incompatible with Wildlife Standard 6. Therefore, a forest plan amendment would be required and is included as part of the proposed action. A project-specific forest plan amendment would remove the applicability of this standard during the construction phase of the proposed action for all raptors besides goshawks. If a goshawk is found nesting in an adjacent raptor nest, construction would be paused during the fledging period (April 15-July 31). The amendment would not apply to the operation or maintenance phase of the proposed action, nor to future projects not included in the proposed action. This amendment is similar to the project-specific amendment included in the 2018 FEIS/ROD. Refer to **Appendix A** for additional detail regarding the 1998 Forest Plan amendment.

2.1.7 Project Design Criteria

PDC would be applied to avoid and minimize potential resource impacts from construction and implementation of the proposed action. This list supplements the standard best management practices (BMPs) (USDA Forest Service 2012) and any additional BMPs contained in the *1998 Forest Plan* (USDA Forest Service 1998) that SSRC would be required to prepare for Forest Service review prior to the start of construction and implementation. PDC are identified in **Appendix B**. PDC were developed during resource analysis as well as from public comments submitted in response to the NOPA.

PDC are site- and project-specific design criteria developed through the analysis of the project.

2.2 ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT DISMISSED FROM DETAILED ANALYSIS

The range of alternatives that the Forest Service ID Team considered for this analysis was bound by the purpose and need underlying the proposed action, as well as by the issues which arose from internal and external scoping (detailed in **Section 1.2**). Additional alternatives were considered but were determined to not meet the purpose and need for the project and therefore were eliminated from detailed analysis.

2.2.1 No Action Alternative

The no action alternative provides a baseline for comparing the effects of the action alternatives. It essentially reflects a continuation of existing management practices without changes, additions, or upgrades.

No new infrastructure or other improvements would be approved under the no action alternative. In accordance with *Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, Chapter 40, Section 41.22*, and *36 CFR § 220.7(b)(2)(ii)* this EA will not include an analysis of the no action alternative. Without implementation of the proposed action, Steamboat would not be able to address the shortcomings needed. This would prevent Steamboat from meeting visitors' expectations and desires for a quality ski area.

2.2.2 Other Alternatives Considered

- An alternative with a different gondola alignment (one outside of defined raptor nest areas) than is currently proposed was considered during the development of this document. This alternative was dismissed from detailed analysis because it was determined to be technically infeasible to construct a gondola that had the same loading and unloading points with a different alignment or bends in the alignment. Furthermore, it was determined that inclusion of PDC could adequately minimize impacts to raptors.
- An alternative without the inclusion of the upper Wild Blue Gondola was considered to protect nesting raptors but dismissed from consideration because it would not meet the purpose and need for the project. Without the upper Wild Blue Gondola, Steamboat would not be able to improve access to Sunshine Peak and reduce ingress/egress time to the area. Furthermore, it was determined that inclusion of PDC could adequately minimize impacts to raptors.
- An alternative without the incorporation of the Fish Creek area into SSRC's operational boundary area was considered. It was ultimately dismissed from detailed analysis because this wouldn't meet Steamboat's purpose to provide for a better managed, yet natural appearing, experience in the Fish Creek area. The Fish Creek area is already within SSRC's SUP boundary, is designated Management Area 8.22, and is regularly skied, especially on powder days.
- A variety of modifications to the proposed action were proposed by commenters during the public comment period. These included retaining the Priest Creek lift, replacing the egress trail with previously approved *Trail F* from the 2018 FEIS/ROD, adding E-bikes to the list of allowed uses on trails in the area, and requiring bikes to be allowed on the gondola (USDA Forest Service 2018). These various modifications were dismissed from detailed analysis because they are beyond the scope of the analysis and not related to the purpose and need for the project. In terms of the previously-approved *Trail F*, this trail would not adequately replace the proposed egress trail because it doesn't provide egress out of the Fish Creek area specified in this analysis and it terminates at a lift that is previously-approved but not yet constructed. In addition, *Trail F* has a higher environmental impact (more tree clearing) and a different alignment. The Priest Creek lift cannot be retained because the lift requires frequent (at least annual) and costly maintenance to remain safe to operate due to its age and this maintenance is expected to increase over time.

Chapter 3.
Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

This chapter provides detail on both the biological and human environment as based on the issues identified in **Section 1.3**. Based on an understanding of the proposal, familiarity of the project area and analysis of the issues raised during scoping, the line officer approved the following resources to be considered in detail in this analysis: recreation, scenery, cultural resources, botany, wildlife and fish, hydrology, soils, and wetlands.

3.1 RECREATION

3.1.1 Affected Environment

The scope of this analysis extends to recreational opportunities, with a focus on winter recreation, at Steamboat on NFS lands within the ski area's approximately 3,738-acre SUP boundary, and on adjacent private lands. Together with market demand and growing expectations of the public, the ski area has been continuously upgraded since winter operations commenced in 1963, enabling Steamboat to provide its guests with a wide variety of ski terrain (e.g., developed ski trails, steep chutes, tree skiing) throughout the SUP boundary.

Steamboat's Operational Area

Steamboat's lifts, terrain network, and guest services facilities are contained within their current operational boundary. During the winter season, the primary recreation activity in the operational boundary is skiing. Guest services are offered at a variety of locations across the mountain. Visitation to the ski area fluctuates annually based on snow conditions, market demand, and other factors, but is approximately 925,000 annual visits in the winter and 50,000 visits in the summer (USDA Forest Service 2018). Overall trail density is currently 8 skiers per acre, which is below the industry average of 10 skiers per acre; however, certain areas of the resort (e.g., Christie Peak) are above industry standard (SSRC 2019).

Steamboat offers a variety of developed terrain ranging from beginner to expert terrain with a total developed terrain acreage of approximately 1,364 acres. While SSRC has good terrain distribution for lift-accessed, developed ski trails, there are gaps in the beginner, low intermediate and intermediate ability levels. Refer to Recreation Technical Report for detail on Steamboat's terrain distribution relative to the skier market distribution (USDA Forest Service 2020a). In addition to Steamboat's developed terrain, the ski area also offers extensive undeveloped terrain. This terrain, including the previously approved Pioneer Ridge terrain, totals approximately 1,601 acres.

It is currently challenging for beginner and low intermediate skiers to access different parts of the resort easily, particularly the Sunshine Peak area, and facilities and services like restaurants and restrooms are sometimes far away. Restaurants in the base areas are close to maximum capacity. Inadequate snow coverage during the early and late parts of the season as well as during seasons

with low natural snowfall has resulted in a decreased guest experience as well as safety hazards when coverage is exceptionally poor. The 2018 FEIS/ROD includes additional detail of ski area visitation, skier density, facilities, and terrain distribution for the ski area.

The Why Not Road is located adjacent to the bottom terminal of the Thunderhead Express. During the summer, the Why Not Road is a mountain access road, whereas during the winter, it is a popular beginner ski trail and learning area. This beginner learning area currently has a variety of uneven terrain and can be difficult for lower-level skiers to navigate as they traverse to the Thunderhead Express.

The Four Points Road is a mountain access road that runs from the Four Points Lodge to the summit of Sunshine Peak. It provides access for Steamboat staff and maintenance vehicles to the Sunshine Peak area and the top terminals of the Sundown Express and Priest Creek lifts. The road is currently narrow, particularly around the switchbacks, and large boulders are common. This makes the road difficult to drive in maintenance vehicles.

During the summer and shoulder seasons, Steamboat offers a variety of multi-season recreation opportunities and multi-use trails. These trails include nature paths as well as mountain biking and hiking specific trails and are popular with both visitors to the area and local residents. There are trails built and operated by Steamboat as well as the Forest Service.

Fish Creek Area

The Fish Creek area is within Steamboat's SUP boundary but currently outside the operational boundary and access to this area is not defined. Skier exit paths are not readily defined and often involve hiking. Many skiers use this area as "sidecountry" since it can be accessed from the Steamboat lift network and provides undeveloped and challenging terrain. Because the Fish Creek area is outside of the existing operational boundary, estimates of use in the area vary widely and the 2018 FEIS/ROD identified 50 to 500 users daily, depending on snow conditions. The Fish Creek Falls Trail (National Scenic Trail #1102) runs along the inside of the SUP boundary and receives use from summer and winter recreationists apart from ski area visitation.

3.1.2 Environmental Consequences

All changes to the quality of winter recreational opportunities within the SUP area would be performed with the goal of enhancing the recreation experience for Steamboat and MBRTB visitors. Projects included in the proposed action would improve alpine skiing opportunities through the installation of additional snowmaking infrastructure in the Sunshine Peak area and inclusion of the Fish Creek area into Steamboat's operational boundary. The trail modifications on *Sundial*, construction of the Wild Blue Gondola, and other lift modifications would improve guest circulation to and from the Sunshine Peak area while the Sunshine Restaurant would improve the guest experience within the area. However, the proposed action would displace existing backcountry terrain in the Fish Creek area and construction of the projects could temporarily displace multi-season trail users in the project area. No multiple-use trails or other non-winter activities are proposed.

Further information regarding these impacts is provided below.

Steamboat's Operational Area

Steamboat would continue to operate as a four-season resort, attracting guests in both the winter and summer seasons. The projects proposed in this EA could impact winter recreation visitation; however, any increases in visitation to Steamboat would likely be minimal and within the rates of visitation increase estimated in the 2018 FEIS/ROD. Similarly, the Comfortable Carrying Capacity (CCC) of Steamboat under proposed conditions would be slightly less than the CCC resulting from the projects approved in the 2018 FEIS/ROD; refer to the 2018 FEIS/ROD for a detailed discussion of visitation and CCC.

The proposed projects are anticipated to increase skier density across the resort to 9 skiers per acre. This would still be below the industry average of 10 skiers per acre and reflects a well-balanced trail density across the resort. Some areas outside the scope of the proposed projects (e.g. Christie Peak) would continue to have trail densities above the ski industry average. The proposed upper Wild Blue Gondola would help move beginner and low intermediate skiers more efficiently out of the base area and into the Sunshine Peak area and may help reduce trail density in other parts of the resort.

The proposed action would not impact Steamboat's overall terrain distribution relative to the skier market because there is no developed terrain proposed. Due to minor trail widening, there would be slight changes to beginner/novice and intermediate terrain distribution if the proposed projects are approved. The amount of undeveloped terrain would increase from 1,601 acres to 1,861 with the addition of 260 acres of Fish Creek terrain. Overall terrain distribution would change slightly with the addition of the Fish Creek Canyon terrain and the previously approved Pioneer Ridge gladed terrain and would move closer to the ski industry market percentages for expert/extreme terrain. The added terrain in the Fish Creek area is undeveloped terrain and would not change developed terrain distribution.

The proposed Sunshine Restaurant and associated utilities would provide food service, restroom, and other guest services in the Sunshine Peak area. Visitors would be able to eat, rest, and/or use a restroom without traveling long distances to the Rendezvous or Four Points lodges. This would specifically allow beginner and low intermediate skiers to access guest services without traveling long distances, possibly over advanced terrain or to other areas. This would also reduce visitor pressure on existing on-mountain restaurants and the base areas, particularly on busy days.

The upper Wild Blue Gondola would primarily transport people who have taken the lower Wild Blue Gondola to the top of Bashor Bowl and allow them to access Sunshine Peak terrain directly from Steamboat's base area. This would improve skier access and circulation for beginner and low intermediate skiers by making it easier for skiers to move between the base area, Bashor, and Sunshine Peak. During summer/fall, the upper Wild Blue Gondola would only operate to support events at the restaurant on Sunshine Peak. Summer visitors using the gondola would only be attending events at the restaurant on Sunshine Peak. These users would not access additional outdoor recreation resources such as hiking and mountain biking.

The upgrade of the Sundown Express chairlift to a six-person chairlift would also facilitate better access and circulation in the Sunshine Peak area. The Priest Creek chairlift has reached the end of its expected life and its removal would not impact access or circulation in the Sunshine Peak area if the upgrade of Sundown Express is approved. The chairlift and gondola projects described in the EA represent a modest increase in the number of people accessing ski terrain in these areas; however, it is not expected to increase overall skier density.

The project would improve the snow coverage on *Upper* and *Lower High Noon*, *Upper* and *Lower Tomahawk* and *Sundial* as well as around the terminals for Sunshine, Sundown Express, South Peak and Elk Head lifts. This would improve skiing conditions for visitors arriving on the upper Wild Blue Gondola and the Sunshine and Sundown Express chairlifts. A combination of automated and manual snowmaking infrastructure on Sunshine Peak would be replaced with all automated infrastructure. The new, in-ground equipment would provide better snow coverage over a larger area. Increasing consistent snow coverage in existing high use areas, improving ski terrain grading and layout, and facilities and services at key locations would improve visitor comfort and safety.

The proposed widened and regraded *Sundial* trail would provide an improved turn to merge into *Tomahawk* and would reduce the uneven grade of the trail. The trail would be easier for lower-level skiers to navigate by making the grade more consistent, making the trail wider, and improving visibility at the trail junction.

The proposed Why Not and Four Points Roads improvements would primarily improve access and egress for Steamboat construction and maintenance vehicles to and from their respective areas. Both road reconstructions are intended to better serve existing recreational skiing terrain and would not typically be accessed by visitors. The projects would make it easier for the permittee to provide needed service to existing and new recreational facilities. The Why Not Road grading may affect existing bike trails in the summer. The grading plan would minimize impacts to summer bike trails and is not anticipated to impact the overall mountain biking opportunities on the resort.

Construction of projects would typically occur during the summer/fall season, when weather is more amenable to construction activities. Summer/fall recreation opportunities serve fewer visitors than the winter/spring season. The activities include hiking trails, mountain biking, and riding mountain coasters, and take advantage of the existing terrain and infrastructure in the SUP. Some hiking and mountain biking trails may require rerouting to complete work in the summer/fall. This is particularly true for the regrading and blasting projects on either of the service roads; or on ski terrain used by cyclists and hikers. Construction sites would be secured for the safety of visitors and trails would be rerouted as needed. In the long-term, regrading and vegetation projects would bring summer-use trails into alignment with guidance for Management Area 8.22.

Fish Creek Area

Visitor access and egress to the Fish Creek area from the existing Steamboat operational area would be improved by

incorporating the area into Steamboat's operational boundary. Permanent signage would direct visitors into and out of the area, along with the proposed skier egress route and proposed Burgess Creek bridge. Navigation within the area itself would also be improved due to permanent signage and fencing of hazardous areas. The development of an established egress route and bridge over Burgess Creek would direct skiers back to the main resort area and reduce hazards in crossing the stream.

Use of the area could increase as there would be signage indicating available terrain, but the area would continue to attract mostly expert skiers and would not be directly lift-served, limiting the number of additional guests using the terrain. While visitor use would increase in the Fish Creek Canyon area, the primary effect of changes would be to increase ski patrol access and make visitor access and egress easier.

Effects to current backcountry users would be similar to the impacts to the Pioneer Ridge development discussed in the 2018 FEIS/ROD. It was anticipated that Pioneer Ridge development would contribute to the displacement of approximately 25 to 250 skiers seeking a backcountry experience and a similar, but not greater, displacement would occur under the proposed action. To travel to certain portions of Upper and Lower Fish Creek Canyon and NFS lands beyond the SUP boundary, users would need additional over-snow travel equipment (e.g., climbing skins, snowshoes, etc.) and would be required to exert greater energy to reach these areas. Visitors seeking a sidecountry or backcountry experience would have to travel further outside the SUP boundary.

Impacts of expansion in the Fish Creek area on summer use of the Fish Creek Falls Trail (Trail #1102) would be minimal. An intervening ridge blocks any direct line of site from Trail #1102 to projects in the existing SUP. The proposed egress trail overlaps Trail #1102 in a quarter-mile section between the upper and lower falls; however, the egress route platform is created by grooming snow and selective tree removal. The egress would not create unmanageable scenic impacts because portions of the egress are not visible and other segments would be less apparent because the ski surface would melt. No additional development is proposed in the Fish Creek area beyond the egress trail and Burgess Creek bridge. There would be no designated summer recreational use of the egress trail or unmanaged terrain and use of Trail #1102 would not increase because of the egress. Scenic resources should still achieve a VQO of Modification in the expanded area and only nominal recreation impacts to Trail #1102 would be expected.

The proposed changes to the Fish Creek area would align with *1998 Forest Plan* Management Area 8.22 direction.

