



SOCIETY
FOR THE
PROTECTION
OF
NEW HAMPSHIRE
FORESTS

Statement of
Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests
On Expansion of Lease Boundary at Mount Sunapee Ski Area

March 3, 2004

I am Charles Niebling, senior director for policy and land management with the Society for the Protection of NH Forests.

The Forest Society led fundraising campaigns early in the 20th century to acquire large tracts of conservation land on Mount Sunapee, eventually transferred as a gift to the people of New Hampshire. We have a truly vested interest in the stewardship of this premier state park.

At this time, the Forest Society is opposed to an expansion of the lease boundary to accommodate the Mount Sunapee Resort (MSR) expansion plan within Mount Sunapee State Park and on adjacent privately-owned lands in the Towns of Goshen and Newbury.

In August of 2001, we argued that any recommendation on the lease expansion was premature until the full scope of the proposed expansion, including development outside the park boundary, was thoroughly evaluated through a new or revised master development plan, with ample opportunity for public comment and review. We took no position on the proposed lease expansion at that time.

In February 2002 DRED Commissioner George Bald issued a decision requiring that MSR revise or develop a new master development plan to include a complete analysis of the impacts of the proposed expansion, before he would consider making a recommendation on the lease expansion. The language of his decision made it clear that eventual recommendation of the lease expansion was not a foregone conclusion, and that he would have to weigh many considerations in deciding whether the lease expansion was or was not in the public interest.

We now believe that (independent of the potential impacts of the expansion to the conservation values for which the park was created) DRED has no duty to grant, and should recommend against, the lease expansion requested by MSR. In our judgment, the lease expansion is proposed largely, if not entirely, to enhance the profitability of this private enterprise and, therefore, there is no compelling public interest in its approval. We believe this position is consistent

with the views of our more than 400 members in the greater Sunapee region, and our 10,000 member households statewide.

The public benefit in leasing Mount Sunapee Ski Area over five years ago to a private company was predicated on the anticipated improvements to the quality of skiing and outdoor recreation that would result. The significant improvements that MSR has made within the existing leasehold have led to greatly increased skier visitation and revenues, based on information provided by MSR to the Mount Sunapee Advisory Committee. By most accounts, MSR has done a commendable job enhancing the appeal of this ski area. We support the work MSR has done to improve the quality of skiing and the recreational experience within the existing Mount Sunapee Ski Area boundary. The public benefit intended by leasing has been met. To expand the lease boundary largely to enable access to adjacent private land to increase corporate profits resulting primarily from vacation home development goes well beyond the state's obligation.

Furthermore, DRED must consider many factors in deciding whether this lease expansion is or is not in the public interest. DRED has other departmental objectives and responsibilities to balance in making this decision. Specifically, the statutorily-required NH Forest Resources Plan approved in 1996 identifies several recommendations that have implications to this decision, including:

- Keeping contiguous blocks of forest intact
- Conserving NH's biological diversity
- Acquiring and managing lands and easements (land conservation)

At more than 25,000 acres, the Sunapee-Pillsbury Highlands is the largest intact unbroken forest block remaining in southern NH. Expansion of the ski area and the resulting ancillary development pressure will surely result in increased fragmentation, subdivision, and parcelization of this block.

DRED must weigh its responsibility to advance these public and natural resource benefits against the private benefit and profit that would accrue to MSR through increased commercial activity at the state park and on adjoining lands. In our judgment, the public interest intended by the original lease has been met, and any incremental additional public benefit through further enhancement of the skiing experience is far outweighed by the impacts to other public interests in Mount Sunapee State Park, and to the communities in the Sunapee region.

We urge DRED to recommend against the lease expansion.