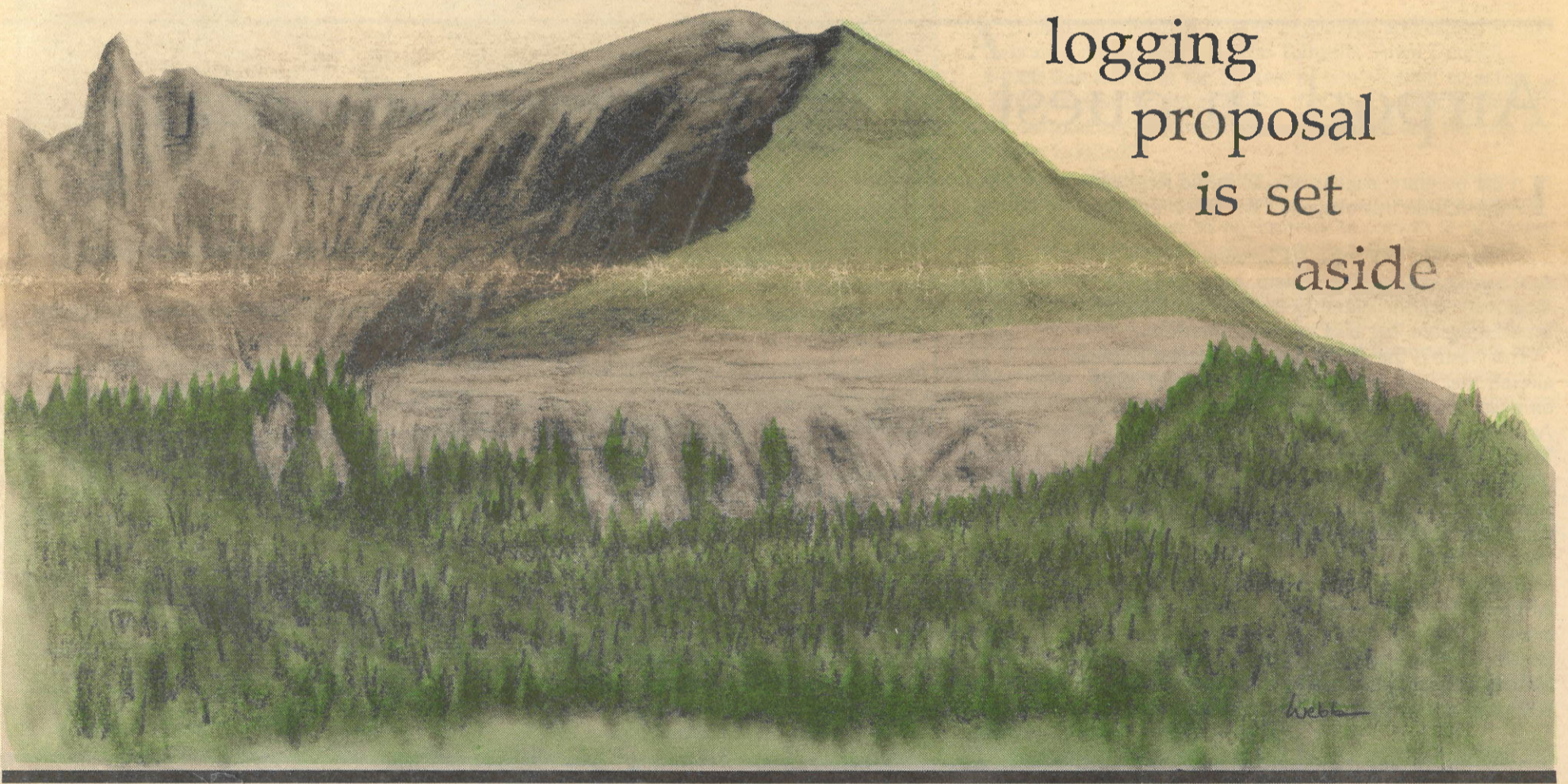


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Sheep Mountain:

logging
proposal
is set
aside



Elk habitat gets heavy consideration

by Jim Davidson

Putting to rest a widely and vigorously opposed timber harvesting proposal, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Monday disclosed that agency's decision to allow no commercial logging on Sheep Mountain for at least the next 10 years.

The USFS previewed their Tuesday official announcement at a special Monday meeting with opposition Sheep Mountain Alliance members in Durango, stating that the 4800-acre region proposed for some 3.5 million board feet of logging would now be managed primarily as

a semi-primitive roadless area and wildlife habitat.

Specifically, the decision earmarks 3,600 acres for semi-primitive roadless management, 700 acres for wildlife habitat emphasis and 500 acres for motorized recreation along the highway corridor.

Those management objectives are subject to change when the San Juan National Forest management plan undergoes a mandatory review in 1998.

In presenting his agency's official Decision Notice, drafted after nearly a year of public input, San Juan Forest District Ranger

"A case cannot be made for harvesting the area at this time."

a modified version of the alternative number one — no action — as outlined in the Sheep Mountain scoping, or evaluation, document was the chosen course of action.

Responding to the public comment that was "widespread and pretty overwhelming," Atencio said, "the public told us and our own biologists told us that this is a key wildlife area."

Atencio also said that the decision was driven

there's no reason to go in" and economic analysis that said "we're going to lose bucks on this thing."

