

DECISION NOTICE

Iron Mountain Ski Area Non-Significant Amendment to the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan

USDA Forest Service
Region 5 – Pacific Southwest Region
Eldorado National Forest
Amador and Placerville Ranger Districts
El Dorado County, CA

Decision and Reasons for the Decision

The Iron Mountain Ski Area Non-Significant Amendment to the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan Environmental Assessment (EA) that discusses and analyzes the environmental effects of the proposed removal of Iron Mountain as an Existing and Potential Winter Sports Site and redesignating these lands as Roaded Natural High Country is incorporated by reference. This Environmental Assessment is available for public review at the Amador Ranger District Office at 26820 Silver Drive, Pioneer, California 95666.

It is my decision to implement Alternative 2 of the Iron Mountain Ski Area Non-Significant Amendment to the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan EA. My decision is based on my review of the EA, the Errata to the EA, the response to comments received during the 30-day Notice and Comment period, and supporting documentation in the project file. Alternative 2 will remove Iron Mountain Ski Area's designation as an "Existing Winter Sport Site" and "Potential Winter Sports Site" (Management Areas 11 and 12) from the Eldorado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan–1989 (ENFLRMP) and redesignate the area as "Roaded Natural High Country" (Management Area 8). In recognition of the existing private landownership at Iron Mountain, all or parts of T.9N., R.16E., Sections 8, 9, 10, 15, 16, 17 will be added to the list of National Forest Service Lands available for disposal by exchange. This will allow for the possibility of future consideration of a land exchange proposal by the Iron Mountain private land owner(s).

My reasons for the decision follow:

1. Alternative 2 (redesignation of the Iron Mountain Ski Area lands to Roaded Natural High Country in the ENFLRMP) best meets the purpose and need, and provides the greatest net public benefits consistent with sustainable multiple use management.
2. The analysis of the physical attributes of Iron Mountain, of the actions and costs necessary to achieve competitive standards, of the potential market, visitation and revenue levels, and of the area's past history, make it clear that the area is not, and will not be suitable as a downhill skiing winter sports area.

3. It is my conclusion that operation of a ski area at Iron Mountain will not be economically viable in the long term, solely based on the physical characteristics (location, terrain, climate, size) and potential market. This conclusion would remain the same regardless of the quality of management or financial backing.

Iron Mountain Ski Area is an existing ski resort with basic facilities; parking lot, lifts, cleared runs, lodge and over-night facilities. It has a privately owned land base of operations. And, it is on the road to Kirkwood Ski Area. These positive aspects are heavily outweighed by at least three major problems: poor terrain, poor location, and high costs to bring the resort up to standards. First, the poor skiability of terrain makes Iron Mountain neither a good ski area for beginners nor challenging enough for advanced skiers. There is a disproportionate amount of intermediate runs. These runs are characterized by very uneven gradient with short steep advanced sections and longer flat sections. Iron Mountain is a "top-down" ski area with the lodge and base at the top of the hill, making it difficult for skiers to recover when they inadvertently venture on to slopes either above or below their ability. Secondly, Iron Mountain Ski Area is at a serious competitive disadvantage with respect to location. Other higher quality ski areas are either a short distance up the road or skiers have several other high quality destinations in the area to choose from. Iron Mountain Ski Area is not on a heavily traveled road to take advantage of overflow or new traffic. The ski area is not within close proximity (1 hour) of a major urban area. Third, the high cost of making Iron Mountain even a marginally attractive ski area is enormous. Existing ski lifts must be replaced and upgraded. Snow making equipment installed to extend the season to just breakeven. Buildings must be brought up to current codes, ski runs cleared of encroaching vegetation and erosion protection measures installed.

4. These lands would become consistently available for general recreation activities, such as snow play, dispersed camping, snowmobiling, hiking, and cross-country skiing, for which there is a demand.
5. The funds the Forest Service is expending to administer the site as a ski area are substantial and could be reallocated to meet other recreation visitor needs.
6. Regeneration of vegetation and forested habitat would occur, and wildlife habitat and watershed stability would improve.

Nonsignificant Amendment to the Eldorado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan

The selected alternative will result in the amendment of the ENFLRMP to remove Iron Mountain as an "Existing Winter Sports Site" from Management Area Number 11 and as a "Potential Winter Sports Site" from Management Area Number 12, and redesignate these lands (1,699 acres total) as Management Area Number 8 -- "Roaded Natural High Country." The total acreage for Management Area 8 will increase from 13,855 to 15,554 acres. (See attached for amended ENFLRMP language.) This amendment is considered a nonsignificant amendment pursuant to Forest Service Handbook 1909.12 Chapter 5.32 for the following reasons:

