

**Analysis of Public Comments Sent to the  
U.S. Forest Service**

**Proposed Ski Resort Development  
on Lolo Peak**

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# **Executive Summary**

An analysis of public comments regarding a proposed four season resort on Lolo Peak in Missoula County, Montana shows approximately 80% oppose ski resort development on U.S. Forest Service lands. Approximately 20% of the comments favor the resort and use of Forest Service lands.

## **Introduction**

The Bitterroot, Flathead and Lolo National Forests have combined efforts to revise long-term forest management plans. As part of this process they invited public comment, receiving thousands of comments. A substantial amount of the comments focused on the proposed ski resort development on and near Lolo Peak. The Forest Service created a separate database of the Lolo Peak comments. These comments are the subject of this analysis and report.

The comments reviewed were solely those provided by the Forest Service. Bader Consulting did not participate in the process of separating out the specific Lolo Peak comments or the format in which those comments were presented (alphabetical in this case) and the comment analysis described herein pertains only to those comments provided by the Forest Service.

## **Methods**

The comments were provided on electronic computer disk and organized by alphabetical order according to the first letter of the last name of citizens. Each comment was individually opened and read to ascertain the position of pro or con and also to register the main emphasis or reason stated in support of the position. Tally sheets were used to record each individual comment with an alpha-numeric

identifier. These sheets were organized using the first letter of the last name. For example, the first sheet was comprised of comments from citizens whose last name begins with A and so forth through the alphabet.

Whenever a letter contained the names of several people, that letter was treated as one individual comment. Whenever a duplicate letter was detected, or an identical letter sent by the same person on a different date, that comment was identified as a duplicate and removed from further analysis. There were 11 comments identified as duplicates. Another 16 comments took neither a pro or con position, and either did not pertain to the proposed resort, or expressed neutrality on this issue, often advising the Forest Service to keep an open mind and conduct a fair analysis. Following this process, there were 1,014 individual catalogued comments.

As a check against these results, the larger pool of general comments on the joint forest plan revisions were obtained from the Forest Service, and one of every three comments was read to see if any pertained to Lolo Peak, and if so, was the amount significant?

During the review process it became clear that those in favor of the resort stated two primary reasons: recreational opportunity and the potential for economic growth and increased employment, and an additional number cited no specific reason for their support. Those opposed to the resort cited more categories of reasons for their opposition and an additional number cited no specific reason for their support. Based on the review, the following categories were developed.

## **Categories Used for Those Favoring a Developed Ski Resort on Lolo Peak**

### **1- Recreational Opportunities**

These people cited their support for increased recreation opportunities on a local basis.

### **2- Economic Opportunity & Job Creation**

These people primarily support a resort for the perceived economic opportunities it would bring to the local community, including new job creation and increased visitor spending.

### **3- No Reason Provided**

These people provided no specific reason for their position and their comments were often one-sentence statements such as, “I am totally in favor of the Bitterroot Resort.”

## **Categories Used for Those Opposing A Developed Ski Resort on Lolo Peak**

### **1- Wilderness & Land Protection**

These people primarily cited the wilderness, primitive and roadless qualities of Lolo Peak and surrounding lands.

### **2- Scenic Values**

These people commented primarily on the beauty of Lolo Peak, and the outstanding view from the valley.

### **3- Economics & Quality of Life**

These people cited economic issues pertaining to their perceived non-viability of a resort, most often citing the availability of several nearby ski areas and lack of adequate snow to support a ski area. Others cited perceived negative economic effects and impact to quality of life.

### **4- No Private Use of Public Lands**

These people voiced their objection to the private use of public land for private commercial purposes.

### **5- No Reason Provided**

These people provided no specific reason for their position. These frequently consisted of one-sentence statements such as “I am totally opposed to the Bitterroot Resort.”

