

March 8, 2014

Re: SEABA's request for opening additional terrain to heli-skiing for a month-long special event.

Dear Assembly Members, Mayor Scott, and Manager Cozzi,

I request that no additional terrain be opened to heli-skiing for the following reasons:

1) The current map and regulations are a compromise arrived at over about 15 years of involvement by many individuals, organizations, and agencies. No one gets what he/she wants. However, SEABA is unwilling to abide by the compromise and returns each season to the borough manager and assembly asking for more. As a result, year after year borough staff have had to spend an inordinate amount of resources dealing with the issue. As a taxpayer, I am fed up with SEABA's demands causing my tax dollars to be wasted. SEABA in particular is disrespectful of all who have participated in good faith in this process to be required to debate again and again the same issues including the number of skier days and the allowable terrain. I do not believe that SEABA will be satisfied until they are allowed to operate wherever they choose in the borough. I ask that some clause be added to code that only allows a heli-ski company to request changes to its permit every 5 years.

2) The weather and snow packs are variables which affect many different businesses. When fishermen experience bad weather, they don't get extended seasons or additional territory in which to fish. Eaglecrest and Alyeska ski areas have had poor seasons as a result of the weather but that is simply a hazard inherent to the business. Surely SEABA does not expect good skiing conditions each winter; surely they don't expect the borough to make allowances for them anytime there are poor conditions. It seems odd to encourage clients to come here when the ski conditions are poor and perhaps dangerous. How will that help promote Haines?

3) Calling the proposed month long photo contest a "special ski competition event" is a blatant attempt to circumvent code. In spring 2013, the industry petitioned the borough to give them these same 5 areas for heli-skiing terrain. Now they are back again attempting to disguise this land grab as an allowable event. Since when is an event intended to last a month?

4) The same reasons the 5 areas were excluded from the map are still relevant: mountain goat habitat, noise pollution, Klukwan opposition. Moreover, now that ADFG has goat data from September 2013, the reasons are more compelling. The Four Winds area had 55 adult and 13 kid mountain goats. And areas #1 and 2 had 22 goats. Locals have also reported seeing a number (5) of bear den sites in areas #1 and 2.

The manager opted to leave out areas #8 and 9 to respect the wishes of the Chilkat Indian Village. I wonder why the concerns of other residents and users about areas #1, 2, and 21 are not also being respected.

5) A very important reason not considered at that time was the growing backcountry use by non-motorized skiers, snowboarders, and other users. Haines' reputation for spectacular wilderness is spreading and a growing number of young outdoor recreationists are not only visiting but moving here. One neighbor rented her cabin to a backcountry skier from Washington who wanted to spend the winter here. I can think of 3 young couples who relocated to Haines also for the backcountry skiing and year-round wilderness recreation. During Haines' big snow season of 2012, the lower 48 had a poor snow season and I encountered backcountry skiers from Utah, Colorado, and Germany exploring local mountains. Winter recreation is not synonymous with heli-skiing.

During the last 2 weeks in February of this year, at least 10 different individuals skied across the frozen Chilkat River to access Haska Creek and the slopes above it for skiing and snow boarding. At least half of them made the trip several times. Both areas #1 and 2 are close enough to Haines that non-motorized backcountry users can access them for day trips. They deserve to be kept off the heli-ski map for that reason. The shared-use clause for Haska Creek included in a (2012?) map revision was found not to work well. When backcountry skiers made the required call to SEABA to request they not use the areas on a particular day, SEABA refused.

6) I support the ADFG position to not open any of these 5 areas during any period of time this season, and to make no changes until all of their data on goats is collected in 2015.

7) SEABA, I believe, was in violation of their borough permit because they failed to comply with other agencies' regulations, in this case, BLM, whose land they were prohibited from using during the Ring of Fire resource assessment. I would have expected the borough to put SEABA on probation and to not entertain any requests from SEABA during a given period of time. Instead, the borough and concerned residents are once again being asked to spend time and resources on behalf of SEABA.

It is not the borough's job to be at the beck and call of the heli-ski industry, adjusting regulations to suit their needs. It is the borough manager and assembly's job to consider the needs and desires of year round residents and to protect the values for which many moved here.

Sincerely,  
Katey Palmer

P.S. For fun, check out Poor Man's Heli on You Tube. 6 minutes, 17 seconds.