

By Luann Danforth

/ Bulletin guest columnist

For a number years now, the Deschutes National Forest has been talking about and studying the idea of building a sno-park near Kapka Butte.

It is supposed to solve overcrowded parking for both motorized and nonmotorized users along the Cascade Lakes Highway. The highest sno-park in the area is at Dutchman Flat.

It was built many years ago by Elk Lake Resort with the help of local snowmobilers. The number of users wishing to park there and ride, ski and snowshoe has grown by leaps and bounds over the years, but the parking lot will only hold 20 cars and six trucks with trailers, at best.

Because of the elevation, the Dutchman area is the first to receive snow and holds it best during winter warm spells and in the spring. Sadly, the area proposed for a new sno-park near Kapka Butte does not hold snow well because it is too low and faces south.

The powers that be in the Deschutes National Forest seem very reluctant to look at expanding Dutchman Flat Sno-park for all users, yet when one looks at comments made in his weekly trail condition report in The Bulletin, Chris Sabo, the trails supervisor, speaks to the need to do just that.

The difference in elevation really does matter. From the Nov. 25, 2010, edition: "reports of 18 to 20 inches at Virginia Meissner and Edison sno-parks, 2 feet at Wanoga, more than 3 feet at Swampy and 3 to 4 feet on Dutchman Flat. Sabo was relieved that snow fell at lower elevations, so crowds can be dispersed among all the sno-parks."

After the rains of early December, Sabo said in the Dec. 16 edition, after indicating that conditions were better up high, "Wanoga Sno-park, which offers a snow play area, is currently in fair condition, but should continue to improve as there is no more rain." That elevation thing came up again in the Dec. 30, 2010, article, in which Sabo indicated the following amounts of snow: "from 10 inches in lower elevations to perhaps 10 feet up high."

He also stated "at lower elevations, low snow hazards are always possible. Be on the lookout for rocks, stumps and other obstacles." One wonders why snowmobilers might want to start out a bit higher on the mountain. And then there is the parking issue.

"Finally, the holiday and predicted conditions will likely mean moderate to heavy usage at sno-parks and trails through New Year's weekend. Plan for overflow parking at some sno-parks, and have a second and third choice in mind."

Sabo is a lucky guy. On Jan. 13, he reported that he had skied the Dutchman Flat area the previous Tuesday and encountered "great, great snow." It is nice if one can get out on weekdays and not have to fight the weekend crowds.

Later in the same article, the reporter, Ben Salmon, wrote, "The weather isn't great news for area winter recreationists, but the silver lining is that it may keep crowds away, Sabo said. But, that also means people may be flocking to higher, snowier spots like

Dutchman, which has a small parking lot, so plan ahead.”

Could that small parking lot be a problem?

It kind of sounds like the Forest Service does not really want people to come and use the National Forest. Maybe you should only plan on coming in a small car and on weekdays.

On Feb. 10, 2011, the difference elevation makes again came to light. “Temps have cooled again and even feel closer to February-like, and those higher elevations with 4 to 5 inches of new snow are a welcome sight,” Sabo said.

The article, written by Anne Aurand, continues: “Dutchman Flat, at 6350-foot elevation, had 4 to 5 inches of new snow as of Tuesday afternoon, according to Sabo” and “Wanoga Snoplay area at 5,400 feet, received only 1 inch of new snow.”

It seems pretty obvious that more parking for all users at the highest possible elevation makes a lot of sense. Unless, of course, you really don't want people to come and use the national forest for recreation.

Luann Danforth lives in Sisters.

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