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Mt. Charleston Development Dispute Centers On Rare Blue Butterfly

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by

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Last November, federal officials approved plans to upgrade recreational amenities at Lee Canyon Ski Area, about an hour north of Las Vegas.

The 785-acre resort is looking to add chair lifts and ski runs for winter sports, as well as mountain bike trails, a mountain coaster, a zipline, and other attractions to help it bring in visitors year-round.

But less than a week after the Forest Service gave the project a thumbs-up, the Center for Biological Diversity filed a lawsuit crying foul.

The center claims the environmental review process didn't accurately assess the impact the new attractions would have on the Mount Charleston blue butterfly, an endangered species that exists only in the Spring Mountains, where the ski resort is located.

"The stronghold of its habitat is right there in Lee Canyon Ski area in the place that would be slated to be turned into downhill mountain biking trails and a rollercoaster," said Patrick Donnelly, executive director for the Center for Biological Diversity.

Donnelly said there was another area that the butterfly called home but most of it was heavily damaged by the Carpenter One fire in 2013, leaving the ski area as the only significant habitat for the tiny butterfly.

To make matters worse, Donnelly said it is difficult to know just how many butterflies live there because they are so difficult to spot.

"These butterflies are very, very rare," he said, "Researchers will be out there all summer long and they'll see fewer than a couple dozen butterflies."

So, after years of research, they are still not sure how many butterflies live on the mountain.

The land the ski resort sits on is managed by the Forest Service, but it is the responsibility of the Fish and Wildlife Service to make sure species living on that land are protected.

Fish and Wildlife gave its analysis of the project to the Forest Service, which ultimately decided that the project on the public land it manages can go forward.

Donnelly believes in this case Fish and Wildlife did not do its job.

"Ultimately, we feel like Fish and Wildlife Service made the wrong call here at Lee Canyon for the Mt. Charleston blue butterfly by saying that turning the butterflies' critical habitat into an extreme downhill sports amusement park wouldn't jeopardize the butterfly," he said.

He stands by the term "extreme downhill sports," because the mountain biking trails would include a lift to bring bikes and riders to the top of the trails. Donnelly believes if someone is "bombing" down a trail that was too steep to ride up is "extreme."

His group also has a problem with the way the trails are designed. He said they bisect the butterflies' habitat and crisscross through it, making it difficult for the insect to have a "cohesive population."

The owners of Lee Canyon Ski and Snowboard Resort have a different view of the proposed mountain biking trails.

Dan Hooper is the general manager of the resort, which is owned by Powder Corporation. He said the Forest Service requested that they leave 15 feet barrier around any butterfly habitat.

"That did present some design challenges," he said, "Definitely the company that was laying out our mountain bike trails had a challenge on their hands with that mitigation measure not being able to be within 15 foot of suitable habitat, but that's why we were happy to take the time to ensure that the design of those trails was in a way that wasn't interfering with current Mt. Charleston blue butterfly habitat."

He said the design and environmental impact analysis has taken nine years to complete.

"That's been really important for us that we've taken our time to work through that process to make sure that all the guests that come up here recreate in Lee Canyon can

do so confidentially knowing that the expansion is being done in an environmentally conscious way,” he said.

Hooper said the expansion at Lee Canyon is a lot more environmentally friendly than some of the unmanaged recreation that goes on in the Spring Mountains.

He pointed to the unmanaged area just down the mountain from the ski area on Lee Canyon Road. Lee Meadows is a snow play area used by a lot of people, but Hooper said there are no restroom facilities, and people leave a lot of trash behind.

He said the ski resort hopes to offer a managed recreation spot for the people who are already coming to the Spring Mountains.

“Unfortunately, the Spring Mountains, and just recreation in general around Las Vegas currently, lacks enough managed recreation for that growing Vegas population,” he said.

Hooper said that the expansion plans include a 500-spot parking area at the ski resort, which is much bigger than the number of visitors they expect to attract with their new activities.

Some of the other infrastructure problems on Lee and Kyle Canyon roads are beyond the ski area's control, but Hooper said they are working with government agencies to better address concerns like illegal parking and overcrowded roads.

As for the butterfly, Hooper said some of the expansion plans will help.

“There’s certain aspects to the project that actually potentially have the possibility of adding additional habitat for the butterfly,” he said.

Hopper explained that the butterflies preferred habitat is the current ski runs, and as they designed the new runs, they looked for ways to better link the habitats in hopes of encouraging more butterflies to live there.

Donnelly and the Center for Biological Diversity suggest looking for another place to expand recreational activities outside of the habitat of a rare and endangered butterfly

“The goal here is to prevent the extinction of the Mt. Charleston blue butterfly,” he said, “If there are ways that this project can move forward without putting the butterfly in jeopardy of extinction, we’re open to those discussions.”

Guests:

Patrick Donnelly, state director, Center for Biological Diversity; **Dan Hooper**, general manager, Lee Canyon Ski Resort