

Mount Spokane expansion clears last ski jump in Supreme Court case brought for worries on wildlife impact

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Youngsters in the Spokane Ski Racing Association are on top of their game at the summit of Mount Spokane. The long-planned expansion of the ski and snowboard park cleared its last remaining hurdle Tuesday. (Rich Landers / The Spokesman-Review)
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Workers began clearing trees on Wednesday to add nearly 80 acres of groomed trails and downhill ski runs on the northwest face of Mount Spokane.

The long-planned expansion of the ski and snowboard park [cleared its last remaining hurdle on Tuesday](#), when the state Supreme Court decided not to review a case brought by environmentalists who say the project will cause irreparable harm to wildlife.

The resort's manager, Brad McQuarrie, said crews have begun mobilizing equipment, repairing access roads and felling timbers in the old-growth forest that blankets the mountainside.

The new area will be served by a chairlift and is expected to be fully operational by the 2018-19 ski season. McQuarrie said construction will need to move quickly.

“We’ve got a very small window between now and when the snow flies,” he said. “It could be snowing at the end of September, so we’re hitting it pretty hard.”

By deferring to the judgment of an appellate court, the Supreme Court ended a yearslong battle to block the ski park expansion. The plaintiffs included the Lands Council, the Spokane Audubon Society, the Spokane Mountaineers and John Roskelley, a former Spokane County commissioner.

“To say we’re disappointed is an understatement,” Roskelley said, adding he had hoped the court would “at least give us a chance to argue the case.”

“We thought they would take the rarity of the alpine area at the top of Mount Spokane – that it’s going to be ruined – to heart,” he said. “Evidently this case just wasn’t as important to them as others.”

The Spokane Tribe also opposed the expansion, which was [proposed more than two decades ago](#) and approved in late 2014 by the state Parks and Recreation Commission, and [called on Gov. Jay Inslee to intervene](#). Tribe members have cited environmental concerns as well as the cultural value of the mountain, which plays a role in some of the tribe’s creation stories.

Mount Spokane officials say the expansion will help the resort bring in new revenue so it can continue offering affordable, family-friendly skiing opportunities. They say the expansion plan went through years of scrutiny and a transparent public process, and that it’s carefully designed to minimize disturbance to the natural area.

The state has required the resort to leave islands of trees between the new ski runs and prohibited construction during the April-to-August nesting season for birds.

But the Lands Council, a Spokane-based nonprofit that led the legal challenge, said in a statement that the ski runs “will cause harm well beyond the immediate area logged. The valuable habitat will be fragmented and left virtually unusable for the many species that currently depend upon it.”

Among those species are endangered gray wolves, which already have seen their natural habitat dwindle, the group said.

Mount Spokane 2000, which operates the ski resort, is the largest concessionaire in the state parks system. Jim Meyer is president of the nonprofit’s board of directors. He’s the husband of Betsy Cowles, chairwoman of Cowles Co., which owns The Spokesman-Review.

Rich Landers contributed reporting.