3.1.3 Cumulative Effects

Past ski area and County development projects as well as reasonably foreseeable future projects have been incorporated and analyzed in this document as part of the Affected Environment. The following projects could have cumulative impacts on recreation resources:

- 2015 Steamboat Front Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project
- 2016 Buffalo Pass Trails Project
- 2018 FEIS/ROD

- 2019 Steamboat Resort Master Development Plan Amendment
- Hahns Peak/Bears Ears Winter Recreation EA
- Mad Rabbit Trails Project

Past projects have shaped recreational opportunities at Steamboat, primarily bolstering the winter recreation opportunities available within the operational boundary. The 2018 FEIS/ROD included numerous projects that are previously approved but not yet implemented. It is assumed that impacts to the facilities, environmental resources, social setting, and economic impacts would not be noticeably different than conditions predicted in the EIS. In addition, overall capacity of and visitation to Steamboat is anticipated to be similar to the conditions discussed in the 2018 FEIS/ROD, which is anticipated to result in increases of both the capacity of the resort and visitation to the resort.

Physical changes are visible but not highly distinguishable from the existing scenery when observed from nearby towns. Recreational uses and seasons of availability would not change drastically, and recreational options for visitors would be increased in the long-term. Construction could impact summer/fall recreation in the short- and mid-term, but there are far more visitors in the winter season. The upper Wild Blue Gondola would operate on a limited summer schedule, reducing recreation and scenic impacts. The Mad Rabbit Trails Project is outside of the Steamboat SUP and not directly connected to trails within the SUP. Some trails in this and the Buffalo Pass Trails project would be open during summer, when visitation is low at SSRC; and closed during the high-use winter season. For these reasons these trail projects are not expected to cause a lasting increase in visitation in any season of use and there are no anticipated cumulative impacts to mountain bike trails from the projects proposed in this EA.

Beyond Steamboat, and in the broader context of the Yampa River Valley, opportunities for recreational activities are abundant on both private and public lands, including NFS, Routt County, and other municipal lands. Visitors of NFS lands outside of the Steamboat operational boundary are also increasing due to population growth, the natural resources present, and array of dispersed activities that exist in the area. Ongoing projects and visitor management show that this trend is occurring independent of additional recreation being provided at Steamboat. While ongoing projects and visitor management work to mitigate the impacts that fall disproportionately on high use destinations and balance resource impacts with recreational opportunities, it is anticipated that additional visitors to the area could create future challenges for management and mitigation of impacts to high use destinations. The displacement of backcountry and side country skiers in the Fish Creek area could push these users farther out into public lands. Overall, when considered cumulatively with the growing visitation to the greater Steamboat area, it is anticipated that pressure on high use destinations would increase.

Cumulatively, the proposed projects at Steamboat could lead to an increase in use of recreation opportunities on NFS lands and municipally owned lands within Routt County. Given the scale of the proposed projects, this increase is expected to be negligible; however, it is likely that the Forest Service and local

governments and organizations would continue to allocate resources to expand recreational offerings and address the management of existing recreation opportunities in the foreseeable future.

3.2 SCENERY

3.2.1 Affected Environment

Analysis of the scenic environment requires an evaluation of the project area and its ability to absorb the effects of both historic and ongoing human-induced and natural changes. Slope, natural vegetation types and patterns, topography, and viewing distance are important factors in this analysis. The scenic impacts of the proposed changes within the project area are considered in relation to the overall existing development/recreational theme of the resort. The scenic environment on NFS lands is directed by the *1998 Forest Plan*, the *Visual Management System* (VMS), and the *Built Environment Image Guide* (BEIG).

Characteristic Landscape of Steamboat's Operational Area

Development of the lift and trail network, guest service facilities, and infrastructure on NFS and adjacent private lands at Steamboat has occurred over the past several decades, over which time the area has been managed as a developed recreation site. The development of skiable terrain has required tree clearing in densely forested areas. These developments have visually altered the natural patterns of the forest character over time, when viewed from the middle ground distance zone. Mountain roads, facilities, and other developed sites are common across the operational boundary. Thus, recreation contributes heavily to the sense of place and scenery at Steamboat.

The topography of the Steamboat operational boundary area is comprised of moderate slopes, glades, basins, and dense forest. Elevations range from 6,900 feet in the base area up to 10,560 feet at the peak of Mount Werner. The distinctive vegetation patterns typical of cut ski slopes contribute to the scenic character of Steamboat.

Steamboat's architectural character is varied, including elements of rustic Rocky Mountain vernacular in structures that use wood siding, large timbers and stone. Facilities related to lift infrastructure are generally of standard design and dark colors. There is currently extensive lighting on some ski slopes and on infrastructure to support nighttime recreation during the ski season. These lights are visible from the base areas and from the town of Steamboat Springs.

Recreation and scenic opportunities align with the regional and forest goals and objectives of Chapter 1 of the *1998 Forest Plan*. Most of the SUP area is a Heavily Altered Landscape with a network of forested areas interspersed with existing ski terrain of various widths and shapes. These are managed for scenic quality and resistance to disease, fire, and extreme weather. Buildings and infrastructure are visible within the SUP, especially by visitors. The entire SUP area is assigned a VQO of Modification.

Characteristic Landscape of Fish Creek

While the Fish Creek Falls Trail runs through the area, providing a visual disturbance in the foreground, overall, the area is undeveloped, and users can explore the area without encountering any human development. The Fish Creek area is considered a Naturally Evolving

Landscape and the Steamboat SUP area, which includes the Fish Creek area, is assigned a VQO of Modification.

3.2.2 Environmental Consequences

Characteristic Landscape of Steamboat's Operational Area

As seen from the Steamboat base area and base areas for other chairlifts and gondolas, the Steamboat landscape is already a network of various highly managed ski terrain and intervening forest vegetation crisscrossed by several lifts and gondolas. The upper Wild Blue Gondola would result in an additional lift on the landscape; however, the scenic impact of this additional lift would be minimal given the existing development present. The replacement of the Sundown Express chairlift would include minor widening of the chairlift corridor that would likely be indistinguishable from the existing corridor. In addition, the Priest Creek chairlift and associated features would be removed, decreasing scenic impacts in this area. Any new construction would match the colors and reflectivity levels of previously approved infrastructure.

Snowmaking pipe and other infrastructure installed for snowmaking would occur in previously cleared areas. Ground disturbance for the snowmaking pipe would be temporary and revegetated afterwards and there would be minimal long-term scenic impacts from the snowmaking pipes. Other infrastructure, including the Moonlight pump station and other above-ground infrastructure, would be visible in the foreground but would not be visually different from other areas within the operational boundary. In addition, the siting and screening of permanent/in-ground infrastructure would make it less visually intrusive to visitors than the manual snowmaking activities.

The construction of the Sunshine Restaurant would add a building to Sunshine Peak. This building may be visible from other areas of the Steamboat operational boundary but is in line with expected infrastructure at the ski resort. The Sunshine Restaurant would be designed to comply with the existing siting and design character of Steamboat, which aligns with Forest Service recommendations for the Rocky Mountain Province per the BEIG. The sewer or electrical piping for the new restaurant would be in existing trenches or in new trenches created in existing ski runs. The recreation setting would remain the same and the ground disturbance for the piping would be in previously disturbed areas and would be revegetated afterwards. The proposed Beaver Creek pump station and Rendezvous water storage tank would include permanent structures and would incrementally add to the developed nature of the Sunshine Peak area; however, the majority of visitors would see this infrastructure at the middle ground and background views, and it would only be minimally visible at these distances, reducing the scenic impacts to visitors overall.

The *Sundial* trail, Why Not Road, and Four Points Road improvements would all occur in landscapes that are already disturbed. Minimal widening of the existing ski trail and road corridors would occur but would be similar to existing conditions. Surface cover would be similar to existing conditions in all three areas, as the widened section of ski trail would be revegetated, and the widened areas of the roads would be gravel/dirt surface. The addition of storage capacity on Why Not Road could allow

for maintenance facilities on the landscape; these would be constructed to match the appearance and siting of existing similar facilities. Overall, the visual disturbance of these project components would be minimal in the context of the developed nature of the area.

The projects would minimally add to the nighttime lights that exist in the operational boundary, as the Sunshine Restaurant would have lights that would be visible at night and other project components would be lit as necessary for safety purposes. Reflectivity would be addressed by using nonreflective finishes and dark colors that comply with the 2019 MDP and Forest Service guidance. The impact of additional lighting and reflective surfaces would be nominal and would not be noticeable to the casual observer.

During the summer, construction work and associated equipment and staging would be highly visible. Overall, the project components would likely allow the scenic resource to comply with a VQO of Modification in both the short and long term.

Characteristic Landscape of Fish Creek

The Fish Creek area is considered a pristine landscape. The area is not visible from the Steamboat base area or the city of Steamboat Springs and there is limited visibility from the top of the Pony Express lift. Less than one percent of the newly accessed area would have tree removal. The new trail and its borders would be constructed to reduce visual impacts inside and outside the egress pathway. The appearance and colors used in fencing and signage would balance need for visibility with desire to limit scenic impacts. Because this is advanced terrain that would only be accessed by skilled skiers and/or skiers with guides, scenic impacts to users of the area would be limited due to the low number of people in the area.

During the non-winter seasons, the ski area projects in the existing SUP would not be directly visible to people hiking to Fish Creek Falls and beyond along Trail #1102 because of intervening ridge lines. The ski egress would be highly visible in a quarter-mile section between the upper and lower falls where the egress route overlaps Trail #1102; however, the egress route platform is created by grooming snow and selective tree removal. Scenic impacts of the egress route should allow the scenic resource to still achieve a VQO of Modification. The Burgess Creek bridge may be visible from nearby communities; it would be constructed according to BEIG guidelines and would comply with a VQO of Modification.

3.2.3 Cumulative Effects

In combination with previously analyzed and approved and/or unimplemented projects that are reasonably foreseeable, and past projects that have been implemented at Steamboat, the proposed projects would contribute incrementally to the modified nature of the area and could further detract from the natural character of scenery resources as viewed from within the Steamboat operational boundary and adjacent NFS and private lands. These changes could take the form of additional built infrastructure, overstory vegetation clearing, and tree stand thinning.

Steamboat has been upgraded and expanded since its inception as a ski area, adding chairlifts, new and improved ski terrain, snowmaking, parking, and lodge facilities. When considered cumulatively with the

projects analyzed in this EA, these previously-implemented projects have the potential to affect the VQO of the area within Steamboat operational boundary. Changes in vegetative pattern and the construction of developed facilities are visible from private and NFS lands within and surrounding the operational boundary.

The 2019 MDP includes projects that are not included in the proposed action. As these projects were identified by Steamboat and accepted by the Forest Service, they are considered here as reasonably foreseeable future projects. These projects include various new and upgraded lifts, trail improvements, and updates and expansions to guest services and associated facilities. These projects, if approved and/or implemented, have the potential to further impact characteristic landscape within the Steamboat operational boundary.

The cumulative scenic impact of the proposed EA and any past, current or reasonably foreseeable future projects should not cause Steamboat to fall outside guidelines for scenery in Management Area 8.22. Projects have been and would continue to be planned to comply with the forest plan guidance for Management Area 8.22 from the start. Project areas should achieve a VQO of Modification within three years. Other portions of the MBRTB would continue to be managed to provide and protect other uses such as habitat, dispersed recreation, and forest goods. As previously discussed, the *1998 Forest Plan* includes mechanisms for the management of scenic resources forest-wide. While the *1998 Forest Plan* includes numerous management prescriptions that could impact scenic resources across the Routt National Forest, the application of 1998 Forest Plan standards and guidelines would ensure that scenic quality is maintained or improved.

3.3 CULTURAL RESOURCES

This cultural resource assessment is mandated by the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). Section 106 of the NHPA requires that federal agencies take into account the effects of a federal undertaking on any cultural resource that is included in or eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). NRHP eligibility is evaluated for its integrity of the resource, its significance in the historical context, or its overall value in terms of engineering, artistic, architectural, or informational. The MBRTB determines the impact to the cultural resources based on the resource's NRHP eligibility and then requests concurrence from the State Historic Preservation Officer on that impact, according to the *36 CFR Part 800* implementing regulations of the NHPA.

Metcalf Archaeological Consultants (Metcalf) prepared the Class III Cultural Resources Inventory for Steamboat Ski Area's 2020 Proposed Developments, Routt County, Colorado, which is summarized in this analysis and a redacted version contained in the project file (Metcalf 2020).

3.3.1 Affected Environment

A Class I archaeological inventory for the project area was completed in July 2019. This literature search utilized the Colorado Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation sites and survey records (Compass), the MBRTB cultural resource data, and General Land Office plat maps. A total of 20 previously recorded resources within one mile of the project area were identified; however, none intersect the current

project area. Site types include prehistoric lithic scatters and a quarry; and historic trails and recreation-related structures, cabins, mining-related resources, and a ditch. Fourteen resources are recommended not NRHP eligible, two are NRHP eligible, and four do not have eligibility listed in their records.

A Class III pedestrian survey totaling 271.3 acres was also conducted for the above sites as well as previously unidentified sites in August 2019. Two previously record sites were revisited during inventory and confirmed they were outside of the Area of Potential Effect (APE). A new segment of the previously recorded site 5RT.530 (the Fish Creek Falls Trail) and one historic isolated find (a probable sheepherder dendroglyph) were identified.

Site 5RT.530.1 is part of the Fish Creek Falls Trail #1102, a standard multi-use recreation trail built and maintained by the Forest Service for recreation on NFS lands. The newly recorded segment is located along the steep southern slope of Fish Creek on the northern flank of Mount Werner. The existing site is currently listed as eligible under Criteria A and C for the NRHP with concurrence from the Colorado Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation; and the newly recorded segment (5RT.530.1) is recommended as contributing to that eligibility as it retains all aspects of integrity and also meets Criterion A of the NRHP.

The historic isolated find (5RT.3592) is a probable sheepherder dendroglyph located on an aspen tree. No other information or artifacts were found in association with the dendroglyph. It is recommended as not eligible for inclusion in the NRHP.

3.3.2 Environmental Consequences

Impacts to cultural resources from the proposed action include the potential alteration or destruction of artifacts or cultural features on the surface, as well as damage to site soil matrices and depositional strata. There is also potential for ground disturbance in the form of vehicles, personnel, and other equipment used to implement the proposed action. These forms of disturbance could alter surface cultural resources, shallow subsurface cultural resources, or even resources as deep as 5 feet below the ground surface.

During the Class III cultural resource inventory, 2 sites of various sources were identified: one new segment of a previously recorded site and one historic isolated find. The proposed action includes the Fish Creek egress route, which would follow the path of the newly recorded site 5RT.530.1. Although the newly recorded linear segment follows only a small portion of the overall egress trail, it is recommended eligible to the NRHP. Only select tree removal and no grading or new development would occur along the egress trail within the site location; there would be no adverse effects to the site. Therefore, a recommendation of no historic properties affected was made for the project as currently defined. In a letter dated November 11, 2020, the State Historic Preservation Office concurred with this determination.

If any cultural resources are identified during project implementation, procedures described by the NHPA, Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act, and the MBRTB would be followed to ensure adequate protection of the discovered resource.

3.3.3 Cumulative Effects

The proposed action, when combined with other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions at Steamboat (including the 2019 MDP), could alter the cultural resources within the project area. However, since the implementation of the projects within the proposed action was determined to have no effect on known NRHP listed or eligible historic properties, no cumulative impacts to cultural resources are possible.

3.4 BOTANY

This analysis centers around the species listed by the Regional Forester as sensitive as described in the Botanical Biological Evaluation (BE) (Western Bionomics 2020a). As discussed in the Biological Assessment (BA), there were no federally listed plan species identified by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) *Information for Planning and Conservation* website as potentially occurring or being affected by the projects (Western Bionomics 2020b). Therefore, federally listed plant species are dismissed from detailed analysis. Refer to **Section 1.3** for a full list of resources that have been dismissed from detailed analysis. Both the BA and BE are available for review on the *project website*.

3.4.1 Affected Environment

Based on documented habitat affinities, eleven species were determined to have potential habitat in the project areas. However, during field surveys that occurred between July and September of 2019, only one species was found within the project area: Rabbit Ears gilia. In addition, several occurrences of hollyhock, a Species of Local Concern (SOLC), were identified. No other sensitive species were observed or are suspected to occur in areas affected by the proposed project. Therefore, all other sensitive plant species and SOLC were dismissed from detailed analysis.

Rabbit Ears Gilia

Rabbit Ears gilia is endemic to Colorado and can be found in openings in coniferous forest slopes, which occur throughout the project area. They have been reported along road cuts and in semi-disturbed roadside areas, indicating that the species is tolerant of disturbance or is capable of recolonizing disturbed sites (Fertig 1999). Multiple occurrences of Rabbit Ears gilia have been previously identified in the project area and newly discovered occupied habitat for the species was identified during field surveys. Five separate occurrences were found occupying approximately 14 acres of grass/forb plant communities. Each occurrence contained between 100 and 1,000 individuals.

