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Cat III protesters

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By Dan Sullivan

Daily Staff Writer

A handful of activists lined the sidewalk in front of Vail Resorts' corporate headquarters in Avon Friday chanting, "Expansion stinks — save the lynx," and brandishing signs protesting the ski company's Category III expansion at Vail Mountain.

The newly formed Coalition to Stop Vail Expansion — bringing together members of other groups such as Amica Forest Rescue, the Rocky Mountain Peace and Justice Center and Rocky Mountain Animal Defense — attributed low turnout for Friday's scheduled noon protest to hazardous road conditions.

Anticipating a gathering larger than the eight protesters who eventually showed up, Avon Police Sgt. Remo Williams was on hand to manage the crowd.

"We're going to do a salt presence," Williams said before the protest in front of the Seasons building, less than a block from police headquarters.

"Everyone has rights. They have an absolute right to protest whatever they feel is wrong. At the same time, (Vail Resorts) has the right to conduct business as usual.

"We're just here as a referee to make sure everyone's rights are protected."

The game wasn't quite canceled on account of snow, and, in spite of their sparse numbers, the protesters received thumbs up and honks of encouragement from the majority of passing vehicles.

Environmental groups long opposed to a 1996 U.S. Forest Service approval of the 885-acre expansion have exhausted almost all legal remedies, though the 10th Circuit



Vail Daily/David Marzella

Members of Coalition to Stop Vail Expansion gather in front of Vail headquarters Friday to protest Category III.

Court is expected to decide on a final appeal this summer.

"We don't hold out a lot of hope for it," protester Robert Alsbrook said.

Preliminary construction has already begun in the former roadless area. Vail Resorts expects to get into full swing once an elk calving closure is lifted July 1.

The protesters claimed a conference report recently released by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service sheds

new light on the expansion's potential to harm Canada lynx habitat.

The feline, classified as endangered in Colorado, is scheduled for federal threatened status under the Endangered Species Act.

Alsbrook said the Fish & Wildlife report helps debunk a misconception that lynx have not existed in Colorado since 1973.

Though the last confirmed physical sighting occurred when two of the animals were illegally trapped in

Vail's Back Bowls 26 years ago, tracks and other evidence gathered by the Fish & Wildlife Service, Colorado Division of Wildlife and independent biologists have all pointed to the elusive cat's continued existence in the area as most recent as last year.

While that information is not new, Alsbrook said there's been a general perception — bolstered by the media — that the species is gone. 174A-DN-56589-NC-

Eight is not enough: Protest fizzles

Cat III poised to move forward. Page A2

5/3/89
Vail Daily, Vail, CO

74C-DN-56589



Coalition to Stop Vail Expansion members Robert Alsobrooke, Ron Mitchell and Stephanie Tidwell protest Category III in front of Vail Resorts headquarters in Avon Friday.

Vail Daily/David Manzella

What is new and significant about the conference report, he said, is that it addresses a need to preserve migration corridors through Vail in order to protect the animal's ability to connect its southern and northern population segments.

"Admittedly, had the expansion gone ahead as proposed, it would have jeopardized all lynx in Colorado," Alsobrook said. "But (Fish & Wildlife) added mitigation to alleviate that possibility. Whether that mitigation will work is another question."

And while some environmental groups have touted CDOW's current efforts to reintroduce the Canada lynx into southern Colorado wilderness, Alsobrook was suspicious of the program Vail Resorts donated \$200,000 to.

"I think (the reintroduction) is very closely tied to this expansion," he said, voicing suspicion the adversarial nature of the expansion levered CDOW's hand to offset the bad press.

"It's allowing corporations to influence policy decisions."

"This project has been reviewed and approved by four federal agencies, one state agency and two local governments," said Vail ski area spokeswoman Kristin Yantis. "The project has been upheld through two administrative appeals and three court challenges."

"In terms of the protest, we respect that these people don't agree with the project."

But given the legal history of the case, Yantis said, "It's unfortunate they still oppose it."

Dan Sullivan covers Vail Resorts, the ski industry and environmental issues. He can be reached at (970) 949-0555, ext. 612.