1. Timing – The decision is to be implemented in 2001, which is twelve years after the adoption of the ENFLRMP, and approximately four years prior to the next revision of the plan.
2. Location and Site – The 1,699 acres contained in the Iron Mountain area represent less than 0.3% of the total area (596,724 acres) of Eldorado National Forest.
3. Goals, Objectives, and Outputs – The redesignation will not alter the long-term relationships between the levels of goods and services projected by the ENFLRMP. The decrease in the ski area acreage and projected SAOT (Skiers At One Time) will not trigger a change in the developed recreation output, it just alters the mix of uses. The actual SAOT outputs will remain unchanged because Iron Mountain is not economically viable as a ski area and has not operated for a number of years. The total demand for developed recreation is not expected to change from the projections in the ENFLRMP since it was calculated as a function of population, however demand for skiing is and has been relatively flat, and other forms of recreation are becoming more popular.
4. Management Prescription – The change in management prescription affects only the Iron Mountain site and would not apply to future decisions elsewhere in the Eldorado National Forest. The Eldorado National Forest's desired future condition for developed recreation is to accommodate the projected increase in demand. The Forest has sufficient potential recreation sites to meet this demand, and it recognizes that changes in the types of uses accommodated may be necessary.

Alternatives Considered

Alternatives considered in detail in the Iron Mountain Ski Area Non-Significant Amendment to the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan EA included Alternative 1 – the No Action Alternative and Alternative 2 – the Proposed Action Alternative. I did not select the No Action Alternative because it did not meet the purpose and need of making more efficient use of Forest Service/taxpayer funds, and it could prevent consistent access to these lands for forest recreation visitors.

Public Involvement

Scoping for this redesignation of Iron Mountain began in January 2000. A letter including a map and the description of Management Area 8 (Roaded Natural High Country) and its management emphasis, direction, and guidelines was sent to potentially interested citizens, groups, and companies. Notification of the proposed action was published in the quarterly Eldorado National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions. A public scoping meeting was also held on February 7, 2000. The Forest Service received a total of 39 (thirty-nine) comment letters and oral responses, and also met with several interested parties to discuss their concerns. The comment period, originally scheduled to end February 25, 2000 was extended to June 5, 2000, to accommodate concerns about the time necessary to provide adequate input. These comments were considered in my decision.

The EA was released for public comment in October 2000. The public comment period ended in November 2000 and the Forest Service received ten (10) written responses. The Forest Service response to these comments is included in Appendix A of the EA. The Errata contains corrections to the EA.

The scoping documents, records of phone calls, meeting notes, written communications, and the mailing list are contained within the project file at the Amador Ranger Station.

Finding of No Significant Impact

A finding of no significant impact has been prepared and is attached to this decision notice.

Findings Required by other Laws and Regulations

The Iron Mountain Ski Area Non-Significant Amendment to the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan EA was completed pursuant to Forest Service Handbook 1909.12 and 1909.15. The environmental assessment responds to the issues brought up by the public during scoping and during the 30-day Public Notice and Comment period, and the effects of the two alternatives are disclosed. The environmental assessment is sufficient for me to determine whether or not to proceed with the proposed action.

My decision complies with the National Forest Management Act. The area to be redesignated meets the description of and is appropriate for the Management Emphasis in Management Area 8 (Roaded Natural High Country) in the ENFLRMP, which is to "maintain a roaded natural type forest setting that provides a range of recreation opportunities and experiences" and to "accommodate both motorized and non-motorized vehicle travel" compatible with other resources (ENFLRMP, p. 4-166). The General Direction and the Standards and Guidelines for a Roaded Natural High Country designation are also suitable for the subject area (ENFLRMP, pp. 4-166 through 4-171; EA pp. 1-6, 3-2 through 3-12).

Implementation Date

Per 36 CFR 217.10 (a), implementation of any decision subject to appeal shall not occur for seven calendar days following publication of the legal notice of the decision. Implementation of the redesignation of Iron Mountain as Roaded Natural High Country in the Eldorado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan will occur January 25, 2001.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 217.3. Any appeals must be filed with Brad Powell, Regional Forester, 1323 Club Drive, Vallejo, CA 94592 by February 26, 2001. Appeals must be received or postmarked on or before the last day of the appeal filing period. It is the appellant's responsibility to comply with 36 CFR 217.9, Content of a Notice of Appeal.

Contact Person

Any questions you have about the Iron Mountain Ski Area Non-significant Amendment to the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan should be directed to Judith Yandoh, District Ranger, Amador Ranger District, 26820 Silver Drive, Pioneer, CA 95666 or by calling her at 209-295-4251.


JOHN D. BERRY

Forest Supervisor

1-10-2001
Date

MANAGEMENT AREA NUMBER 8

ROADED NATURAL HIGH COUNTRY

Management Emphasis

Maintain a roaded natural type forest setting that provides a range of recreation opportunities and experiences. Accommodate both motorized and nonmotorized vehicle travel and make it compatible with the grazing, minerals exploration and development, wildlife, water and soil resources.