Hollyhock

The botanical survey identified five occurrences of hollyhock in the area adjacent to the Why Not Road repair. Several individuals are located at each occurrence, resulting in approximately 30 individual plants occupying 0.1 acre of land.

3.4.2 Environmental Consequences

Rabbit Ears Gilia

Of the 14 acres of occupied Rabbit Ears gilia habitat, the proposed action would result in approximately 2.53 acres of direct, temporary disturbance. The 2.53 acres of temporary impact includes 0.63 acre for the *Sundial* improvements, 0.78 acre for the *Tomahawk* snowmaking line, and 1.11 acres for Sunshine Restaurant Potable Water Option A. Temporary

impacts involve grading activities that would later be reclaimed. It is anticipated that Rabbit Ears gilia plants would recolonize these areas following disturbance and reclamation and these impacts represent a temporary loss of occupied habitat. In addition, a PDC has been included in the proposed action to require the acreage of Rabbit Ears gilia directly impacted be replaced in-kind within the Routt National Forest.

Indirect effects to Rabbit Ears gilia also have the potential to occur as a result of the proposed action. Adverse indirect effects could potentially include noxious weed invasion, altered hydrologic patterns, erosion, or sedimentation. This could impact individuals, who may die or show reduced growth and reproduction. PDC outlined in **Appendix B**, including the in-kind replacement of any Rabbit Ears gilia directly impacted, would be implemented to avoid or lessen the magnitude of any potential indirect effects to this species. Overall, multiple occurrences of Rabbit Ears gilia occur across the project area and throughout the MBRTB. While the proposed action could temporarily reduce the overall extent of the population, the projects would not eliminate any of these occurrences in their entirety. Furthermore, there are likely numerous other, yet undocumented occurrences of this plant in the general vicinity.

The direct and indirect impacts associated with the proposed action are expected to adversely impact occupied habitat of Rabbit Ears gilia within the Steamboat SUP area. When combined with other cumulative impacts across the MBRTB, there are potential viability concerns for Rabbit Ears gilia forest-wide. However, with implementation of PDC, the proposed action **may adversely impact individuals, but is not likely to result in a loss of viability in the Planning Area, nor cause a trend toward federal listing**.

Hollyhock

Under the proposed action, installation of the Wild Blue Gondola may directly impact individual hollyhocks and/or hollyhock habitat if lift towers require placement on top of occupied habitat. The project would permanently impact 0.1 acre of hollyhock habitat through installation of gondola towers. Efforts to avoid occupied habitat would be attempted when siting lift towers; however, it is possible that the design features of the gondola would require impacting occupied habitat.

The hollyhock occurrences are located adjacent to existing disturbed sites: a bike trail, a hiking trail, and the Why Not Road. Ongoing summer recreation does pose a threat to these occurrences; however, each occurrence is located in a place where the forest canopy was substantially cleared for trail construction. The increased sunlight penetration to the forest floor that resulted from clearing for the two trails is likely the mechanism by which the population became established. Overstory vegetation removal associated with clearing the gondola alignment may create additional habitat suitable for colonization by hollyhock under the more open canopy condition, potentially offsetting the impact to occupied habitat.

3.4.3 Cumulative Effects

The temporary loss of 2.53 acres of Rabbit Ear's gilia habitat and permanent loss of 0.1 acre of hollyhock habitat, when combined with other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions at Steamboat, could alter

occurrences and habitats for Rabbit Ears gilia and hollyhock. Examples of these other actions include past project development, ski trail clearing, motorized and non-motorized recreational use, road and trail building and maintenance, insect and disease outbreaks, fire suppression, road construction, urban development, noxious weed infestation, and ditch construction. Combined with other individual losses throughout the MBRTB and given that this species is geographically restricted (Ladyman 2004), any negative impacts at the population level could potentially affect viability over the entire MBRTB. However, conservation measures implemented to reduce, mitigate, or completely avoid impacts to these species on this project and projects across the MBRTB would lessen the cumulative effects to these species.

3.5 WILDLIFE AND FISHERIES

The following wildlife and fish analysis is a summary of the technical analyses contained in the BA and Wildlife BE prepared specifically for this project (Western Bionomics 2020b; Western Bionomics 2020c).

3.5.1 Affected Environment

Federally listed Species

Federally threatened, endangered, and proposed terrestrial and aquatic wildlife species that may occur or could potentially be affected by the proposed action are analyzed in the BA. The following discussion summarizes information specific to upper Colorado River fish and Canada lynx.

Upper Colorado River Fish

The Upper Colorado River Basin is home to the USFWS-listed endangered humpback chub, bonytail chub, Colorado pikeminnow, and razorback sucker. These fish are found only in the Colorado River system. None of the four endangered fish are found any closer to the project than the lower Yampa River near Dinosaur National Monument, Colorado; however, activities resulting in water depletions in the Upper Colorado River Basin may impact the continued survival of the four endangered fish (USFWS 1999). Steamboat currently uses 85 acre-feet of water depletions, which is within the 91.7 acre-feet of water that was approved by the USFWS in 2006 (Western Bionomics 2020b). There currently remains 7 acre-feet of depletions before consultation with the USFWS would be required for new depletions.

Canada Lynx

In the southern Rocky Mountains, lynx are predominately found above 8,000 feet in Engelmann spruce, subalpine fir, and lodgepole pine forests and typically avoid alpine ecosystems, particularly in the winter. Lynx Analysis Units (LAUs) approximate the size of an area used by an individual lynx and are the scale at which the effects of management activities are evaluated for lynx. The Steamboat SUP area is located within the Mount Werner LAU, which is approximately 54,759 acres in size. Approximately 90% of this LAU is considered suitable lynx habitat.

Across the managed portion of the SUP area within the Mount Werner LAU, effective lynx habitat has been fragmented by ski trail development; however suitable forested areas remain between ski trails that may be used by lynx while traveling. The majority of forest stands within the managed portion of the SUP area are skied throughout the winter. As a result of the disturbance by skiers, most stands are not likely to provide

habitat suitable to meet life requisites for lynx or hares.

Steamboat is unique among Colorado ski areas in that the summit of Mount Werner is located below timberline. As consequence, lynx habitat surrounds the SUP area on the north, east, and south. A traveling lynx can navigate around the ski area without the necessity of crossing extensive alpine areas, as is typical of many other Colorado ski areas. In this area, lynx are most likely to move through the spruce-fir, mixed conifer, and lodgepole pine zones.

Forest Service Sensitive Species

Forest Service sensitive species are summarized in the BE. The following discussion summarizes information specific to northern goshawk and Colorado River cutthroat trout (CRCT).

Northern Goshawk

Northern goshawks are addressed separately from other raptors in this analysis because northern goshawks are included on the RFSS list, and the proposed action includes activities in suitable goshawk nesting habitat and in proximity to known active and inactive raptor nest areas. On the Routt National Forest, goshawks often construct their nests in either lodgepole pines or aspens. They typically forage beneath the canopy of conifer and aspen forest communities. Wildlife personnel on the MBRTB have conducted detection surveys for goshawks annually since 1990. The results of these 30 years of goshawk nest surveys suggest a declining trend for goshawks on the MBRTB related to the declining mountain pine beetle epidemic (Western Bionomics 2017).

A variety of raptor nests have been identified in the project area (refer to the separate discussion of other raptors); these nests exhibit attributes suggesting that they were built by goshawks or other accipiters but they have not been used by goshawks themselves since monitoring began in 1995.

Colorado River Cutthroat Trout

The CRCT historically occupied portions of the Colorado River drainage in Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico (Behnke 1992). Now remaining populations occur mostly in headwater streams and lakes. The distribution and abundance of CRCT has declined (Young 2008). CRCT do exist within Burgess Creek but have not been found elsewhere in the SUP area (Western Bionomics 2020c).

Other Sensitive Species Considered in the Analysis

The following species were also considered in the analysis: hoary bat; American marten, pygmy shrew, boreal owl, olive-sided flycatcher, flammulated owl, and western bumblebee. The habitat and any indication of presence in the project area for each species is provided in the BE; please refer to the BE for additional information on species habitat and population trends in the project area.

Species of Local Concern

SOLC are described in the BE. Wildlife described as SOLC were identified during scoping process for the project as requiring specific analysis, but are not included on other lists, such as sensitive, threatened, endangered, proposed, or MBRTB Management Indicator Species.

Raptors

Other raptors aside from goshawks have the potential to occur within the project area. Since the MBRTB began recording locations of known nests in 1990, 7 nests have been identified within the

Steamboat SUP area. Nests 1 and 2 have fallen; Nests 3 – 5 are located within the Pioneer Ridge portion of the SUP area; and Nests 6 and 7 are located near the proposed upper Wild Blue Gondola alignment (Western Bionomics 2017).

During the winter of 2017/18, Nest 6 was first observed by Forest Service personnel adjacent to the *Lower Concentration* ski trail. It was observed in 2018 to be used by red-tailed hawks with three nestlings, and again in 2020 by redtail hawks that successfully fledged 3 juveniles. This nest is within 300 feet of the proposed upper Wild Blue Gondola alignment. Nest 7 was identified by Forest Service personnel during the winter of 2020. This nest is located between the proposed mid-station and top terminal of the Wild Blue Gondola and was observed directly beneath the proposed gondola alignment. Although this nest was not observed during the 2019 tape callback surveys, it may have existed at the time of the survey and been obscured by foliage during the survey. Nests 6 and 7 are considered one nest area, referred to as the Concentration-Vagabond nest area. A response was not elicited from Nest 7 during surveys in 2019 in the vicinity of the Concentration-Vagabond nest area, indicating it was unoccupied. As Nest 6 was active in 2020 and the distance between Nest 6 and Nest 7 is only 0.27 mile, it is highly unlikely both nests would be occupied at the same time as raptors are generally not tolerant of close nesting by other raptors (Palmer 1998; Bosakowski et al 1996). Refer to the Wildlife BE for additional detail on raptor nesting patterns.

Elk

CPW estimates elk herd populations and sets management objectives at the scale of "Data Analysis Units" (DAUs). The Steamboat SUP area is located within DAU E-2 (Bears Ears Herd), which encompasses portions of Moffat and Routt counties and is bounded on the north by the state line, the west by the Little Snake River, the south by the Yampa River, Colorado Highway 318, and U.S. Highway 40, and on the east by the Continental Divide (CDOW 2008). The most current post-hunt population data estimates the population within E-2 at 22,910 (CPW 2015a). The population objective is 15,000-18,000 animals, thus the DAU is slightly above the population objective.

Evidence of elk utilization is apparent throughout the SUP area. The entirety of the project area is mapped by CPW as summer range while the northwestern and southern portions of the SUP area are mapped as production range. However, surveys during the calving season in 2017 and 2018 did not detect the presence of any calving activity.

Moose

Moose can be found in sagebrush, high in the mountains above timberline, as well in the more traditional willow, aspen, pine, and beaver pond-type habitats. However, they are most likely to live in riparian habitats with willows, which is their primary food source. Colorado's moose population is currently estimated at 2,550 animals statewide (Western Bionomics 2020c).

Similar to other game animals, CPW estimates moose herd populations and sets management objectives at the scale of DAUs. The Steamboat SUP Area is located within DAU M-3 (the "Gore Moose" unit; CDOW 1995). This DAU encompasses Game Management Units 14 and 15 in Routt County, all of Grand and Summit Counties, and a portion of Eagle County. The 2014 post hunt population estimate for DAU M-3 is 370

(CPW 2015b). Evidence of moose utilization is apparent as pellet piles and anecdotal observations throughout the southern and northern portions of the SUP Area, and several moose (bulls, cows, & calves) were observed during field surveys. The entire ski area is located within a large area mapped by CPW as moose summer range. The lower portions of the Burgess Creek drainage, and to a lesser extent the lower elevation SUP area, are mapped as winter range.

3.5.2 Environmental Consequences

Overall, the proposed action would be consistent with all relevant direction provided by the *1998 Forest Plan*, the *Southern Rockies Lynx Management Direction*, and *Forest Service Manual 2670.32*.

Federally Listed Species

Upper Colorado River Fish

The construction of the Sunshine Restaurant and installation of additional snowmaking infrastructure would increase water depletions within the Yampa River watershed, negatively impacting the four upper Colorado River fish. Approximately 13.9 acre-feet of new depletions in the Yampa River watershed are proposed under the project (13.8 acre-feet associated with the proposed snowmaking and 0.1 acre-feet associated with the Sunshine Peak Restaurant). Refer to **Section 3.6** for additional detail on water depletions associated with the proposed action.

The grand total for Steamboat's depletions would increase to 98.9 acre-feet, which would be greater than the 91.7 acre-feet that was approved by USFWS in 2006. Therefore, Steamboat would be required to undergo additional Section 7 consultation with USFWS for 7.2 acre-feet of new depletions over the previously approved 91.7 acre-feet. As the total increased water usage would result in an increase of depletion of water within the Yampa River watershed, the proposed actions and existing actions at Steamboat would **adversely affect** the four big river endangered fish (Colorado pikeminnow, Razorback Sucker, Humpback Chub, and Bonytail Chub). Section 7 consultation with the USFWS is in progress; a summary of this consultation and the USFWS's Biological Opinion will be included in the final decision notice.

On January 10, 2005, the USFWS issued the final programmatic biological opinion on the Management Plan for Endangered Fishes in the Yampa River Basin. Water depletions less than 100 AF/year fit under the umbrella of the Yampa River programmatic biological opinion. With implementation of the Recovery Action Plan elements the adverse effects are not likely to jeopardize the big river fish or adversely modify their designated critical habitats.

Canada Lynx

The proposed action would have adverse consequences on 21.14 acres of lynx habitat, as disclosed in **Table 3** below. Implementation of the proposed action would affect 7.25 acres of primary lynx habitat, 12.88 acres of secondary lynx habitat, and 1.01 acres of currently unsuitable lynx habitat. Direct impacts on lynx habitat from the proposed action would be below one percent of lynx habitat within the Mount Werner LAU.

Table 3. Lynx Habitat Impacts

Project	Impacts to Primary Habitat (acres)	Impacts to Secondary Habitat (acres)	Impacts to Currently Unsuitable Habitat (acres)	Total
Facilities	0.70	0.39	-	1.10
Burgess Creek Bridge	0.92	0.38	-	1.30
Fish Creek Egress Route	1.96	2.84	-	4.80
Why Not Road Grading	-	3.61	-	3.61
Sundown Express	-	0.73	-	0.73
Wild Blue Gondola	3.67	4.93	1.01	9.60
Total	**7.25**	**12.88**	**1.01**	**21.14**

This impact would therefore be insignificant at the scale of the Mount Werner LAU, especially given that all impacts are either within the current operational boundary or within areas outside of the operational boundary that are currently and have been historically skied.

The Fish Creek area is skied at the current time and has been for decades. Due to the current volume of skier use, it is likely that lynx react to the recreational environment of the Fish Creek area as if it were already part of the operational boundary of the ski area. Clearing of the Fish Creek egress trail is not expected to have any additional impact on skier numbers or the effectiveness of lynx habitat within the 237-acre Fish Creek area. Nor would it have any impact on habitat connectivity, as lynx are expected to use the terrain for all 3 recognized types of movements, daily, exploratory, and dispersal. While lynx may continue to avoid otherwise suitable habitat in Fish Creek area during the winter daytime, the high skier presence does not pose an impediment to lynx night-time travels under current conditions and would not further impede lynx movements after implementation of the proposed action. Suitable lynx habitat that surrounds the ski area allows lynx to circumvent less effective habitat within the operational boundary and still experience unimpeded travel in the area. Therefore, there would be no noticeable impacts to lynx habitat connectivity as a result of the proposed action.

Because lynx are known to remain on the periphery of the operational boundary of ski areas, the effectiveness of habitat within the currently managed ski area and within the proposed operational boundary expansion has been compromised. The proposed projects on their own would have mostly insignificant and/or discountable effects on lynx. However, taken together, the proposed action would reduce the availability of lynx habitat but would not compromise the ability of the Mount Werner LAU to support foraging, denning, or traveling lynx. Therefore, the proposed action **may affect, but is not likely to adversely**

affect, the Canada lynx. Section 7 consultation with the USFWS is in progress; a summary of this consultation and the USFWS's Biological Opinion will be included in the final decision notice.