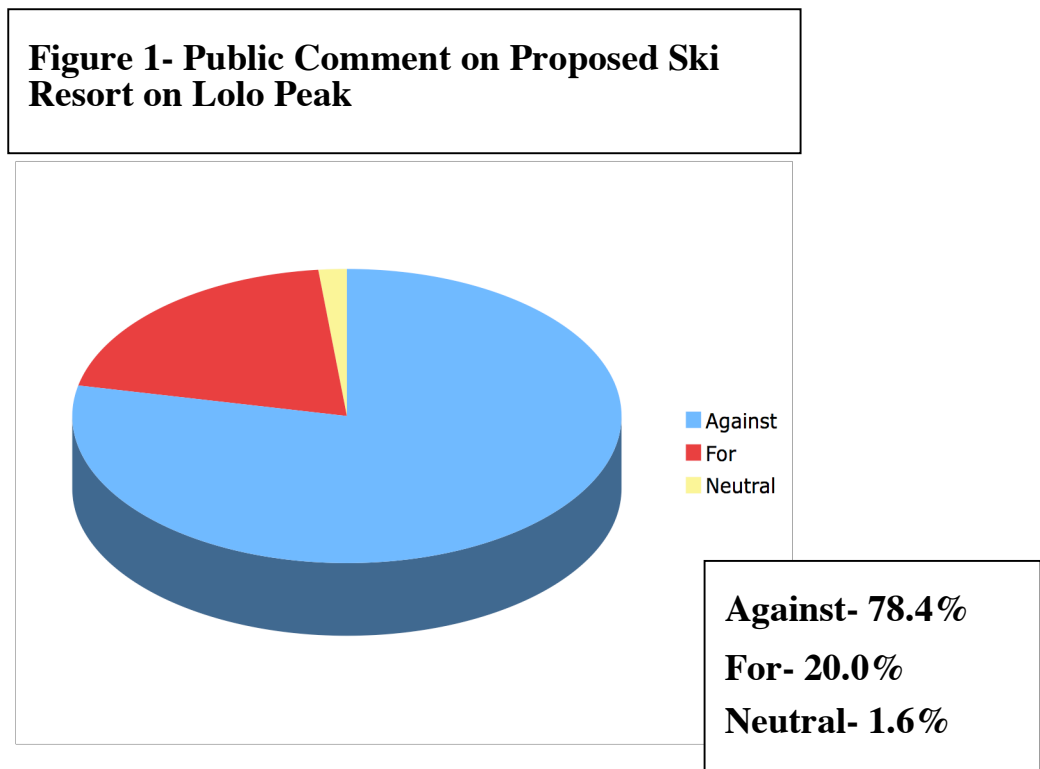
## **Assignment**

Whenever the comment cited several different reasons, for purposes of assignment to the categories listed above, either the first reason listed or the one with the most words and emphasis was used.

## Results

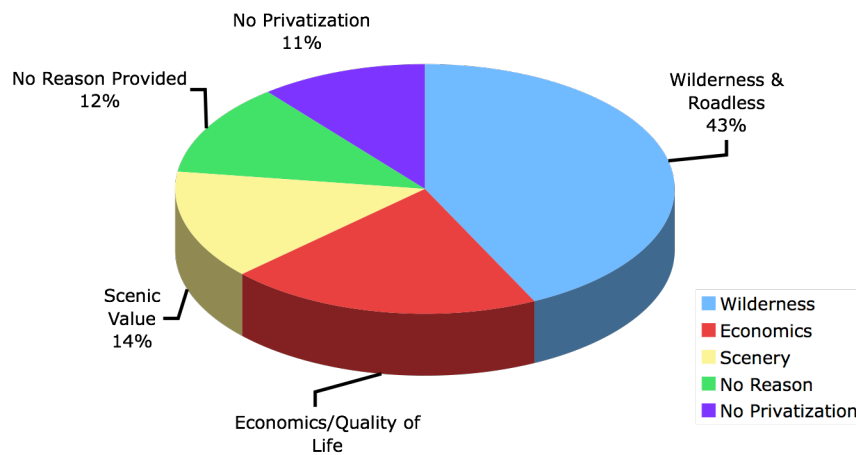
Analysis of the 1,014 comments revealed that 78.4% oppose the resort on public lands, 20% favor the resort on public lands and 1.6% of the comments were neutral or unrelated to the resort issue. Of the 998 comments stating a pro or con position, 795 (79.7%) opposed the resort plan and use of Forest Service lands. Those in favor of the resort numbered 203 (20.3%).

The review of the general comments on the plan revisions (n = 289), found a total of 27 (9.3%) contained some specific reference to the proposed ski development at Lolo Peak. Of these, 88% voiced opposition to the resort on public lands. These were not considered significant enough to alter the analysis or conclusions, and were not included in the totals nor further considered.