Description

Management Area Number 8 contains 15,554 acres. The Area is dissected by major transportation facilities but adjacent lands are essentially natural. It meets the Forest Service criteria for the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum class of Roaded Natural. Special timber harvest methods are employed to enhance dispersed recreation and visual quality or salvage insect and disease losses.

[The remainder of the Management Area Number 8 contents, pp. 4-166 – 4-171, will remain the same.]

MANAGEMENT AREA NUMBER 11

EXISTING WINTER SPORTS SITES

Management Emphasis

Operate and maintain existing winter sports sites. Provide aesthetically pleasing, well maintained, fully equipped facilities for the pleasure and safety of forest visitors.

Description

These are developed winter sports sites that are administered by the Forest Service and are operated by the Forest Service, other government entities, or by private concessionaires under Special Use Permit. Uses vary by site and may include downhill skiing, nordic skiing, and snowplay. Existing winter sports sites contained in Management Area Number 11 are:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Site No.</u>	<u>Acres</u>
Kirkwood Meadows	710.0	2,165
Echo Summit	267.0	109
Sierra Ski Ranch	339.0	<u>1,579</u>
	TOTAL	3,853

*[The remainder of the Management Area Number 11 contents
pp. 4-184 – 4-189, will remain the same.]*

MANAGEMENT AREA NUMBER 12

POTENTIAL WINTER SPORTS SITES

Management Emphasis

Protect potential downhill skiing sites for future development. Maintain or improve the forest setting.

Description

These are inventoried sports sites that have characteristics that make them suitable for downhill skiing. All potential areas are adjacent to existing winter sports sites. They would be constructed by private concessionaires under Special Use Permit. Potential sites contained in Management Area Number 12 are:

Scheduled this Decade

<u>Name</u>	<u>Site No.</u>	<u>Acres</u>
Huckleberry	679.0	238
Sierra Ski Ranch	339.1-2	1,173
Kirkwood Meadows	798.1-2	1,709
Echo Summit	267.1	60
Total		3,180

[The remainder of the Management Area Number 12 contents, pp. 4-190 – 4-193, will remain the same.]

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Iron Mountain Ski Area Non-Significant Amendment to the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan

USDA Forest Service
Region 5 – Pacific Southwest Region
Eldorado National Forest
Amador and Placerville Ranger Districts
El Dorado County, CA

I have reviewed the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Iron Mountain Ski Area Non-Significant Amendment to the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (October 17, 2000), the supporting documentation in the project file, the Errata for the EA, the comments received from the public during the 30-day Notice and Comment period, and the response to those comments. The EA, which is incorporated by reference, analyzed the effects of retaining the current land use designation under the No Action Alternative (Alternative 1) and the effects of adopting the Proposed Action (Alternative 2). The EA discusses and analyzes the environmental effects of changing the designation in the ENFLRMP of the Iron Mountain area from Existing Winter Sports Site and Potential Winter Sports Site and redesignating the area as Roaded Natural High Country.

Based on my review, I have selected Alternative 2. It is my determination that implementation of Alternative 2, as described in the EA is not a major federal action that will significantly affect the quality of the human environment, therefore an environmental impact assessment is not necessary. The proposed action is not, nor is it similar to, projects that have been identified by the Forest Service as belonging to the class of actions that normally require an environmental impact statement. This determination is based on the following factors:

1. Alternative 2 is limited in time and scope:

The change in management prescription for the Iron Mountain area applies to only 1,699 acres - or less than 0.3%--of the total area (596,724 acres) within the Eldorado National Forest. Alternative 2 amends the 1989 Eldorado National Forest Land and Resources Management Plan (ENFLRMP). The ENFLRMP is due for revision in approximately four years. (EA page 1-1, and ENFLRMP pages 1-1).

2. The impacts of implementing Alternative 2 are minor:

Alternative 2 will not result in any direct, indirect, or cumulative negative impacts to watershed, vegetation, wildlife - including federally threatened, endangered and proposed species, or heritage resources (EA pages 3-2 to 3-9).

The effects on the skiing public will not be significant, because the area has been open to the public only 14 of the last 28 years. Additionally, there is little likelihood that any ski operation at the site would remain in operation for any significant length of time since it has been determined that Iron Mountain is not an economically viable enterprise (EA pages 1-1 to 1-4, 3-10 and 3-11). For the same reasons, the socio-economic impacts to the counties are minimal (EA pages 3-12 to 3-14, and Response to Comments #1 and 2).