Forest Service Sensitive Species

Northern Goshawk

Activities proposed under the proposed action would impact 24.67 acres of conifer and aspen forests that provide potentially suitable goshawk habitat. The impacts would stem from the clearing of trees, building roads, the new restaurant, and installing chairlifts. All these areas would still provide goshawk foraging habitat following implementation. However, potential nest habitat would be eliminated on the 11.78 acres of suitable habitat where forest is permanently converted to non-forest habitat. No known active or inactive goshawk nests or nesting territories would be disturbed.

During construction, Resource Monitors approved by the Forest Service would periodically visit the site. As per **Appendix B**, these monitors would check for the presence of goshawks (and other sensitive resources) at the site. If goshawk are found, a no-disturbance buffer and timing restrictions would be set up to 0.25 mile between April 15 and July 31, unless a shorter distance or time is approved by the Forest Service Fish and Wildlife biologist or the responsible official. Therefore, the Proposed Action would be compliant with the 1998 Forest Plan. However, if the nest is active by any other raptor, the 1998 Forest Plan amendment would allow for construction activities to proceed. Refer to the discussion of raptors other than goshawks for additional discussion on the 1998 Forest Plan amendment.

Although direct and cumulative effects are anticipated under the proposed action, northern goshawk populations would likely remain stable across the planning unit over the next 10-20 years since nesting components are protected elsewhere throughout the forest. Therefore, implementation of the proposed action **may impact individuals but is not likely to result in a loss of viability on the planning area, nor cause a trend to federal listing or a loss of species viability rangewide**.

Colorado River Cutthroat Trout

CRCT do exist within Burgess Creek. Proposed activities under the proposed action have the potential to increase turbidity and water yield within Burgess Creek, both of which would impact CRCT. To minimize impacts to CRCT, PDC would be included in the proposed action and are detailed in **Appendix B**. These PDC include the restriction of construction activities within 50 feet of live water until after August 1, unless coordinated with the Forest Service Fish and Wildlife Biologist, and all sampling gear, waders, and tools must be washed daily and prior to entering a stream segment. In addition, Steamboat would create a drainage management plan to identify existing and proposed drainage features as well as prioritize drainage issues to be treated. With the inclusion of these PDC and other water quality PDC discussed in **Appendix B** and **Section 3.6**, the project would maintain all current stream health ratings including Burgess Creek. However, during construction, extreme weather events have the potential to temporarily increase turbidity which would negatively affect CRCT, possibly leading to short-term impacts on survivorship, natality, or fecundity. Fish habitat in Burgess Creek would be expected to recover from such events in the long-term, therefore short-

term turbidity pulses would not impact the viability of the Burgess Creek population. As a consequence of the foregoing information, the project would have no long-term impact on CRCT. However, because of the potential for short-term, construction-related impacts to CRCT, the proposed project **may impact individuals but is not likely to result in a loss of viability on the planning area, nor cause a trend to federal listing or a loss of species viability rangewide**.

Other Sensitive Species Considered in the Analysis

Because the proposed action could result in individual mortality, it **may impact individuals but is not likely to result in a loss of viability on the planning area, nor cause a trend to federal listing or a loss of species viability rangewide** for the seven sensitive species listed previously. Refer to the BE for additional detail regarding direct and indirect impacts to these species as a result of the proposed action. Overall, while the proposed action may impact individuals of each species from construction or conversion of habitat to non-habitat, it is not anticipated to negatively impact the species population viability. General PDC included with the proposed action would also help mitigate impacts to sensitive species (i.e., implementation of BMPs to reduce soil erosion, noxious weed treatments, pausing construction if sensitive species are found, etc.).

Species of Local Concern

Raptors

Of the seven nest sites that have been identified within the Steamboat SUP area, Nests 3, 6, and 7 are located adjacent to activities included in the current proposed action. The Fish Creek Egress would pass approximately 200 feet from Nest 3. The Wild Blue Gondola alignment would pass within 300 feet of Nest 6. Nest 7 is located directly beneath the alignment of the proposed gondola.

While Steamboat intends to avoid disturbance to individual raptor nest trees, some of the components of the proposed action would require disturbance within the no-disturbance buffer required by the 1998 Forest Plan for raptor nest areas. Specific to Nest 7, Steamboat intends to span this nest with the new gondola, preserving the nest and nest tree. However, field adjustment of the gondola configuration could require trimming the top of the nest tree above the nest, removing Nest 7, or removing any new nests that are built within this nest area. Removal of Nest 7 or any new nest would be consistent with overall 1998 Forest Plan direction as long as there is a remaining nest or nests that provide a nest platform within the Concentration-Vagabond nest area. Wildlife Standard 6 speaks to nest areas and not individual nests (i.e., protect active or inactive nest areas).

However, as Wildlife Standard 6 requires a no-disturbance buffer around active nests from nest-site selection to fledging (generally March through July), the construction of the proposed action would introduce disturbance within that buffer for Nests 6 and 7 and would therefore require a non-significant and project-specific 1998 Forest Plan amendment. This amendment would remove the applicability of this standard during the construction phase of the project. While this would allow construction in the vicinity of these nests during the fledging period, PDC incorporated into the project would require wildlife surveys at known raptor nest areas prior to implementation of any projects. If preconstruction surveys find raptors nesting at this site, construction

would not be implemented until Steamboat coordinates with the Forest Service Wildlife Biologist to determine if and when construction could proceed. This 1998 Forest Plan amendment suspends Wildlife Standard 6 only for the duration of the construction phase of the project, only applies in the area impacted by construction, and does not apply to goshawk nests. Upon completion of construction the 1998 Forest Plan amendment expires, and Wildlife Standard 6 again becomes applicable forest-wide. Species to which the proposed amendment does apply are all rated by Natureserve (2021) as globally secure. These species include sharp-shinned hawk (Accipiter striatus), Cooper's hawk (Accipiter cooperii), and red-tailed hawk (Buteo jamaicensis), which are the species of raptor most likely to utilize nests in forest habitat within the SUP Area (Wickersham 2016).

Note that Wildlife Standard 6 does allow exceptions "when animals are adapted to human activity". Raptors that nest in an area actively used by skiers and maintenance staff are likely adapted to some level of human activity, which may include the intermittent operation of the gondola during spring and summer; Wildlife Standard 6 would not prohibit limited use of the gondola during those times.

While Forest Service approval of the proposed action would temporarily increase human-related disturbance to raptors other than northern goshawk, such disturbance would not impact any raptor at a level that would be detectable at the scale of the Forest or the global population. In all cases of potential temporary impacts, the disturbance would terminate upon completion of construction.

Elk

Construction projects implemented in mapped production range during calving season (May 15-June 30) have the potential to disturb elk during this period. Similarly, projects implemented during the summer have the potential to disturb elk using the mapped summer concentration area. PDC that prevents construction in mapped production range during the period from May 15 through June 30 is included in **Appendix B** and would prevent impacts during calving. As found in other Colorado ski area development projects, elk will avoid the development area in the first year (Morrison et al. 1995). During the summer, ample habitat exists on the MBRTB for elk that may become displaced from the fringe of the mapped summer concentration area. When construction terminates, these areas would continue to provide seclusion during the summertime season of use. Summer recreational use of the Wild Blue Gondola is not an objective, however lodge based special events could occur. While summer recreation is not anticipated to increase, any shifts in this visitation could illicit short-term behavioral responses from deer and elk depending on the intensity of disturbance with varying flight distances (Miller et al. 2020). In addition, any shifts in winter visitation to the project area, particularly in the Fish Creek area, could result in displacement and higher energy expenditures in elk.

There could be disturbance to elk within winter range from avalanche blasting in the Fish Creek area. Steamboat does not currently use avalanche control or mitigation (i.e., use of explosives) within the Fish Creek area but does perform these operations elsewhere in their operational boundary. The introduction of avalanche blasting into the Fish Creek

area could startle individual elk. However, the elk present during the winter in residential areas in the Burgess Creek and Fish Creek drainages are habituated to the sounds of the urban environment during winter, including Steamboat operational noise. It is likely that elk would eventually habituate to the sound of avalanche blasting, as the disturbance would be limited to the immediate sound of blasting and there would be no negative feedback mechanism suggesting to the animal that the noise posed any sort of threat.

Overall, while Forest Service approval of the proposed action would temporarily increase human-related disturbance to elk, it is unlikely that such disturbance will impact elk at a level that would be detectable at the scale of the Bears Ears DAU.

Moose

Permanent direct impacts to moose habitat resulting from implementation of the proposed action would result from clearing trees in 24.67 acres of conifer and aspen forest. At the scale of the home range of an individual moose, such clearing would be inconsequential. The proposed action could also result in accelerated shrub growth once the forest canopy is cleared which would be beneficial to moose by providing additional forage. The clearing limits are narrow and would not lead moose to avoid the cleared areas, except during construction.

3.5.3 Cumulative Effects

For aquatic species including the upper Colorado River fish, CRCT, and brook trout, the proposed action would add to the cumulative effects of consumptive water use within the Beaver Creek watershed and broader Yampa River basin. In conjunction with past and present development in the area, water withdrawals would increase. Furthermore, the impacts of the proposed projects alongside other development could degrade water quality of monitored streams in the area and negatively impact aquatic species in the project area. However, with implementation of the Recovery Action Plan elements, the adverse effects are not likely to jeopardize threatened and endangered species or adversely modify designated critical habitats for the four upper Colorado River fish. PDC included in the proposed action—including BMPs to minimize soil erosion, limitations to Beaver Creek pumping rates, and revegetation of disturbed areas—would also minimize impacts to the CRCT, mountain sucker, and brook trout.

In the past and present, residential and commercial expansion and development, along with increased human recreation, has fragmented habitat and/or decreased the effectiveness of available habitat for all terrestrial and avian species discussed in this analysis. Habitat has been modified through a variety of ways, including: wildfire prevention and control, timber management, livestock grazing, ski area habitat conversion, the mountain pine beetle infestation, human recreational activities, and residential and commercial development. The proposed action would cumulatively add to the fragmentation of and reduction in effectiveness of habitat for wildlife species. Although some direct and indirect impacts would occur to certain threatened, endangered and proposed wildlife species, listed raptors or elk, these impacts would be negligible overall. This conclusion is supported by the fact that relevant PDC (e.g., active goshawk nest site seasonal buffers,

constructing roads and other disturbed sites to minimize sediment discharge, etc.) would reduce any impacts to wildlife species.

3.6 WATERSHED

This analysis tiers to the 2018 FEIS/ROD and incorporates a variety of the information presented in that document. Overall, impacts are anticipated to be within the effects disclosed in the 2018 FEIS/ROD.

3.6.1 Affected Environment

The proposed action would occur within four separate watersheds: Beaver Creek, Priest Creek, Burgess Creek, and Fish Creek watersheds. Additional details on each watershed can be found in the Watershed Technical Report (USDA Forest Service 2020b). All of the proposed snowmaking would occur in Beaver Creek and Priest Creek watersheds. The Beaver Creek watershed covers 1,082 acres (1.69 square miles), from the summit of Sunshine Peak at 10,384 feet elevation to its confluence with Walton Creek at approximately 7,130 feet elevation. The middle and lower portions remain largely undeveloped today, while ski area construction has altered the upper 5,000 feet of stream and associated watershed.

The Priest Creek watershed covers 1,638 acres (2.56 square miles), from Sunshine Peak at 10,384 feet elevation to the confluence with Meadow Creek at approximately 6,850 feet elevation, just above the confluence of these combined streams with Walton Creek at approximately 6,830 feet elevation. The middle portion of the watershed remains undeveloped today. Ski area construction has altered the portion within the SUP area while residential housing and road construction have altered the lower (private) portion.

The Burgess Creek watershed covers 2,214 acres (3.46 square miles), from the summit of Mount Werner at 10,565 feet elevation to its confluence with the Yampa River at approximately 6,760 feet elevation.

The mainstem of Fish Creek drains a watershed covering 5,062 acres (7.91 square miles), from Sunshine Peak at 10,600 feet elevation to the confluence with the North Fork of Fish Creek at approximately 7,460 feet elevation. The only development within the Fish Creek mainstem watershed is the Upper Fish Creek Falls trail, which includes two bridges. Aside from some logging in previous decades, the Fish Creek watershed remains largely undisturbed. This watershed provides water to the City of Steamboat Springs.

Water Quality

To characterize the existing status of stream health, field stream surveys of the affected perennial streams plus a reference stream were conducted. Details regarding methodology and individual stream health observations are available in the Watershed Technical Report. Refer to **Table 4** for a summary of these classifications

Table 4. Stream Health Summary

Stream	Percent Fine Sediment	Residual Pool Depth	Unstable Banks	Wood Frequency
Beaver Creek	Robust	At Risk	Robust	Robust
Priest Creek	Robust	At Risk	Robust	Robust
Burgess Creek	Robust	Robust	Diminished	Diminished
Fish Creek	Robust	Robust	No quantitative data	No quantitative data

All of the watersheds except Fish Creek are part of the larger Walton Creek HUC 5 watershed. In 2011, the MBRTB performed watershed condition classification for the two HUC 5 watersheds, Walton Creek and Fish Creek (USDA Forest Service 2020b). Based on an assessment of 12 indicators, both watersheds were classified as Functioning at Risk for overall watershed condition. This indicates fair watershed health overall.

The Yampa River mainstem from Oak Creek to Elkhead Creek—which is the reach of the Yampa River that the project area drains into—is on the Clean Water Act (CWA) 303(d) list as impaired for temperature and arsenic. The mainstem of Fish Creek is on a separate list for monitoring and evaluation of sediment and E. coli (USDA Forest Service 2020b). All other project area streams were previously on the monitoring and evaluation list to be monitored for sediment, manganese, arsenic, iron, and zinc, but were removed from the list in 2018 due to attainment of water quality standards. Most human-made snow is currently applied to trails tributary to Burgess Creek, while a small portion is currently applied to trails tributary to Priest Creek. As a result, snowmaking water from the Yampa River ends up flowing into Burgess and Priest Creeks. To date, there have not been any measured water quality effects from the existing diversions of Yampa River water into the Burgess Creek watershed.

Water Influence Zones and Connected Disturbed Areas

The water influence zone (WIZ) of a stream includes the geomorphic floodplain (valley bottom), riparian ecosystem, and inner gorge. The WIZ protects interacting aquatic, riparian, and upland functions by maintaining natural processes and resilience of soil, water, and vegetation systems. Ground disturbance in the WIZ can impact bank stability by creating hydrologic connections between high-runoff areas and the stream network, known as connected disturbed areas (CDAs). CDAs include roads, ditches, water bars, compacted soils, bare soils, and areas of high burn severity that create a direct route for overland flow, sediment, or pollutants to enter the stream network. Ground disturbing activities located within the WIZ are considered connected unless site-specific actions are taken to disconnect them from streams (USFWS 2006). **Table 5** summarizes the existing CDAs within the SUP area at Steamboat. These CDA lengths are a conservative estimate; additional field verification

would occur as part of the drainage management plan that would be a required PDC for the project.

CDAs can have negative impacts on stream health in the project area. Modeling indicates that development in the Burgess Creek watershed has increased watershed yield by approximately 25 percent relative to pre-development conditions, while peak flows have increased 80 percent above baseline (Resource Engineering 2018). These increased peak flows are routed to streams through extensions to the channel network via CDAs and trail clearing. This can result in increased erosion and sedimentation in project area streams. Furthermore, the total length of CDA (5.0 miles) has extended the stream network by 17.6 percent (USDA Forest Service 2020b). According to guidance in the USFS *Watershed Conservation Practices Handbook* (USDA Forest Service 2006), CDAs in watersheds should be limited "so the total stream network is not expanded by more than 10 percent." Therefore, if actual CDA lengths are near the conservative estimates tabulated above, it is evident that the project area is currently negatively impacted by CDAs.

Water Quantity

Steamboat currently diverts water from the Yampa River and from three headwater tributaries that originate from Steamboat's SUP area: Burgess Creek, Priest Creek, and Beaver Creek. This water is used to provide water to Steamboat's mountain restaurants and snowmaking system. As summarized in **Table 6**, Steamboat's current diversions result in approximately 76.4 acre-feet of depletions. Combined with the projects included in the approved 2018 EIS, there would be a total of 85 acre-feet of depletions that Steamboat would be responsible for.

