

Judge allows snowmaking from wastewater at ski slope in sacred peaks

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FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. — A federal judge is allowing a ski area to use treated wastewater to make snow, enraging Indian tribes who say the plan will taint a mountain they consider sacred.

The ruling Wednesday upheld a Coconino National Forest decision to authorize facility upgrades at Arizona Snowbowl and to allow artificial snowmaking. The treated effluent would be delivered by pipeline from Flagstaff, a few miles southeast.

Snowbowl officials claim the snowmaking equipment is necessary to ensure the survival of the ski area, which has struggled with short seasons because of a lack of snow. Snowbowl is on federal land in the San Francisco Peaks but is privately owned and operated.

U.S. Forest Service officials said they would review the ruling to determine steps toward implementing the project. Snowbowl General Manager J.R. Murray said barring an injunction, he's legally allowed to start construction immediately.

The Hopi Tribe, the Navajo Nation and other opponents of the expansion argued that the Forest Service failed to comply with environmental laws or the government's trust responsibility in protecting Indian rights and religious freedom.

The tribes, whose reservations are northeast of Flagstaff, and environmental groups have vowed to appeal the ruling by U.S. District Judge Paul Rosenblatt and to fight the expansion project in other ways.

Opponents also said they would try to convince Flagstaff to pull out of its agreement to sell reclaimed water to Snowbowl, and if that fails, would attempt to block the pipeline.

Rosenblatt had ruled that the expansion didn't harm tribes' religious rights because they didn't practice their religion directly within the ski area.