

Lee Canyon expansion clears hurdle, but further challenges likely

By **Rory Appleton** Las Vegas Review-Journal

November 5, 2019 - 4:55 pm

Don't miss the big stories. Like us on Facebook.

The Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest announced Tuesday that a proposal for a massive [multimillion-dollar expansion and remodeling project](#) at Lee Canyon, Southern Nevada's only ski resort, can move forward.

The proposal now moves into a 45-day public comment period, during which at least one local environmental group has pledged to fight the proposal due to the significant impact it could have on an endangered butterfly.

Forest supervisor Bill Dunkelberger selected a specific proposal known as the Bristlecone Trail Alternative, which makes minor adjustments to Lee Canyon's \$35 million proposal to build mountain biking trails, a "mountain coaster" and ziplines designed to transition the resort into a

year-round attraction. The expansion plan also would expand ski terrain, add new lifts, improve parking and modernize existing buildings.

Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest spokeswoman Erica Hupp said any formal objections to the plan will be reviewed by a Forest Service regional office. Objections can only be submitted by people who previously commented on earlier drafts of the proposal. There is no firm timetable for when final approval could be granted for the project, as this review period could take days or more than a year, depending on how many objections are filed.

Jim Seely, marketing director for the ski area 50 miles northwest of the Strip, released a statement praising the decision: "We are pleased the U.S. Forest Service has been so diligent in working through the process of balancing the care of a sensitive environment with the creation of additional summer and winter recreation opportunities for the community."

The plan has been in the works since 2011 but has only recently neared Forest Service clearance because of concerns over the Mount Charleston blue butterfly, which was declared an endangered species in 2013. After the Carpenter 1 fire destroyed much of its habitat, the butterfly's remaining home in the Lee Canyon ski area was given protected status in 2015.

Patrick Donnelly, Nevada director for the environmental nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity, said his organization will file a formal objection

and fight the proposal in federal court if needed to protect the butterflies.

Donnelly said the butterfly relies on several flower species that only grow on Mount Charleston. Introducing trails and additional foot traffic during the summer, when the insects are most active, may doom a species already impacted by climate change, he said.

"The ski resort is the most important habitat left for the butterfly," Donnelly said. "This could put the butterfly at significant risk of extinction."