Table 5. Existing CDAs within SUP Area

Watershed	Total Road/Trail Area in Watershed (acres)	CDA Acres	Percent of Road/Trail Area that is CDA	CDA Length/ Total Stream Length
Fish Creek	0.2	0.05	24.9%	74.5%
Burgess Creek	30.8	1.4	4.1%	38.8%
Valley View Ck	1.1	0	0%	0%
Priest Creek	7.0	0.3	2.3%	79.0%
Beaver Creek	3.0	0.3	3.8%	31.9%
Storm King Ck	1.0	0	0%	7.1%
Total	**43.2**	**2.0**	**3.7%**	**40.9%**

Table 6. Yampa River Watershed Depletions

Source	Annual Water Depletion without 2018 FEIS/ROD projects	Annual Water Depletion for 2018 FEIS/ROD Projects	Total
Snowmaking	72.2	8.4	80.6
Restaurant	0.5	0.2	0.7
Revegetation	3.7	0.0	3.7
Totals	**76.4**	**8.6**	**85.0**

3.6.2 Environmental Consequences

Water Quality

The proposed snowmaking would add approximately 46 acre-feet of water per year to Priest Creek and Beaver Creek watersheds in the form of melted snow, which would add to peak streamflow during late spring and early summer melt off. This would increase shear stress on streambanks and culverts, and could impact stream health parameters, including fine sediment percentage, pool depth, and bank stability. Approximately 33.7 acre-feet per year would be added to Beaver Creek, with the remaining 12.3 acre-feet per year flowing into Priest Creek. This would result in an increase in annual yield of 2.6% for the Beaver Creek watershed. Although additional snowmaking would more than double the current snowmaking contribution to water flow in Priest Creek, this would increase annual yield for the Priest Creek watershed by only 0.9%. Peak flow in Beaver Creek (May-July) would increase by 0.2 cubic feet per second (cfs), or 1.8% (LRE Water 2020), while peak flow in Priest Creek would increase by less than 0.1 cfs, or less than 1%. Therefore, while the snowmaking could negatively impact stream health parameters, the increase in watershed yield and peak stream flow would be small at the watershed scale and impacts would be negligible. Furthermore, the development of the Beaver Creek diversion, pump station, and collection gallery would decrease flow in Beaver Creek during the snowmaking season, generally late October to early January, and could compensate for some springtime increases in water flow in this watershed as some of the meltwater would be taken up by riparian area recharge. Construction within each watershed could also cause temporary impacts to water quality and sediment load within nearby streams. Refer to the discussion of WIZ and CDA impacts for additional detail.

Based on the lack of any measured effects from current diversions of Yampa River water into the Burgess Creek watershed, it is not anticipated that the current water quality issues in the Yampa River, including temperature and arsenic, would influence the water quality of Priest Creek and Beaver Creek.

Water Influence Zones and Connected Disturbed Areas

Temporary and permanent ground surface disturbance as well as areas of vegetation removal associated with the proposed action within the WIZ are shown in **Table 7**.

Because most of the permanent disturbances would be small, isolated, and away from stream channels, they would cause little if any increase in CDA across the project area. Exceptions would be the Why Not Road repair, Fish Creek egress route, and Moonlight and Beaver Creek pump stations. These projects would result in grading or other disturbance in the WIZ which could result in an increase in erosion and sedimentation to the streams in the project. In addition to permanent disturbance area, approximately 25 acres would undergo temporary disturbance for installation of snowmaking water lines; and for potable water, sewer, and electrical lines supplying the Sunshine Restaurant. No grading would be associated with the Fish Creek egress route, but piles would need to be installed to support the bridge, and snow along bridge approaches would be compacted by grooming.

For both temporary and permanent disturbances, proper implementation of BMPs and PDC across the project area would be necessary to help maintain or improve stream health in the affected watersheds. It is anticipated that the erosion and drainage management measures included with the proposed action (including development of a drainage management plan and prompt revegetation of disturbed areas) would minimize impacts to the project area. Refer to **Appendix B** for a summary of PDC included.

Table 7. Proposed Disturbances within WIZ

Watershed	Grading Acres	Vegetation Removal Acres
Fish Creek Total	0	1.44
Burgess Creek Watershed Total	1.92	2.55
Priest Creek Watershed Total	2.39	0.21
Beaver Creek Watershed Total	2.01	0
Total	**6.32**	**4.2**

Water Quantity

The total additional diversion rate of 61.6 acre-feet per year proposed under the proposed action would cause a depletion of 13.9 acre-feet per year in the Upper Yampa River watershed, bringing total Forest Service-approved depletions for Steamboat operations to 98.9 acre-feet per year (**Table 8**). This assumes that approximately 23 percent of diversions would be lost to sublimation, evapotranspiration, and other system losses and the remaining 77 percent would remain in the watersheds as snowmelt. This is 7.2 acre-feet per year more than the 91.7 acre-feet per year authorized under the Yampa River Programmatic Biological Opinion discussed in **Section 3.5** for the upper Colorado River fish. This additional water usage required additional consultation with USFWS (refer to **Section 3.5.2 Wildlife and Fisheries**); however, SSRC currently has adequate water rights to utilize this additional water.

Snowmaking associated with the proposed action would divert an additional 59.8 acre-feet per year from the Yampa River to cover the 70.3 acres of additional ski runs, a 17.1-percent increase in diversion volume. During the snowmaking season (late October to January), the additional diversion of 59.8 acre-feet per year would decrease Yampa River flow below the diversion during these three months by an average of approximately 0.3 percent, which is unlikely to cause negative impacts to downstream fisheries and aquatic habitat. Combined with previously-approved snowmaking diversions (350.4 acre-feet per year), total reduction of streamflow in the Yampa River streamflow would average approximately 2 percent below the flow that would occur if no Steamboat snowmaking diversions occurred during the winter season. Additional diversions and depletions would occur for the proposed restaurant but this diversion (1.8 acre-feet per year) would be minimal at the scale of the Yampa River.

Table 8. Proposed Action Watershed Depletions

Source	Annual Water Depletion without 2018 FEIS/ROD projects	Annual Water Depletion for 2018 FEIS/ROD Projects	Proposed Diversions	Proposed Depletions	Total Depletions
Snowmaking	72.2	8.4	59.8	13.8	94.4
Restaurant	0.5	0.2	1.8	0.1	0.8
Revegetation	3.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.7
Totals	**76.4**	**8.6**	61.6	13.9	**98.9**

3.6.3 Cumulative Effects

Past ski area development at Steamboat has cumulatively affected stream health and riparian areas on NFS lands within Steamboat's SUP area. There have been cumulative impacts to the watersheds in the project area from ground disturbance activities related to construction of ski trails, snowmaking, mountain restaurants, ski lifts, roads, and trails. Urban and commercial development on private lands has also resulted in impacts to the watershed. Watersheds subjected to activities associated with ski area management, including trail construction and snowmaking, tend to exhibit cumulative changes to channel conditions as compared to watersheds in undeveloped conditions. As discussed in **Section 3.6.1**, Burgess Creek shows a certain level of impacts to its condition that is likely a consequence of past and present ski area developments, particularly in streambank condition, sedimentation, and riparian area quantity resulting in the 'at risk' stream health rating.

However, direct project effects of tree removal and grading within the WIZ in the Burgess Creek, Priest Creek, and Fish Creek watersheds, when considered together with past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions, would maintain all current stream health ratings, including the 'at risk' rating for Burgess Creek, through successful implementation of mitigation measures and PDC described previously and in **Appendix B**. While stream health class would be maintained, it is unlikely that overall stream health would improve toward robust stream health within the next planning period, without additional measures taken.

As a result, a drainage management plan that would identify issues and treatments across these watersheds that would help maintain stream health, or in the case of Burgess Creek, improve stream health and aquatic habitat has been included as PDC.

3.7 SOILS

3.7.1 Affected Environment

Please refer to the Watershed and Soils Specialist Report (USDA Forest Service 2020b) for additional detail on soils in the project area. Most of the soils within the project area formed in glacial till, slope alluvium, colluvium, or residuum derived from Precambrian crystalline rocks. They occur on steep mountain slopes, summits, and ridges with slopes typically ranging from 10 to 60 percent. Although fairly thick, the soils are commonly rocky and weakly developed with low fertility; textures range from loam to very cobbly loam. Clay content ranges from 14 to 16 percent.

According to the Soil Resource Inventory for the project area, area soils are moderately to severely erosive, particularly along the upper portions of Priest Creek and Burgess Creek watersheds (USDA Forest Service 2020b). The portion of the Fish Creek watershed within the SUP area is also mapped as severely erosive. Project area soils generally exhibit low to slight mass wasting hazard across most of the SUP area—with the exception of the Fish Creek watershed (moderate) as well as part of the Why Not Road regrade area and the hilltop at the top of Thunderhead Express Lift (both high mass wasting probability). **Table 9** provides the acreage of soil classifications, as well as their characteristics, within the project area.

Table 9. Soil Classifications and Characteristics in the Project Area

Soil Name	Area (acres)	Description	Erosion Hazard	Revegetation Capacity	Mass Wasting Hazard
Buantlake	1,514	Sandy loam	Moderate	Moderate	Slight
Trude	765	Cobbly sandy loam	High	Low	Low
Leighcan	637	Gravelly loam	Moderate	Low	Low
Grenadier	237	Loam	Moderate	Low	Low
Cowood	135	Coarse sandy loam	Moderate	Low	Low
Targhee Family	135	Loam	High	Low	Moderate
Hanks	104	Gravelly loam	Moderate	Low	Low
Namela	41	Loam	High	Moderate	High
Cryaquolls	39	Loam	Low	Severe	Low
Uinta Variant	36	Sandy loam	Moderate	Moderate	Unknown
Hub	13	Fine sandy loam	High	Moderate	High
Gateview Family	8	Very cobbly loam	Moderate	Moderate	Low
Total	**3,664**	**-**	**-**	**-**	**-**

3.7.2 Environmental Consequences

While the majority of the Fish Creek egress trail would be located on severely erosive soils, no grading is proposed in this watershed. Therefore, there would be minimal impacts to soils in the Fish Creek watershed. The repair and regrading of the Four Points and Why Not Roads, located in the Burgess Creek watershed, would be located primarily on severely erosive soils. However, with the inclusion of PDC such as promptly revegetating disturbed areas as well as soil erosion BMPs, the project is anticipated to result in a long-term decrease in erosion risk due to drainage improvements on roads. In Priest Creek watershed, ground disturbance projects that would occur at least in part on severely erosive soils include snowmaking line replacement along the *Moonlight* trail, construction of the Moonlight pump station, replacement of the Sunshine Express lift, and a portion of the sewer and electric line replacement Option B. No projects on severely erosive soil would occur in Beaver Creek or Storm King Creek watersheds. Overall, proper implementation of required BMPs and PDC—particularly revegetation along hillslopes as well as proper drainage and armoring of culvert outlets along roads—would minimize any impacts of the proposed action on soil productivity and stability.

As discussed previously, project area soils generally exhibit low to slight mass wasting hazard across most of the SUP

area. The primary exceptions to this are, the Fish Creek watershed (rated as moderate) as well as the hilltop at the top of Thunderhead Express Lift and part of the Why Not regrade area (both rated as high mass wasting probability). Within the Fish Creek watershed and hilltop adjacent the Thunderhead Express Lift, no ground disturbance would occur as part of the proposed action. While the area adjacent to the Thunderhead Express Lift and Why Not Road regrade area would receive additional snowmaking, these areas have a relatively low gradient and are not anticipated to result in slope failure. For the grading in the Why Not Road area, BMPs and PDC would be included to reduce the risk of unstable soil movement within the project area.

3.7.3 Cumulative Effects

Past development at Steamboat has increased erosion rates and sedimentation in comparison to undisturbed areas within the project area; general ski resort development and access roads have increased impermeable surfaces, soil compaction, and reduced soil productivity between pre-development and present conditions. Possible cumulative effects to soil resources would be associated primarily with potential soil loss from erosion, along with loss of soil productivity. When considered cumulatively with all past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions, cumulative impacts to soil resources would be negligible.

3.8 WETLANDS

Refer to the 2020 Steamboat Resort Improvements Project Wetland Technical Report (Western Bionomics 2020d) for detailed information regarding applicable state, federal, and Forest Service regulations related to wetlands. Detailed mapping is also provided in the 2020 Wetland Technical Report.

3.8.1 Affected Environment

During the summer of 2019, Western Bionomics verified existing wetland boundaries and delineated new wetland areas via field surveys. Thirty-four wetlands totaling approximately 32.3 acres occur within the analysis area, including 28.1 acres of palustrine emergent (PEM) wetlands, 2.3 acres of palustrine scrub-shrub (PSS) wetlands (willow dominated), and 1.91 acres of combined PSS/PEM wetlands. The acreage of wetlands present in the project area is summarized in **Table 10**. In addition, 4,438 linear feet of streambed were identified or verified in the analysis area. Refer to **Section 3.6** for a further discussion of the hydrological features present.

Table 10. Summary of Wetlands Acreages by Type

Wetlands/Cowardin Class	Wetland Area (acres)
Palustrine Emergent (PEM)	28.14
Palustrine Scrub-Shrub (PSS)	2.28
PEM/PSS	1.91
Grand Total	**32.33**

The wetlands are located in four primary areas: the lower mountain around the *Bashor*, *Eagles Nest*, *Giggle Gulch*, and *Lower Vagabond* trails; around *Lower Moonlight*; the upper mountain near the Priest Creek and Sundown Express lift lines as well as the *Tomahawk* and *High Noon* trails; and the area around Four Points Road. The vegetation of the PEM wetlands on the lower mountain and the PSS wetlands adjacent the Four Points Road is primarily reed canarygrass but also includes redtop, sticky cinquefoil, smallwing sedge, and other non-native pasture grasses including orchardgrass. Vegetation of the upper mountain PEM wetlands is herbaceous and includes bluejoint reedgrass, arrowleaf groundsel, chiming bells, and water sedge. The vegetation of the PSS wetlands includes alder with an understory of American mannagrass, arrowleaf groundsel, chiming bells, and more.

Minor amounts of noxious weeds occur in and around some wetlands, particularly on the lower mountain. These include Canada and bull thistle, scentless chamomile, and houndstongue.

The hydrology of the wetlands is primarily provided by groundwater, with a smaller contribution from surface water flowing into and through the wetlands. The groundwater system is fed by precipitation recharge that occurs on the surrounding slopes and hillsides. Most of the precipitation in the analysis area occurs as snowfall; however, summer rainstorms can also contribute to the hydrology. When the groundwater encounters less permeable soil or bedrock, it is diverted to the land surface, forming springs, seeps, and small intermittent and perennial streams. Large perennial streams such as Burgess Creek and Priest Creek convey the surface water, which produces saturated soil conditions along the stream banks and on adjacent floodplains, where present. In addition, snowmaking activities have increased snow depths and corresponding peak runoff flows, likely creating new drainage channels and expanding the extent of wetland vegetation (Resource Engineering 2018).

Wetland Functions

Wetlands are often described in terms of their functions and values. The wetlands on the lower mountain received a "Functional" FACWet rating, which by definition means that the capacity of some or all of the wetlands functions has been markedly altered, but the wetland still provides the types of functions associated with its habitat type. Flood flow attenuation and water storage are rated fairly low because they are located on moderate to steep slopes and have little ability to hold snowmelt water for effective recharge. Sediment retention and shoreline stabilization are also low rated as reed canarygrass, the dominant species in these wetlands, lacks sufficient root networks to prevent erosion and slow the velocity of water. The wildlife habitat function is rated as low because these wetlands lack structural diversity that would be beneficial to a variety of wildlife.

Due to the high groundwater table associated with PSS wetlands on *Lower Moonlight* and the hydrology contribution from abundant springs and seeps upstream, the groundwater discharge function is rated as moderate to high. However, the groundwater recharge function is rated as low as the wetland occurs on moderate to steep slopes and has little capacity to store and hold surface water for infiltration. Both the velocity reduction and erosion protection functions are rated as moderate because the plant root

network provides moderate protection while floodwater retention and peak flood reduction functions are rated as low because of the narrow floodplains present. Water quality, sediment removal, and nutrient retention and removal are also rated as low because they are related to the velocity reduction function. The wildlife habitat function is rated as moderate due to the structural presence of an intact overstory.

The upper mountain PEM wetlands have a high groundwater recharge function due to the high groundwater table and the presence of springs and seeps. Similar to the other wetlands, the groundwater discharge function is rated as low because the wetlands occur on steep slopes and have little capacity to store and hold surface water. Velocity reduction and erosion protection functions are rated as low to moderate depending on the vegetation present and the purpose it serves. The floodwater retention/peak flood reduction functions are also rated as low because the streams have relatively narrow floodplains. The water quality functions, and sediment removal and nutrient retention/removal are rated as low. Wildlife habitat function is rated as low because of the lack of structural development.

The Four Points Road wetland complex is a similar suite of species and functions as described for the upper mountain PEM wetlands.

