

**National Ski Areas Association  
Testimony to the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands**

**H.R. 765- Ski Area Recreational Opportunity Enhancement Act**

**Beth Ganz  
Vice President of Public Affairs and Sustainability  
Vail Resorts**

**May 4, 2011**

Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. On behalf of Vail Resorts and the National Ski Areas Association I am pleased to provide the following testimony in support of H.R. 765, the Ski Area Recreational Opportunity Enhancement Act.

NSAA has 121 member ski areas that operate on National Forest System lands. These public land resorts are in the states of Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Vermont, Washington and Wyoming. Vail Resorts owns and operates six resorts in Colorado, Nevada and California of which five are located on public lands.

At the outset, we would like to thank Chairman Bishop for his leadership on this bill.

**Background**

Public land resorts work in partnership with the US Forest Service to deliver an outdoor recreation experience unmatched in the world. Our longstanding partnership—dating back to the 1940s, is a model public-private partnership that greatly benefits the American public. The recreation opportunities provided at public land resorts help benefit rural economies, improve the health and fitness of millions of Americans, provide kids and families great outdoor experiences and promote appreciation for the natural environment.

In addition to the recreation benefits that ski areas provide throughout the year there are economic benefits that must be considered. Resorts are frequently one of the largest employers in the rural regions in which they operate, providing important employment and other economic opportunities for their local population base. The presence of resorts provides a critical component of the economy in many areas of the country.

Over the past five years, we have averaged 58.6 million skier/snowboarder visits annually, and about 60% of those visits occurred on public land. Yet ski areas occupy less than one-tenth of one percent of Forest Service lands.

Ski areas are the perfect place to accommodate these large numbers of forest visitors and not just in the winter. It is important to remember that ski areas are *developed* sites. They inspire appreciation for the natural environment, but they also represent a

built environment that is accessible and convenient for visitors. Ski areas already have the parking lots, bathrooms, trails and other facilities to accommodate millions of summer visitors. Use of developed ski areas during all times of the year allows the Forest Service to provide recreation opportunities to millions of visitors in a controlled and mitigated environment thus alleviating the impacts *elsewhere* on the forests.

## **Summer and Year-Round Activities**

Summer and year-round activities are not new to ski areas. Resorts across the country have offered summer activities for decades, with scenic chairlift rides dating back to the 1960s. These activities include mountain biking, scenic chairlift rides, hiking, ziplines, alpine slides, climbing walls, Frisbee golf and others. Until very recently, the authorization of summer activities at public land resorts occurred without issue. Many ski area special use permits reference “year-round” or “four season” resorts. The Forest Service Manual expressly encourages the year-round use of resort facilities. Even Congress recognized the four-season nature of resorts back in 1996 by including the term “gross year-round revenue” in our fee system (16 USC 497c). Resorts have acted in reliance of these authorities, and the federal government has collected fees on summer activities, for decades.

So why are we here? NSAA strongly supports H.R. 765 to create a national comprehensive approach to growing seasonal and year-round recreational opportunities. Such an approach will provide for more consistent decision making and more accurately reflect what is now taking place at modern four-season resorts.

Summer and year-round recreation can transform ski areas and their rural communities from single season destinations into year-round destinations. Year-round visitation increases year-round employment opportunities in rural resort communities, creating a more stable workforce and local economy. It should also be noted that public land resorts generate permit fees for the Forest Service from all revenues generated by activities at ski areas. The Congressional Budget Office confirmed this last point in the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress stating that the bill would not negatively impact the federal budget and that it will minimally increase receipts to the Treasury.

We believe that there is great potential for resorts to expand their offerings of seasonal and year-round recreational activities. According to NSAA statistics, the average resort’s non-ski season operations account for just 6.9 percent of overall revenues illustrating this point. H.R. 765 could prove to be an economic boost to many rural areas improving local employment, food and beverage receipts, lodging and providing gateway access to the public’s enjoyment of their public lands.

## **The Bill**

Specifically, H.R. 765 clarifies the Forest Service’s authority to permit appropriate seasonal or year-round recreational activities and facilities subject to ski area permits issued by the Secretary under section 3 of the National Forest Ski Area Permit Act of 1986 (16 USC 497b). The bill is also an opportunity to update the language used to describe snow-sports to better reflect the wide range of snow sports (including snowboarding, snow-biking, etc) taking place at modern ski-areas. NSAA notes and

appreciates the discretion and guidance the bill provides to the Secretary to make site-specific decisions on appropriate activities and facilities that are natural resource-based, outdoor developed recreation that harmonize with the natural environment of the public lands.

In the 110<sup>th</sup> and 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, the Administration testified in support of the bill and stated that further clarifications would assist the Forest Service in its interpretation and implementation of the bill. During consideration in the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress the legislation was amended with the input of the National Ski Areas Association, U.S. Forest Service, committee staff and other stakeholders. The bill as you see it today reflects those amendments as agreed to in the Senate which are largely similar to the House passed version of the bill.

Thank you for your consideration of H.R. 765. This bi-partisan, no-cost and non-controversial legislation is important to ski areas across the country and we encourage its swift passage.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear here today.