

OUR VIEW What's wrong with Jesus going skiing in Montana?

By Lee Rozen, for the editorial board Moscow-Pullman Daily News | [0 comments](#)

North of Kalispell, Mont., is Whitefish, and a bit north of that is the Big Mountain ski resort, which is just south of Big Mountain itself. Glacier National Park is off to the northeast.

This geography lesson is brought to you thanks to a statue of Jesus that has been sitting next to a ski run on Big Mountain since, well, sometime in the 1950s.

The ski runs around Big Mountain all start on Flathead National Forest land, but wind around until about three-fourths of the way down they cross onto private property.

The statue of Jesus sits on a 25-by-25 foot chunk of land that the local Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternal organization, leased from the U.S. Forest Service. While it turns out they haven't been paying anything for the lease, that doesn't seem to be the problem.

What does seem to be the problem for the Freedom From Religion Foundation of Madison, Wis., is that Jesus, being a religious figure, is standing on government land.

They say this is a violation of the concept of the separation of church and state. (The Forest Service, ever eager to avoid controversy, has offered to move Jesus half a mile away to a spot on private land, but the Knights fear he is too fragile and wouldn't survive the move. Come on, guys, have some faith.)

Nevertheless, while many courts might disagree with us, in this case we think the church and state argument is a bunch of hooley. The Forest Service didn't erect the statue and doesn't maintain it.

If the Forest Service rules allow for leasing 25-foot-square patches of land next to ski runs, then the main questions are, "Why aren't they being paid for it?" and "What else could we put there besides a statue of Jesus?"

Statues of Mohammed, Buddha, Joseph Smith and L. Ron Hubbard would be obvious candidates.

Nothing about that, it seems to us, would create a law "respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." That's what the First Amendment outlaws.

And it certainly wouldn't need to be limited to religious figures. Giant Snoopys or Darth Vaders? Picabo Street or Shaun White? Mannequins modeling the latest in skiwear?

But good grief, Forest Service, charge for it.