3.8.2 Environmental Consequences

In accordance with *Executive Order 11990*, the proposed action was designed to avoid and minimize impacts to wetlands wherever possible. With proper implementation of the PDC and future CWA 404 permit process, the proposed action is anticipated to comply with all relevant direction provided in the *Watershed Conservation Practices Handbook*, *CWA*, and *Executive Order 11990*.

Under the proposed action, there would be approximately 0.12 acre of permanent wetland impact from grading activities; however, actual permanent disturbance would likely be less once PDC were implemented and grading plans developed. These impacts would occur from construction of the Moonlight and Beaver Creek pump stations, the Burgess Creek bridge, Sundown Express Lift replacement, and the Wild Blue Gondola. The Burgess Creek bridge would be designed to allow for passage of flow and sediment, withstand expected flood flows, and allow free movement of resident aquatic life. Towers associated with the proposed Wild Blue Gondola and Sundown Express Lift would be field adjusted to avoid wetland impacts where practicable.

The United States Army Corps of Engineers mandates that there be no net loss of wetlands and requires mitigation for any direct wetlands impacts, including the 0.12 acre of permanent wetland disturbance associated with the project. This can include the construction of new wetlands, purchase of credits in a wetland mitigation bank, restoration of a degraded wetland, or a combination of those. The type and amount of wetland mitigation for these projects, if any, would be determined during a future CWA 404 permit process. Refer to **Table 11** for a summary of wetland impacts.

Table 11. Summary of Wetland Impacts

Project	Direct		Indirect
	Permanent (acres)	Temporary (acres)	Vegetation Clearing (acres)
PSS	-	0.01	0.3
PEM	0.12	4.25	0.07
Total	**0.12**	**4.26**	**0.37**

Indirect Impacts to Wetland Functions

Indirect impacts to wetlands would result from overstory vegetation removal, wetland dewatering from pipeline construction or grading, increased snow compaction, increased noxious weed invasion, and erosion and sedimentation. These indirect impacts could negatively affect wetland functionality. However, with the implementation of construction BMPs and PDC, these indirect impacts would either not occur at all or would be so minor as to be insignificant.

Overstory Vegetation Removal

The indirect impact to 0.44 acres of wetlands through forest overstory removal could potentially cause a change in wetland vegetation composition and structure. These overstory impacts would occur with the Burgess Creek bridge construction, Fish Creek egress trail clearing, Sundown Express Lift corridor widening, and Wild Blue Gondola corridor clearing. This change could affect some functions such as groundwater discharge, which may increase due to reduced evapotranspiration rates from tree removal. In addition, the removal of overstory trees would reduce the structural diversity of stands in the area and could reduce wildlife habitat. Increases in groundwater discharge as a result of forest overstory removal could also form additional drainage channels leading to increased erosion and sedimentation. However, the projects could also indirectly benefit the wetlands: the additional groundwater discharge could increase the size and extent of wetlands. Furthermore, overstory vegetation removal in the wetlands that are dominated by alders and willows could lead to a greater shoot density over the long term.

Other functions such as velocity reduction, erosion protection, and the water quality functions would stay the same, as existing shaded vegetation would be replaced by vegetation like sedges that require more sunlight but provide similar wetland functions.

Wetland Dewatering

As the majority of wetlands in the project area are supported by groundwater, a change in the pattern of groundwater flow or groundwater recharge could affect wetlands. Changes to a wetland's hydrology could potentially reduce the size of the wetland, change its species composition, or lead to a conversion to another wetland type or to upland habitat.

The installation of underground pipeline trenches for snowmaking through or adjacent to wetlands may intercept the

high groundwater table and potentially dewater a wetland so that it is no longer in a functioning condition. However, PDC that requires the installation of clay cutoff walls in any snowmaking or utility pipeline trench that intersects a wetland would prevent dewatering of these wetlands. In addition, the installation of pipelines could impact the wetland soils but a PDC would be included that require subsoil to be stockpiled separate from topsoil and replaced in the same location from which they were removed. This measure, combined with a requirement to return grade to the pre-construction grade, would decrease the temporal period of impact.

Snow Compaction

A small amount of snow compaction could occur along the Fish Creek egress route due to recreational use. Snow compaction can negatively impact wetlands and associated plant life by lowering soil temperatures, increasing frost depth, and delaying melt patterns. While delayed melt can delay flowering times and reduce seed set, it can also provide extra soil moisture during the growing season which may benefit some plant species. Regardless, any snow compaction would be minor and any changes in snowmelt would be minimal.

Noxious Weed Invasion

Wetlands could be negatively impacted from noxious weed invasion, particularly on the lower mountain where noxious weeds like Canada and bull thistle, scentless chamomile, and houndstongue are prevalent. PDC such as prompt revegetation, pre-treatment of existing infestations, monitoring for new invasive species three years post-construction, and cleaning construction equipment prior to entering project areas would help reduce the likelihood of noxious weeds negatively impacting wetlands.

Erosion and Sedimentation

Ground disturbance in the project area has the potential to result in erosion and sedimentation effects to wetlands. PDC would be applied to reduce any potential erosion and sedimentation, including installing appropriate sediment control features during and after project construction and flagging wetlands prior to construction.

3.8.3 Cumulative Effects

Minor indirect impacts to wetlands occur and would likely continue to occur from ongoing ski area operations (i.e., forest overstory removal, snow compaction, and increased water use from snowmaking). The potential permanent direct impact to 0.12 acre of wetlands, temporary direct impacts to 4.27 acres of wetlands, and 0.44 acre of indirect impacts to wetlands would negatively impact wetlands when considered cumulatively with past and current disturbance at the ski area. However, the proposed action would meet the intent of the *1998 Forest Plan* and *Executive Order 11990* when considered with the following: all past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions; the existing laws and guidance protecting, restoring and mitigating wetland impacts as well as SSRC's compliance with these wetland laws and guidance; and the wetland PDC identified in this document and associated mitigation of cumulative impacts to wetlands.

Chapter 4.
Consultation and Coordination

Table 12 and **Table 13** lists those individuals who participated in initial scoping, were members of the ID Team, Consultant Team and/or provided direction and assistance during the preparation of this EA.

Table 12. Forest Service Interdisciplinary Team

Team Member	Project Responsibility
Bryan West	ID Team Lead/NEPA
Marti Aitken	Botany
Tim Croissant	Wildlife
Rick Henderson	Fisheries
Marissa Karchut	Heritage
Noel Ludwig	Hydrology, Wetlands, Soils
Isaac Sims	Recreation/Scenery
Mike Hill	Recreation/Scenery
Erica Dickerman	Permit Administrator
Melissa Dressen	Wildlife
Liz Schnackenberg	Hydrology
Jason Strahl	Heritage

Table 13. Consultant Team

Team Member	Organization	Project Responsibility
Ashley Smith	SE Group	Senior Project Manager
Tyler Ford	SE Group	NEPA Writer
Kelly Colfer	Western Bionomics, Inc	Botany, Fisheries, Wildlife, Wetlands
Melissa Elkins	Metcalf Archaeology	Cultural Resources

Table 14 lists the government agencies and organizations contacted during the scoping process.

Table 14. Agencies Contacted

Government	Agency
Federal	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Tribal	Northern Arapaho Tribe Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes Northern Cheyenne Tribe Shoshone Cultural Committee Ute Business Committee Southern Ute Tribal Council Ute Mountain Ute Tribe
State	Colorado Parks and Wildlife Colorado Natural Heritage Program
Local	Steamboat Springs Chamber Resort Association Western Resources Advocates Western Watersheds Rocky Mountain Wild Sierra Club The Nature Conservancy Conservation Colorado Alliance for Sustainable Colorado Routt Recreation Roundtable Keep Routt Wild Routt County Riders

Chapter 5.
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Appendix A. Project-Specific Forest Plan Amendment

Introduction

Under the National Forest Management Act and its implementing regulations at 36 CFR 219 (2012 Planning Rule), a plan may be amended at any time. Plan amendments may be broad or narrow, depending on the need for the change. The Forest Service has the discretion to determine whether and how to amend the *1998 Forest Plan* and to determine the scope and scale of any amendment.

Amendment Consistent with Forest Service NEPA Procedures (§ 219.13(b)(3))

The resource effects of the proposed project-specific amendment are documented in the Steamboat Resort Improvements Project EA following Forest Service NEPA procedures at 36 CFR 220. The proposed projects are not anticipated to result in significant impacts. In addition, because this amendment applies only to this project, and effects would be for a limited duration (see **Appendix B**) and spatial extent, it is not considered a significant change to the 1998 Forest Plan for purposes of the National Forest Management Act (§ 219.13(b)(3)).

How the 2012 Planning Rule applies to the plan amendment[1]

The proposed project-specific amendment to the 1998 Forest Plan has been prepared under the 2012 Planning Rule. The 2012 Planning Rule replaced the 1982 Planning Rule procedures that the Forest Service used to develop the existing 1998 Forest Plan. Therefore, the proposed amendment must comply with the procedural provisions of the 2012 rule, and not the obsolete 1982 rule.

Purpose of the amendment (§ 219.13(b)(1))

The purpose of this project-specific amendment is to temporarily exempt the proposed action from complying with Wildlife Standard 6:

> *Protect known active and inactive raptor nest areas. Extent of the protection will be based on proposed management activities, human activities existing before nest establishment, species, topography, vegetative cover, and other factors. A no-disturbance buffer around active nest sites will be required from nest-site selection to fledging (generally March through July). Exceptions may occur when animals are adapted to human activity (Forest Plan p. 1-14). (USDA Forest Service 1998)*

The exemption applies to the duration of the construction phase of the project, and the area impacted by construction, but does not apply to goshawk nests. The exemption is necessary to facilitate infrastructure improvements. Construction timeframes in the area are short due to annual snowpack, and nest locations and occupancy can change yearly; without an exemption,

[1] Amendment that applies to all future projects

construction of many improvements would substantially increase costs because construction would span multiple seasons.

The proposed action requires a 1998 Forest Plan amendment due to inconsistency with the timing restrictions and existing nests, as well as potentially unknown or new nests established during project implementation. Implementation of the project may disturb raptors using nests within the project area and may also require removal of one nest tree (See **Sections 3.5.1** and **3.5.2** of the EA and the Wildlife BE for additional details). Although the amendment would exempt the proposed action during the construction phase only, PDC would be applied to reduce potential impacts to raptors. Future operations and maintenance, future actions in the project area, and goshawk nests found during construction would not be exempt from Wildlife Standard 6. Known active or inactive goshawk nests or nest territories, in particular, would not be disturbed.

Note that Wildlife Standard 6 does allow exceptions "when animals are adapted to human activity". Raptors, including goshawks, that nest in an area actively used by skiers and maintenance staff are likely adapted to some level of human activity, which may include the intermittent operation of the gondola during spring and summer; Wildlife Standard 6 would not prohibit limited use of the project area and project components (i.e., the proposed Wild Blue Gondola) during those times.

Compliance with the Rule's Procedural provisions

As explained below, this amendment complies with the procedural provisions of the 2012 Planning Rule (*§ 219.13(b)*).

Using the best scientific information to inform the planning process (*§ 219.3*)

There is a general consensus by wildlife biologists (Squires and Kennedy 2006, CPW 2008) that disturbing an occupied nest before fledging may result in abandonment of the nest by the adults, and subsequent mortality of nestlings. This science was considered during the analysis process; however, it was determined that this project would not adversely impact raptor population viability at the Forest level or contribute to a loss of species viability range-wide due to the scale of the project (EA, Wildlife BE). To identify potential direct, indirect, irretrievable, irreversible, and cumulative impacts that may result from the project, the most accurate, reliable, and relevant information was considered in this EA.

Providing opportunities for public participation (*§ 219.4*) and providing public notice (§ 219.16; *§ 219.13(b)(2)*)

Notice of the project-specific 1998 Forest Plan amendment was included in the NOPA that was provided to the public for scoping in July of 2020. Individuals had approximately 30 days to submit comments on the amendment. Therefore, public notice and opportunities for public participation were provided, meeting *§ 219.4*, *§ 219.16*, and *§ 219.13(b)(2))*

As allowed by *§ 219.13(b)(2)*, required public notifications of plan amendments may be combined where appropriate. The NOPA comment period provided the public notification of the Forest Plan amendment. The comment period lasted 30 days (*36 CFR § 219.16(a)(2)*). Public notifications were made by publication of a legal notice in the Laramie

Boomerang; by posting the notification on the project website; and by mailing or e-mailing notifications to interested or affected parties per *§ 219.4(1) and (2)*.

Individuals and entities who submitted timely, specific written comments during the designated opportunity for public comment will also have opportunity to file an objection to the proposed project and site-specific amendment (*36 CFR 218.5*).

Format for plan components (*§ 219.13 (b)(4)*; *§ 219.7(e)*)

This project-specific amendment to the 1998 Forest Plan would remove Wildlife Standard 6 for nests, aside from goshawk nests, for the Steamboat Resort Improvements Project. All future projects and current goshawk nests in this area would need to be compliant with Wildlife Standard 6.

The project-specific plan amendment process (*§ 219.13*)

The NOPA included information on the plan amendment during public scoping and the effects of this project-specific amendment are analyzed and disclosed in conjunction with this project's EA. The adjoined analysis will be available for an objection period following the guidelines set forth in *36 CFR 218*.

Objection opportunity (*§ 219.50* through *§ 219.62*)

The plan amendment would apply to all construction activities associated with the project; therefore, the 2012 Planning Rule's objection process applies, but only to the plan amendment. The review process of *36 CFR Part 218* would apply to the project part of the decision (*36 CFR § 219.59(b)*). Draft decision documents and all notices of the opportunity to comment on the draft decision will clearly indicate which part of the draft decision is subject to the objection process and which part of the draft decision is subject to the review procedures of *36 CFR Part 218*, and an explanation of those procedures.

Under the 2012 Planning Rule, a plan amendment is not subject to objection when the responsible official receives no substantive formal comments on the proposal during the opportunities for public comment (*36 CFR § 219.51(a)*). Should substantive comments be received, an objection to the plan amendment, including attachments, must be filed with the appropriate reviewing officer within 60 days of the date of publication of the public notice for the objection process (*36 CFR § 219.56(a)*).

Should no objection to the plan amendment be filed, approval of the plan amendment may occur on, but not before, the fifth business day following the end of the objection-filing period. Should an objection(s) to the plan amendment be filed and found to have standing, a decision document concerning the plan amendment cannot be issued until the reviewing officer has responded in writing to all objections, which must occur no greater than 90 days following the end of the objection-filing period (*36 CFR § 219.58*.

Effective date (*§ 219.17(a)(3)*)

The project may be implemented no sooner than 30 days after publication of notice of approval (*40 CFR 1506.10(b)(2)*).

Scope and scale of the amendment

The scope and scale of the proposed amendment is site-specific and covers a small portion of the Routt National Forest

(less than 1/1,000 of a percent). It is also project-specific, does not apply to future projects on the Forest, and does not apply to goshawk nests. The amendment is limited to one specific resource – raptors aside from goshawks -- and is limited to the project area during project construction.

Documenting Compliance with the Rule's Applicable Substantive Provisions

The 2012 planning rule requires that substantive rule provisions within *§ 219.8* through *§ 219.11* that are directly related to the amendment must be applied to the amendment.

The NEPA analysis indicated that the proposed amendment may impact individual raptors but is not likely to impact the species as a whole. Therefore, I applied the rule provisions outlined in *§ 219.9(a)(1)*: Diversity of plant and animal communities-Ecosystem integrity. While the proposed action could adversely affect this provision, due to the limited scope and scale of the amendment it is not considered a substantial lessening of protections (*§ 219.13(b)(5)(ii)(A)*).

Due to the limited scope and scale of the project, overall diversity of plant and animal communities and ecosystem integrity as a substantive requirement of *§ 219.9(a)* would be maintained throughout the Forest under existing Forest Plan direction without amending additional plan components. The responsible official is not required to apply any substantive requirements that are not directly related to the amendment. For the remaining substantive provisions from the 2012 Planning Rule, the project has no direct effect as explained below.

§ 219.8 Sustainability

- § 219.8(a)(1) Ecological Sustainability – Ecosystem Integrity – Ecological integrity of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems and watersheds in the plan area are adequately protected by existing forest plan guidance. The amendment would only have an indirect, negligible impact on ecological integrity at the ecosystem scale due to the limited scope and scale of the exempted timing restriction.
- § 219.8(a)(2) Ecological Sustainability – Air, Soil, and Water – Air quality, soils and soil productivity, water quality, and water resources are addressed in the forest plan and PDC are in place to reduce resource concerns. Timing restrictions do not directly impact these resources.
- § 219.8(a)(3) Ecological Sustainability – Riparian Areas – Ecological integrity of riparian areas is adequately protected in the forest plan and PDC are in place to reduce resource concerns. The amendment would only have an indirect, negligible impact on ecological integrity at the watershed scale due to the limited scope and scale of the exempted timing restriction.
- § 219.8(a)(4) Ecological Sustainability – Best Management Practices for Water Quality – Existing forest plan standards address best management practices for water quality by matching regional water conservation practices handbook management measures.
- § 219.8(b) Social and Economic Sustainability – The project would not have a direct effect that is outside the scope of existing forest plan direction on social and economic

sustainability (§219.8(b)). Timing restrictions do not directly impact social and economic sustainability.