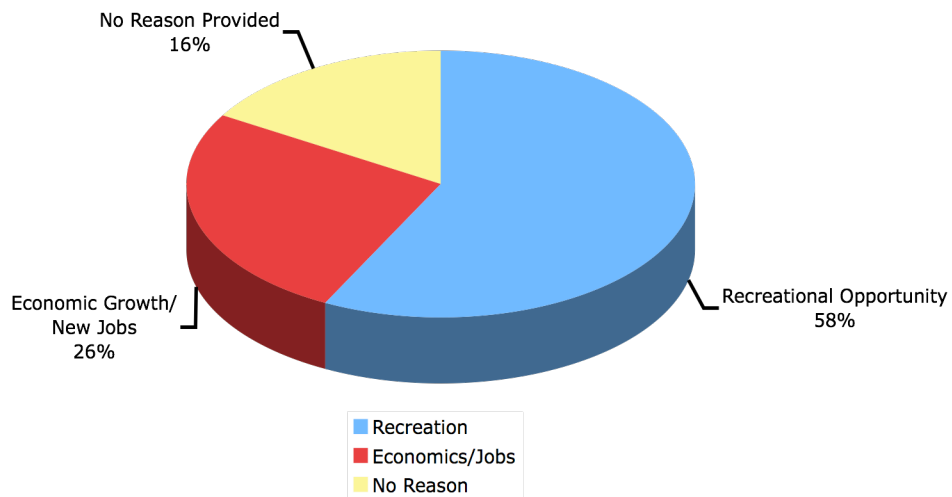
Of those opposed to the resort, 43% cited wilderness, roadless and primitive values and many advocated for expansion of the Carlton Ridge Research Natural Area; 20% cited negative economic effects and impacts to quality of life; 14% emphasized scenic values; 11% voiced strong opposition to private use of public lands; 12% provided no specific reason.

**Figure 2- Comments Opposed to Ski Resort**



Of those in favor of the resort, 58% cited increased recreational opportunity, with emphasis on a local alternative with shorter drives; 26% cited the opportunity for economic growth and job creation; 16% did not provide a reason.

**Figure 3- Comments in Favor of Ski Resort**



## Discussion

Several trends were evident in reviewing the comments. Among those opposed to a ski resort on Forest Service lands, the most consistent theme expressed was “leave it the way it is.” Many want to see an increase in the level of protection of the roadless area and the Carlton Ridge Research Natural Area. Many want the area put into Wilderness designation and support expansion of the Carlton Ridge RNA. Others cited the unique biological values of the area including the alpine larch.

The second largest group cited chiefly economic reasons. A commonly voiced opinion is that global warming trends portend shorter winters and less snow at lower elevations, threatening the viability of a ski area. The number of existing ski areas in the region was also mentioned often. Many others stated they feel the resort would have mostly negative economic effects, increasing the cost of living while offering low-paying jobs. Another frequently voiced concern regarded a perceived lower quality of life due to increased traffic and residential sprawl. Many objected to an “Aspen or Vail in the Bitterroot.”

Many respondents emphasized protection for the scenic values of Lolo Peak, commenting they see Lolo Peak everyday. Many others stated that they object to the new ski runs on the lower slopes, frequently referring to them as “ugly scars.”

Finally, there were those who expressed strong opposition to private use of public lands. Many of these said they did not care what private landowners did with their own lands, but strongly oppose any use of public lands chiefly for the benefit of private interests.

Among those in favor of a ski resort on Lolo Peak, 58% cited recreational opportunity as their reason for supporting use of Forest Service lands for a developed ski area. Many stated it is too far for families to travel to other ski areas in western Montana and they want an

opportunity to ski with shorter driving distances. Among this group, a frequent comment was the desire for a local ski area. Other stated they are excited about the prospect of skiing the upper slopes of Lolo Peak.

Another 26% stated they believe the resort would bring increased economic opportunities, including new jobs and increased visitor spending in the local area. Many stated they want Forest Service lands used for developed recreation in order to promote economic growth.

Finally, an interesting aspect was the effect that paid advertisements had on public comment. A large number of respondents cited the ads using negative terms, and of those who mentioned the ads, a large majority expressed opposition to the resort idea.

## **Conclusion**

The sample size of  $\approx 1,000$  comments indicate that an overwhelming majority of the interested public is strongly opposed to development of a ski resort on public U.S. Forest Service lands on and near Lolo Peak.