3. There will be beneficial effects that are of limited intensity and are not considered significant:

The ski area would not operate again, which will allow stream channel and hillslope erosion stability to improve and the risk of cumulative watershed effects to decrease as the area returns to more natural conditions over time. (EA pages 3-2 to 3-3)

Regeneration of forested habitat on the ski runs will benefit wildlife, including spotted owls, goshawks, great gray owls, willow flycatchers, fishers, martens, Sierra Nevada red fox, California wolverines, mountain yellow-legged frogs, and ENFLRMP Management Indicator Species. Federally threatened, endangered, and sensitive species individuals may also be beneficially affected. (EA page 3-7)

Alternative 2 will allow the Forest Service to stop using public funds and resources to evaluate ski area operation proposals. (EA page 3-14)

Alternative 2 will also make the area consistently accessible to the public for other types of recreation uses. (EA page 3-12)

4. The change of management prescription for the Iron Mountain area will not adversely affect public health or safety:

When Iron Mountain was operating as a ski area, recreation activities such as snowmobiling, snowplay, and dispersed camping were excluded due to potential user conflicts with downhill skiers and the safety concerns of other types of dispersed use mixing with the concentrated downhill ski use (EA page 3-10). Alternative 2 removes the conflict and the safety concerns, and opens the area to a variety of dispersed winter and summer recreation uses.

The redesignation of Iron Mountain under Alternative 2 would place the area in part of the High Country emphasis zone of the ENFLRMP, which serves as a key dispersed recreation area. Many visitors use this zone for a wide variety of winter and summer dispersed recreation activities. There are inherent risks in all of these activities, and the Iron Mountain site may or may not be any more dangerous for any or all of these activities (Response to Comments #35).

5. No known unique or unusual circumstances exist in the geographic area:

There are no known effects to parklands, prime farmlands, wetlands, floodplains, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

6. Alternative 2 is not likely to cause highly controversial effects:

No comments were received concerning potential effects of the proposed action to the physical or biological environment. Concerns were raised about potential effects of the proposed action on the local economy. Based on past experience and the determination that the site is not economically viable as a ski area (EA pages 1-1 to 1-4, and 3-12), as well as documentation of effects to the local economy (EA pages 3-13 to 3-14, and Response to Comments #1 and 2), I do not consider the effects to be highly controversial.

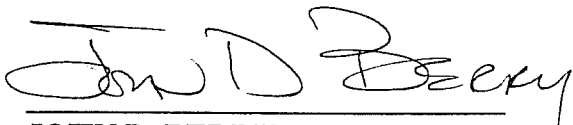
7. Alternative 2 will not involve highly uncertain, unique, or unknown environmental risks: The EA provides sufficient information for determining the effects of the proposed action.

8. This action does not establish a precedent for future actions.

9. Alternative 2 will not produce any significant irretrievable, irreversible, or cumulative effects:

The analysis of the redesignation of Iron Mountain within the ENFLRMP revealed no adverse cumulative effects. Biological Evaluations/Biological Assessment (BEs/BA) analyzing the effects of Alternative 2 on threatened, endangered, and sensitive terrestrial and aquatic wildlife and plant species were completed. These BEs/BA determined that Alternative 2 may beneficially affect individuals, and is not likely to result in a trend toward federal listing or loss of viability for these species. Alternative 2 will have no cumulative effects to heritage resources (EA page 3-9). Socioeconomic analysis indicated that Alternative 2 would continue the current situation that exists, in that El Dorado County will continue to collect only property tax on the private property, and that this would continue unless a new commercial enterprise (i.e. snowmobile area) was permitted at the site. Amador County has not benefited from jobs or skier spending associated with Iron Mountain for at least five years, and this situation also would continue unless there is a new commercial enterprise as just described (EA page 3-14).

10. The project does not threaten any violations of Federal, State, and local laws or requirement for protection of the environment.



JOHN D. BERRY
Forest Supervisor

1-10-2001

Date

**Errata for the
Iron Mountain Ski Area Non-Significant Amendment
to the
Forest Land and Resource Management Plan
Environmental Assessment**

January 3, 2001

The following changes are made to the Iron Mountain Ski Area Non-Significant Amendment to the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan EA.

Page 1-5

Delete the first paragraph and replace with the following:

The purpose of the proposed action is use the site to the best public benefits, make the site available for use to a variety of forest visitors and activities, and to minimize the costs incurred by the Forest Service.

Page 1-6

Delete the last paragraph and replace with the following:

The Forest Supervisor of the Eldorado National Forest, as the responsible official for this proposed amendment, must determine the capability and suitability of the lands to sustain a winter sports area, and decide whether to implement the Proposed Action (Alternative 2) as described in Chapter 2, or take no action at this time.

Pages 3-8 and 3-9

Change the references to the "Carson Route of the California Emigrant Trail" to "Carson Route, California National Historic Trail."