- § 219.8(b)(2) Social and Economic Sustainability – Sustainable Recreation – The project has been designed to be compliant with recreation direction in the forest plan regarding sustainable recreation including recreation settings, opportunities, access, and scenic character.
- §219.8(b)(5) Social and Economic Sustainability – Cultural and Historic Resources and Uses – The project would have no effect on forest plan direction for cultural and historic resources, or management of areas of tribal importance. The project does not occur in areas of tribal importance.

§ 219.9 Diversity of Plant and Animal Communities

- § 219.9(b) Additional, Species-Specific Plan Components – Species-specific plan components are adequately addressed by existing forest plan guidance and project specific measures are in place to reduce resource concerns.
- § 219.9(c) – Species of Conservation Concern – Species of conservation concern are adequately addressed by existing forest plan guidance and project specific measures are in place to reduce resource concerns.

§ 219.10 Multiple Use

- § 219.10(a) Integrated Resource Management for Multiple Use – The limited nature of the project has no direct impact on integrated resource management to provide for ecosystem services and multiple uses.
- § 219.10(b)(i) Requirements for Plan Components for a New Plan or Plan Provision – Sustainable Recreation – The project has been designed to be compliant with recreation direction in the forest plan regarding sustainable recreation including recreation settings, opportunities, access, and scenic character.
- § 219.10(b)(ii) Requirements for Plan Components for a New Plan or Plan Provision – Protection of Cultural and Historic Resources – The project would have no effect on forest plan direction for cultural and historic resources.
- § 219.10(b)(iii) Requirements for Plan Components for a New Plan or Plan Provision – Management of Areas of Tribal Importance – The project would have no effect on forest plan direction for management of areas of tribal importance. The project does not occur in areas of tribal importance.
- § 219.10(b)(iv) Requirements for Plan Components for a New Plan or Plan Provision – Congressionally Designated Wilderness – The project would have no effect on forest plan direction congressionally designated areas or areas recommended for wilderness designation. The project does not occur in areas of wilderness or recommended wilderness.
- § 219.10(b)(v) Requirements for Plan Components for a New Plan or Plan Provision – Wild and Scenic Rivers – The project would have no effect on 1998 Forest Plan direction for wild and scenic rivers. The project does not occur in areas of wild or scenic rivers, or rivers found eligible or determined suitable for the National Wild and Scenic River system.

- § 219.10(b)(vi) Requirements for Plan Components for a New Plan or Plan Provision – Appropriate Management of Other Designated Areas – The project is proposed in an area suitable to the management of ski areas with no other designations or proposed designations within the project area.

§ 219.11 Timber Requirements based on the NFMA

- The project is compliant with existing forest plan guidance regarding: lands not suited for timber production; timber harvest for purposes other than timber production; timber harvesting in the plan area on a sustained-yield basis; timber harvest of even-aged stands for regeneration, including maximum openings; and protections for soil slope or other watershed conditions, and protection of soil, watershed, fish, wildlife, recreation, and aesthetic resources related to timber harvest (219.11(a), 219.11(c), 219.11(d)(2), 219.11(d)(3), 219.11(d)(4), 219.11(d)(5), 219.11(d)(6), 219.11(d)(7)).

References

In-Text Citation	Full Reference
CPW 2008	Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW). 2008. Recommended buffer zones and seasonal restrictions for Colorado raptors. CPW, Denver, CO.
Squires and Kennedy 2006	Squires, J.R. and P.L. Kennedy. 2006. Northern goshawk ecology: an assessment of current knowledge and information needs for conservation management. Studies in Avian Biology 31: 8-62.
USDA Forest Service 1998	USDA Forest Service. 1998. Routt National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. Available at: *https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/mbr/landmanagement/planning/?cid=fsbdev3_025110*

Appendix B. Project Design Criteria

General

- In collaboration with Forest Service staff, create a drainage management plan covering all of Steamboat. This detailed plan would describe existing and proposed drainage features and areas of excess erosion, and their connections to the existing drainage system. Any drainage issues observed and listed in this plan would be prioritized for treatment in order to mitigate changes in hydrology, attenuate flows, reduce erosion, and maintain stream health. This plan shall developed in consultation with the City of Steamboat and shall be updated as needed, but not less often than every five years.
- Implement BMPs for erosion control and sedimentation for any ground disturbing activities adjacent to wetlands. These include, but are not limited to, the installation of sediment fences, erosion control wattles, and sediment basins; avoiding placement of slash or other debris in wetlands; and not driving over wetlands unless there is a suitable thickness of snow or frozen ground to ensure that no rutting or soil compaction occurs.
- Re-seeding/revegetation plans need to be developed with the Forest Service Botanist prior to the initiation of ground disturbance. Create a revegetation plan that includes measures to adequately establish desirable vegetation. Implementation of the re-seeding/revegetation plan will occur in coordination with the Forest Service Botanist.
- Where possible, pretreat invasive plant populations within the project area with approved herbicides prior to project implementation.
- All herbicide choices for pre- and post-treatment of invasive plant species, application rates for treatment, and required resource protection measures shall follow the Final EIS and ROD for Invasive Plant Management for the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland dated August 2015.
- A Pesticide Use Proposal shall be reviewed and approved by the District/Forest Weed Program Manager prior to herbicide application and initiation of ground disturbance to ensure SSRC weed control activities are in compliance with the August 2015 Invasive Plant Species ROD.
- Before implementing any approved project activities not included in the 2019 botanical and wetland survey area, the specific project areas will be surveyed using established protocols. Surveys will be conducted for threatened, endangered, proposed, and candidate species; Forest Service Region 2 sensitive species; and wetland/riparian habitats. Such areas may include, but are not limited to, staging areas that were not originally identified prior to botanical field reconnaissance. Should these sensitive areas be identified, coordinate with Forest Service on necessary permits, PDC, or other requirements prior to implementation.
- Active Northern Goshawk Nest Site Seasonal Buffer: If northern goshawks are discovered nesting during pre- project surveys, a no disturbance buffer and timing restrictions will be set forth in the vicinity of the active goshawk nest stand up to 0.25

mile from April 15 through July 31, unless a shorter distance or lesser time is approved by a Forest Service wildlife biologist or Forest Service Responsible Official.

- Minimize the loss of suitable lynx habitat by: 1) minimizing tree and vegetation removal, 2) limiting the extent (percentage) of glading and tree removal, and 3) phasing in improved tree skiing over a five- to ten-year period as forest health improves across the Mount Werner Lynx Unit.
- To minimize impacts to elk, construction activities would not be permitted between May 15 and June 30 in currently available mapped elk production areas. If changes to the timing are needed by SSRC, then it will be agreed upon by SSRC, Forest Service, and CPW for the following projects: Beaver Creek pumphouse and infiltration gallery, expanded Rendezvous water tank, Potable Water Option A, Potable Water Option B, Sewer/Electric Option A, *Sundial* grading/blasting, Sundown Express chairlift corridor, Priest Creek chairlift corridor, Fish Creek egress, Sunshine lower terminal maze area, and snowmaking pipeline.
- Obtain any necessary CWA Section 401, 402, and 404 permits prior to project implementation.
- Contribution to a wetland bank or to the Forest Service for wetland enhancement work to offset wetland impacts and ensure compliance with EO 11990 and *40 CFR Part 230 Section 404 (b)(1)* will be required. There will be no net loss of wetlands.

Pre-Construction

- Minimize disturbance to hollyhock populations by siting lift tower footings to avoid these populations where possible.
- Wetlands proximate to the potentially disturbed areas will be identified and flagged prior to the initiation of approved construction-related activities. Construction limits will be clearly defined so as to avoid or minimize disturbance to those identified wetlands.

During Construction

- Slash and boles of trees will be less than 24" in depth or remove slash and boles to designated locations for later disposal.
- Slash and boles will occupy less than 30% of the treatment area.
- Salvage and then restore the approximate topsoil thickness (organic rich surface horizons) in all areas proposed for grading and reclamation. Avoid mixing topsoil with lower (subsoil) horizons to the most practicable extent possible.
- Where excavation has potential to cause drainage of groundwater supporting upslope wetlands, install an impermeable liner, consisting of bentonite clay or similar material, within the trench or along the cut slope to preserve the hydrologic functioning of adjacent wetlands.
- Travel routes accessing the project area prior to and during project construction will be treated for noxious species. Travel routes include ski area access roads, after leaving county administered roads.

- Clean construction and logging equipment prior to and when leaving NFS lands. Within the project area, construction and logging equipment shall be cleaned prior to entering weed free areas. Cleaning includes removing all soil, mud, plant parts, seeds, vegetative matter, or other debris that could contain or hold seeds. These areas include, but are not limited to, the Sunshine and Fish Creek areas.
- The acreage of Rabbit Ears gilia directly impacted will be replaced in kind within the Planning Area (i.e., Routt National Forest). Replacement may include, but is not limited to, seeding and live planting of Rabbit Ears gilia into appropriate habitat elsewhere within the Planning Area.
- In areas of proposed glading (40% tree removal), retain a higher density of trees within 100 feet of rare plant occurrences, where possible.
- To protect the CRCT, restrict construction activities within 50 feet of live water until after August 1, unless first coordinated with the Forest Service Fish Biologist.
- All sampling gear, waders, and tools must be washed daily and also prior to entering a stream segment with Colorado River cutthroat trout with an approved biocide to prevent spread of diseases and non-native organisms.
- Any new stream crossings on fish bearing streams or near amphibian breeding sites must meet Forest Service standards for aquatic passage as outlined in Stream Simulation: An Ecological Approach to Providing Passage for Aquatic Organisms at Road-Stream Crossings.
- Discovery Clause: If specific impacts to threatened, endangered, and Region 2 sensitive species and/or their habitats, including nests, are identified during project implementation, project operations in the immediate vicinity will be suspended until the Forest Service Fish and Wildlife Biologist or Botanist are contacted. Project implementation may be adjusted, and timing restrictions may be applied, as determined by the Forest Service, to reduce those impacts. The species of interest include any USFWS threatened, endangered, and sensitive species, goshawks, raptors, pygmy shrews, amphibians, Colorado River cutthroat trout, and rare plants.
- Raptor nest surveys will be conducted at known raptor nests between June 15 and July 31 of each construction period to identify active nest sites. Project-related construction activities are permitted prior to the beginning of the June 15 survey window, unless active goshawk nest sites were previously identified within 0.25 mile of the construction activity. If active goshawk nests are identified, a no-disturbance buffer would be set up to 0.25 mile between April 15 and July 31, unless a shorter distance or time is approved by a Forest Service wildlife biologist or responsible official. If other raptors are identified or no raptors are identified, construction could proceed following clearance by the Forest Service. Resource Monitors would specifically check for the presence of raptors, including goshawks, and the Forest Service would adjust implementation as needed to remain compliant with the 1998 Forest Plan's Wildlife Standard 6.
- Construction workers will not have dogs on site.
- All food and garbage will be secured in a bear proof manner on site and not left on site overnight.

- Maintain 100-foot vegetative buffers adjacent to intermittent or perennial drainages on each side of drainage and wetlands, as practicable (consistent with WIZ).
- Install stream crossings on straight and resilient stream reaches, as perpendicular to the flow as practicable. Install stream crossings to sustain bank full dimensions of width, depth, and slope and keep streambeds and banks resilient. Favor bridges, bottomless arches or buried pipe-arches for those streams with identifiable floodplains and elevated road prisms, instead of pipe culverts. Favor armored fords for those streams where vehicle traffic is either seasonal or temporary, or the ford design maintains the channel pattern, profile and dimension.
- Construct roads and other disturbed sites to minimize sediment discharge into streams, groundwater dependent ecosystems, wetlands, and other riparian areas. Reduce sediment sources and connected disturbed areas by minimizing the number of stream crossings. Construct trail approaches to stream crossings such that drainage is relieved onto the hill slopes, as opposed to entering the channel.
- Avoid altering the stream bed and banks to maintain the natural character of the stream.
- Do not encroach fills or introduce soil into streams, wetlands, groundwater dependent ecosystems, or riparian areas. Protect these features from sediment by installing sediment wattles, sediment fencing, retention basins, or other applications as appropriate before ground-disturbing activities begin.
- Keep heavy equipment out of streams, swales, wetlands, and ponds, except to cross at Forest Service approved and designated points or if the area is protected by at least 1 foot of packed snow or 2 inches of frozen soil. Exception may occur for performing restoration work or to build crossings, with Forest Service Soils Scientist, Hydrologist, or Fish and Wildlife Biologist approval. For approved temporary stream or wetland crossings, lay down construction mats or other physical barriers to protect against soil displacement and minimize the number of passes.
- Avoid disrupting water supply or drainage patterns into wetlands. If this is not possible, obtain Forest Service Hydrologist's approval before disturbance occurs.
- In order to prevent the proposed snowmaking and drainage pipelines from dewatering wetlands, clay cutoff walls or a similar type structure will be installed in the pipeline trench. Such cutoff walls shall be installed where the excavated pipeline trench encounters high groundwater adjacent to or in the direct vicinity of the wetlands.
- To the greatest extent practicable, the disturbance width for temporary snowmaking and other utility lines should be a maximum of 20 feet wide through wetlands and other aquatic resources.
- Flush-cut and leave stumps and root wads intact within riparian areas and wetlands, except in areas identified for grading activities.
- Keep roads and trails out of wetlands unless there is no other practicable alternative. If roads or trails must enter wetlands, use bridges or raised prisms with diffuse drainage to sustain flow patterns. Set crossing bottoms at natural levels of channel beds and wet meadow surfaces. Avoid actions that may dewater or reduce water budgets in wetlands.

Post Construction

- Reclaim disturbed areas promptly after construction to prevent erosion and invasion by weeds. Ensure proper drainage, rip compacted areas, apply biodegradable erosion control blanket or mulch, and apply a Forest Service- approved noxious weed-free seed mix to facilitate revegetation. Incorporate native vegetation into site plans as much as possible.
- Monitor for and treat any new invasive botanical species for a minimum of three years after project completion.
- SSRC will continually communicate with CPW and the Forest Service to monitor any increases in big game pressure and human-big game conflicts as a result of the project.
- To protect brook trout, limit pumping at the Beaver Creek pump station to no more than 25 gallons per minute to provide adequate streamflow in Beaver Creek.
- During winter operations, maintain roads as needed to keep the road surface drained during thaws and break- ups. Perform snow removal in such a manner that protects the road and other adjacent resources. Do not use riparian areas, wetlands or streams for snow storage or disposal. Remove snow berms where they result in accumulation or concentration of snowmelt runoff on the road or erodible fill slopes. Install snow berms where such placement will preclude concentration of snowmelt runoff and will serve to rapidly dissipate melt water.

Steamboat®

STEAMBOAT RESORT IMPROVEMENTS PROJECT AND PROJECT-SPECIFIC FOREST PLAN AMENDMENT FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT AND DECISION NOTICE

APRIL 2021

USDA Forest Service
Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland
Rocky Mountain Region

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Finding of No Significant Impact

Analysis presented in the EA indicates that the proposed action would not, individually or cumulatively, significantly affect the quality of the human, biological, or physical environment; thus, an environmental impact statement would not be required. The provisions of *40 CFR § 1508.27* indicate that project significance must be judged in terms of both context and intensity, defined as follows:

Context

The significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts and varies with the setting. In the case of site-specific actions, significance depends more on the effects in the locale rather than the world as a whole. Both short- and long-term effects are relevant. The direct and indirect effects analysis contained in the EA focuses on the Steamboat SUP area, and extends further for cumulative effects analysis, depending on the resource. Local issues were identified through the scoping process and considered during project development and analysis. The project area is limited in scale, and the site-specific activities are confined. Both spatial and temporal effects are limited and not likely to meaningfully affect natural resources or the human environment.

Intensity

The finding of no significant impact is based on ten factors identified in *40 CFR § 1508.27(b)*. An initial screen was conducted to confirm whether or not the proposed action is consistent with the *1998 Forest Plan*. It was determined that the proposed action would be inconsistent with Threatened, Endangered, Sensitive Species, and Wildlife Standard 6; however, the inclusion of a 1998 Forest Plan amendment to temporarily remove the applicability of that standard would allow the project to remain consistent with the *1998 Forest Plan*. Additionally, the ID Team considered the effects of the project appropriately and thoroughly with an analysis that is responsive to the concerns and issues raised by the public.