Whereas, under a complicated evaluation system, no cutting would leave the forest with quantifiable benefits valued at \$270,000, following the forest harvesting plan would cost the agency \$309,000, the official decision document indicated.

Signed by Forest Supervisor William Sexton, the document states further, "A case cannot be made for harvesting the area at this time. Stands are healthy, wildlife habitat is near optimum conditions, recreation opportunities meet current needs, and stream courses are capable of accommodating only very small increases in wa-

cost more to prepare and offer than it could be expected to generate in benefits."

Rather than designate the entire area for semi-primitive management (3A prescription, in USFS par-

See reactions, chronology

pages 8, 9

lance), the USFS indicated a determination to preserve the option of limited future cutting to improve wildlife habitat under a 4B designation.

Such cutting, forest planner Jim Furnish said, "would require no roads, no skidding, no hauling."

The decision document fur-

Reactions favor logging resolution

Reaction to the U.S. Forest Service's decision to protect Sheep Mountain from logging over the next decade ran strongly in favor of the decision and the process leading to it.

Among some of the most notable responses were these:

● "I'm really pleased with the process. It started out a little rough at first [when the comment period had to be extended due to lack of communication with the public], but in the end we got a lot of valuable information we wouldn't have had otherwise. It was a sound decision." — Leonard Atencio, San Juan National Forest District Ranger

● "I'm pleased. We should all be pleased. But I still can't quite understand why the Forest Service

didn't designate it all 3A [semi-primitive roadless] and guarantee that it will be left alone. And I can't help but wonder what will happen to Sheep Mountain in 10 years when the loggers in the San Juan National Forest are out of trees." — Jack Pera, president of the Sheep Mountain Alliance

● "It's exciting. I've never been a part of anything like this before [the reversal of position by the Forest Service on a timber sale]." — Ann Longworth, Western Colorado Congress staffer

● "It's nice to win one once in a while, and it's pretty uncommon. Once the Forest Service has decided to cut an area, it's really tough to stop it without an appeal and legal action ... The key to the decision

was that the timber, being at the head of the canyon, was pretty marginal and would be expensive to get out. Rather than go through a helluva fight, the Forest Service probably decided it just wasn't worth it." — Rocky Smith, timber specialist with the Colorado Environmental Coalition

● "The Sheep Mountain decision recognizes that timbering is not always the best or even most profitable use of our national forests. We are often far better off protecting our state's natural resources for hunting, fishing, hiking, camping and other recreational uses.

"Recreational activities generate substantial economic and social benefits, contributing greatly to our state's \$5 billion per year tourism and

recreation industry.

"Money-losing timber sales which no private landowner would ever consider are an absurd use of our economic and natural resources. Common sense dictates that we save resources like Sheep Mountain and use them in accordance with fundamental principles of economics and conservation." — Senator Tim Wirth of Colorado

● "We asked them to find an alternative to the Sheep Mountain site since logging is important to the economy of Montezuma County ... When you have a forest as beautiful as Sheep Mountain, we need to keep it and sell it more than once to the tourists ... San Juan Forest officials were willing to work with people, and they deserve a pat on the back." — Ann

Brown, Durango staffer for Rep. Ben Nighthorse Campbell

● "I think they made the right decision. For the Telluride area, that's very good news. It gives me a renewed level of confidence in the Forest Service's sensitivity to the importance of scenic quality to the Telluride region's economy." — Richard Grice, San Miguel County Planning Director

● "I'm happy to see the town government and the county government supporting a successful environmental action." — Mark Worth, Mayor of Telluride.

Sheep

continued from page 1

ther referred to wildlife management, stating, "Because a portion of this area is excellent summer habitat for elk, I [Sexton] have determined that it should be managed specifically for that purpose, with a management prescription of 4B. It is currently in an optimum condition for elk, and although I can foresee no need to do anything to maintain this optimum condition in the near future, I believe it is appropriate to specify an emphasis on wildlife manage-

ment for this area, rather than semi-primitive, non-motorized recreation. The timber lands in this prescription area will not become part of the suitable timber base."

As explained by Furnish, removal of Sheep Mountain from the suitable timber base means the area, at least for 10 years, will not be relied upon to meet San Juan National Forest's annual proposed timber yield quota of 24 million board feet. Consequently, Furnish said, other areas of the forest must be more extensively harvested to make up for the exclusion of the Sheep Mountain timber.

No particular replacement

Support for cutting in the form of comment from the logging industry had been minimal — a fact Atencio found both surprising and unexplainable.

source for Sheep Mountain spruce has been identified, Furnish said, indicating that one or more alternative projects will have to be

identified to offset several logging options removed from the forest plan.

At the Monday meeting, Sexton said that semi-primitive/wildlife designation "are set for 10 years — that's as long as the plan [the forest management plan] lasts. Then we start over again."

Furnish added, however, that when the forest review begins in 1998, existing prescriptions and situation will be treated as "givens," with no changes made without substantiated cause.

Responding to hundreds of letters received in opposition to the sale, the decision document said

further, "Public opposition to this project has been voluminous and intense. Although I [Sexton] believe some of this opposition is based on misunderstanding, I appreciate the sincerity and deeply-held values people ascribe to this area. I believe it is appropriate to make an effort to manage this area in a manner more consistent with my perception of the public's stated needs."

Atencio said that, although opposition to the cutting had been strong, support in the form of comment from the logging industry had been minimal — a fact that he found both surprising and difficult to explain.

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