1) Consideration of both beneficial and adverse impacts.

Both the beneficial and adverse impacts associated with the proposed action are presented in the EA. The proposed action would provide recreational benefits to users of the MBRTB and would improve recreation opportunities on NFS lands. Any adverse resource impacts are thoroughly documented in **Chapter 3** of the EA and are determined to be avoidable and/or non-significant. Other issues and resources were not included in detailed analysis in the EA due to a lack of anticipated impacts. The finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by beneficial effects of the action.

2) Consideration of the effects on public health and safety.

Although there are inherent risks associated with lift-served alpine skiing and there could be an increase in use of the difficult Fish Creek terrain, the proposed action would not significantly affect public health and safety. Given the increase in signage and better ski patrol response, public safety would improve in the Fish Creek area and other

mitigation measures have been included in the proposed action to ensure that public health or safety are not degraded.

3) Consideration of the unique characteristics of the geographic area.

There are no unique characteristics of the geographic area affected by the proposed action.

4) Consideration of the degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be considered controversial.

No scientific dispute exists regarding the proposed action or the analysis contained in the EA. Based on the fact that the Forest Service has analyzed and approved numerous projects of this type, the effects of this project are not considered to be controversial, nor is there scientific dispute about these effects.

5) Consideration of the degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

The proposed action is similar to projects common at ski areas that operate on NFS lands. The analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risks. Therefore, based on the Forest Service's experience with implementing these types of activities, as well as the requirement to implement PDC to minimize effects, there would not be significant effects on the human environment.

6) Consideration of the degree to which this action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or that it represents a decision in principle about future considerations.

This decision would not establish a precedent for future actions with significant risks to the environment. The proposed action is consistent with forest-wide and Management Area 8.22 direction, as well as the Steamboat SUP. Furthermore, the projects and activities included in the proposed action are common at a developed resort such as Steamboat.

7) Consideration of the action in relation to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.

The cumulative effects analyses presented for each resource throughout **Chapter 3** in the EA disclose past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions with potential to lead to effects which are cumulative in nature. Due to avoidance, project-specific PDC, and the implementation of BMPs, the analysis does not identify any cumulatively significant impacts that are anticipated to result from implementation of the proposed action.

8) Consideration of the degree to which the action may affect listed or eligible historic places.

During the Class III cultural resource inventory completed for the proposed action, two sites of various sources were identified. One site was recommended as not eligible for inclusion in the NRHP. The other site, a segment of the Fish Creek Falls Trail, is recommended as contributing to the eligibility of the overall site (5RT.530, the Fish Creek Falls Trail). However, as only select tree removal and no grading or new development would occur, there would be no adverse effects to the site. A recommendation of no historic properties affected was made and the Forest Service received response from the State Historic Preservation Office concurring with this determination on November 11, 2020. No active cultural resource monitoring or changes in the

design of the undertaking are necessary for the protection of historic properties.

9) Consideration of the degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its critical habitat.

The proposed action is consistent with Section 7(d) of the Endangered Species Act. The proposed action would affect Canada lynx and the four Upper Colorado River fish (Colorado pikeminnow, razorback sucker, humpback chub, and bonytail chub).

For Canada lynx, the determination is "may affect, not likely to adversely affect." The proposed action would result in vegetation clearing in potential Canada lynx habitat, which may affect but is not likely to adversely affect Canada lynx and lynx habitat. While the project would result in tree clearing in the Fish Creek area as well as ground disturbance and tree clearing within the existing Steamboat operational boundary, the area would likely have already been degraded in terms of lynx habitat quality due to use of these areas that has been occurring for decades. Based on this use, it is likely that habitat effectiveness for lynx is already compromised and that lynx currently avoid the land within the operational boundary and Fish Creek due to existing levels of human use and development. Furthermore, the disturbance to lynx habitat is less than one percent of the available habitat within the Mount Werner LAU. The proposed action is consistent with all applicable lynx-related provisions of the *Southern Rockies Lynx Management Direction* and the associated Final Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision.

The determination for the four Upper Colorado River fish is "adversely affect.". In 2005, the USFWS issues a final programmatic biological opinion on the Management Plan for Endangered Fishes in the Yampa River Basin. Water depletions less than 100 acre-feet/year fit under the umbrella of the Yampa River programmatic biological opinion. As depletions under the proposed action would increase to 98.9 acre-feet, the project fits within this biological opinion. With implementation of the Recovery Action Plan elements, the adverse effects of this project are not likely to jeopardize the big river fish or adversely modify their designated critical habitats.

Section 7 consultation with the USFWS is in progress; a summary of this consultation and the USFWS's Biological Opinion will be included in the final decision notice.

10) Consideration of whether the action violated federal, state, or local laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

Based on information disclosed in the EA, the BA, the BE, and the project file, no federal, state, or local laws, regulations, or requirements for protection of the environment would be violated with implementation of the proposed action, including: *USFWS's Endangered Species Act Informal Section 7 Consultation*; *U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Clean Water Act 404 Permit*; State of Colorado's *Stormwater Management Plan* and *Burn Permit*; *Executive Order 11990, Protection of Wetlands*; and *Executive Order 11988, Floodplain Management*.

The proposed action would not be compliant with Threatened, Endangered, Sensitive Species, and Wildlife Standard 6 of the *1998 Forest Plan* due to construction and project activities that would occur in the proximity of known active and inactive raptor nest areas. The temporary amendment of the 1998 Forest Plan to remove the applicability of this standard, combined with the adherence of this standard if a goshawk is found to be nesting and lack of disturbance to known active or inactive goshawk nests or nest territories, would allow the project to remain compliant with the *1998 Forest Plan*.

Draft Decision Notice

This decision notice documents my decision and rationale for approving the proposed projects on the Hahns Peak/Bears Ears Ranger District, Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland (MBRTB). The project area is located within Steamboat Ski Resort's (Steamboat) Special Use Permit (SUP) boundary, Routt County, Colorado. My decision is based on and supported by the April 2021 Steamboat Resort Improvements Project Environmental Assessment (EA).

Decision

After thoroughly considering the purpose and need for action, issues, range of alternatives, and analyses presented in the EA, as well as public comments that were received, I am approving the proposed action with the inclusion of all project design criteria (PDC) identified in **Appendix B** of the EA. The selected alternative includes the following elements: operational boundary adjustment to include Fish Creek; Fish Creek egress trail and Burgess Creek bridge; modifications to *Sundial*; Why Not and Four Points road improvements; construction of the upper Wild Blue Gondola; removal of the Priest Creek chairlift; replacement of the Sundown Express chairlift; installation of the Sunshine Peak snowmaking infrastructure; construction of the Sunshine Restaurant; installation of utilities supporting the Sunshine Restaurant including potable water, sewer, electric lines, and fiber optic lines, as well as the Beaver Creek pumphouse and collection gallery and expanded Rendezvous water tank. Further description of the selected alternative can be found in the EA (pages 6-14).

The selected alternative, along with my decision to require PDC, meets all applicable laws, regulations, and policies. With the application of PDC, the project will not result in any unacceptable effects to NFS lands. Failure to comply with the required PDC will constitute a breach of the project approval and could suspend construction and/or operations on the facilities approved by this decision. The selected alternative includes a collection of projects within the Sunshine Peak and Fish Creek areas. It is understood that not all projects may be implemented immediately to open and operate the terrain in these areas (e.g., the Wild Blue Gondola may not be initially constructed); project components can be phased in over time with this authorization.

All approved projects will be located within Steamboat's existing SUP area. The selected alternative is depicted in **Figures 2** and **3** of the EA.

An amendment to the 1998 Routt National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (*1998 Forest Plan*) is a component of the selected alternative. An inconsistency was identified between the selected alternative and Threatened, Endangered, Sensitive Species, and Wildlife Standard 6, which states:

Protect known active and inactive raptor nest areas. Extent of the protection will be based on approved management activities, human activities existing before nest establishment, species, topography, vegetative cover, and other factors. A no-disturbance buffer around active nest sites will be required from nest-site selection to fledging (generally March through July). Exceptions may occur when animals are adapted to human activity.

In accordance with the National Forest Management Act and its implementing regulations at *36 CFR § 219* (2012 Planning Rule), I am approving this 1998 Forest Plan amendment that will remove the applicability of this standard during the construction phase of the selected alternative. The amendment will not apply to the operation or maintenance phase of the selected alternative, nor to future projects not included in the selected alternative. This amendment will also not apply to northern goshawks. This amendment is similar to the project-specific amendment included in the 2018 FEIS/ROD. Refer to **Appendix A** of the EA for additional detail regarding the 1998 Forest Plan amendment.

Project Design Criteria

PDC will be applied to avoid and minimize potential resource impacts from construction and implementation of the selected alternative. This list supplements the standard BMPs (USDA Forest Service 2012) and any additional BMPs contained in the *1998 Forest Plan* (USDA Forest Service 1998) that SSRC will be required to prepare for Forest Service review prior to the start of construction and implementation. PDC are identified in **Appendix B** of the EA.

Rationale For My Decision

In reaching my decision I relied heavily upon an ID Team composed of Forest Service resource specialists who analyzed the effects of the proposed action documented in the EA. I considered the following issues and concerns: anticipated effects to recreation, scenery, cultural resources, botany, wildlife and fisheries, hydrology, soils, and wetlands. I also understand that certain resources were not carried forward in detailed analysis for the EA; however, those resources were considered by the ID Team and determined to be eliminated from detailed analysis with rationale. I also reviewed the PDC included in the EA, as well as public comments received during the 30-day scoping/comment period and considered how the selected alternative will respond to the stated purpose and need.

In reviewing the qualitative and quantitative effects on the human and biological environment presented in the EA, I find they have been adequately addressed and disclosed. I considered impacts to the full range of resources affecting the human, biological, and physical environments. I have reviewed the potential direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts. Through the application of appropriate PDC identified to minimize impacts to the resources of concern, I feel confident that potential impacts have been thoroughly assessed and disclosed.

I understand there is concern over impacts to wildlife that currently live within and adjacent the Steamboat SUP area, including elk, mule deer, raptors, and others. While these species may be displaced from the project area and/or impacted by construction and development, there is a variety of ample

habitat beyond that Steamboat SUP available to these species. It is also worth noting that this project results in minimal disturbance in undeveloped areas and primarily occurs in previously disturbed areas. In addition, a variety of PDC have been included to protect the diverse array of wildlife species potentially present in the area and overall, I believe that there would not be undue negative impacts.

I recognize that the project may affect the Beaver Creek, Priest Creek, Burgess Creek, and Fish Creek watersheds as well as the broader Yampa River Valley watershed. However, watershed PDC and drainage management measures approved for this project will mitigate impacts across the ski area. With the diverse array of PDC, ranging from a required drainage management plan to prompt revegetation to general erosion BMPs, I believe that impacts to these watersheds will be minimized.

There are other potential impacts of the project on recreation in the area. Specifically, the project could displace existing summer recreation users within the Steamboat SUP area during construction, and backcountry users that currently recreate in the Fish Creek area. Given the temporal and spatial limitations to the disturbance and construction extent of the project, I believe impacts to summer recreation users will be negligible. There will be impacts to backcountry users; however, the overall user experience of Fish Creek will remain similar to existing conditions and there will continue to be no direct lift access to this area. There may be an increase in use of this area, affecting the user experience for some individuals but I believe the benefits outweigh the potential costs. Overall, I feel my decision will improve the experience of guests to the Forest within the Steamboat SUP area in conjunction with the stated environmental impacts.

Other Alternatives Considered

The selected alternative was the only alternative analyzed in detail in the EA. In accordance with *Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, Chapter 40, Section 41.22*, and *36 CFR § 220.7(b)(2)(ii)*, the EA did not include an analysis of the no action alternative; however, numerous other alternatives were considered early in the NEPA process. These alternatives were thoroughly considered by the Forest Service against *1998 Forest Plan* direction and were not carried forward into detailed analysis (refer to **Section 2.2** of the EA).

Public Involvement

In July 2020 a notice of proposed action was mailed or emailed to community residents, interested individuals, government officials, public agencies, tribal governments, and other organizations, initiating a 30-day comment period. A virtual open house was held on July 17, 2020. A total of 81 comment letters were received during scoping and were then utilized by the ID Team to identify substantive issues and to consider potential alternatives to the proposed action. I considered these comments in my decision. After reviewing public comments, as well as internal concerns raised by Forest Service specialists, a final list of issues was assembled that helped guide subsequent analysis. Issues are identified in **Chapter 1** of the EA.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the

human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (according to *40 CFR § 1508.27*). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. Refer to the finding of no significant impact document in the EA for additional detail.

Findings Requirement by Other Laws and Regulations

Upon approval of the 1998 Forest Plan amendment, this decision is consistent with the *1998 Forest Plan* as required by the National Forest Management Act of 1976 and all other laws, regulations, and policies that govern Forest Service actions. Site-specific PDC (**Appendix B** of the EA) and *1998 Forest Plan* standards and guidelines will be applied, as appropriate, to meet 1998 Forest Plan goals and desired conditions. While the Forest Service assumes no responsibility for enforcing laws, regulations, or ordinances under the jurisdiction of other governmental agencies, Forest Service regulations require permittees to abide by applicable laws and conditions imposed by other jurisdictions. The project was designed to conform to the *1998 Forest Plan* and all other laws, regulations, and policies, including: U.S. Fish and Wildlife's Endangered Species Act Informal Section 7 Consultation; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Clean Water Act 404 Permit; State of Colorado's Stormwater Management Plan and Burn Permit; *Executive Order 11990, Protection of Wetlands*; and *Executive Order 11988, Floodplain Management*.

Opportunity to Object to the Proposed Project

This decision is subject to the objection processes pursuant to pursuant to *36 CFR § 218.8* (Project-level components objection) and *36 CFR § 219.54* (1998 Forest Plan amendment objection). Objections will only be accepted from those who have previously submitted specific written or substantive formal comments regarding the proposed project or 1998 Forest Plan amendment during a comment period in accordance with *36 CFR § 218.5(a)* or *36 CFR § 219.53*. Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted, timely, and specific written or substantive formal comments regarding the proposed project, unless comments are based on new information that arose after the designated comment opportunities.

Incorporation of documents by reference is not allowed, except for the following items that may be referenced by including date, page, and section of the cited document, along with a description of its content and applicability to the objection: 1) All or any part of a federal law or regulation; 2) Forest Service directives and land management plans; 3) Documents referenced by the Forest Service in the proposed project environmental analysis document that is subject to objection. All other documents must be included with the objection.

At a minimum, an objection must include the following: objector's name and physical mailing address; signature or other verification of authorship upon request; identification of the lead objector when multiple names are listed; name of the proposed project; name and title of Responsible Official; and name of national forest unit(s) on which the project will be implemented (*36 CFR § 218.8(d)* or *36 CFR § 219.54(c)*).

Objections, including attachments, must be filed via mail, email, hand-delivery, express delivery, or messenger service (Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., excluding holidays) to:

Objection Reviewing Officer, USDA Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Region, 1617 Cole Blvd. Building 17, Golden, CO 80401; fax: Fax: (303) 275-5134 to the attention of Objections or Email: r02admin_review@fs.fed.us. Electronic objections must be submitted in a format such as an e-mail message, plain text (.txt), Portable Document Format (.pdf), rich text format (.rtf), or MS Word (.doc). In cases where no identifiable name is attached to an electronic message, a verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature is one way to provide verification.

Objections must be submitted within 45 calendar days following the publication of a legal notice in the Laramie Boomerang. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an objection. Those wishing to object should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. The regulations prohibit extending the time to file an objection.

It is the objector's responsibility to ensure timely filing of a written objection with the reviewing officer pursuant to *36 CFR § 218.9* or *36 CFR § 219.56*, which includes: date of U.S. Postal Service postmark or shipping date for delivery by private carrier for an objection received before the close of the fifth business day after the objection filing period; agency's electronically generated date and time for email and facsimiles; or official agency date stamp showing receipt of hand delivery. All objections are available for public inspection during and after the objection process.

Implementation Date

If no objections are filed within the 45-day time period, approval of the decision may occur on, but not before, five (5) business days from the close of the objection filing period. Aspects of the project that are impacted by the project-specific 1998 Forest Plan amendment may be implemented no sooner than 30 days after publication of notice of approval (*40 CFR § 1506.10(b)(2)*).

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision, please contact:

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