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STATE OF WASHINGTON
WASHINGTON STATE PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION

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Item E-7: Mount Spokane Land Classification - Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: This item reports to the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission on land classification options for the Potential Alpine Ski Expansion Area (PASEA) at Mount Spokane State Park. This item aligns with agency core values and advances the Commission Transformation Strategy: "Demonstrate that all Washingtonians benefit from their state parks."

SIGNIFICANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION: Mount Spokane State Park is the largest park in the state park system at approximately 14,000 acres. Within Mount Spokane State Park, the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission (Commission) has authorized an alpine ski area known as the Mount Spokane Ski and Snowboard Park that is currently operated under a concession agreement with Mount Spokane 2000 (MS 2000), a Spokane area non-profit corporation. The area under agreement with MS 2000 for the Mount Spokane Ski and Snowboard Park encompasses 1,425 acres or about 10% of the park.

In 1999, the Commission adopted land classifications for the park. However, an approximately 850-acre portion of the park, known as the Potential Alpine Ski Expansion Area (PASEA), was left unclassified at that time (Appendix 1). In 2010, MS 2000 approached the Commission with a conceptual proposal to expand skiing into approximately 279 acres of the PASEA. The proposed expansion included a new chairlift and seven new ski trails. To make a determination of whether ski area expansion is appropriate and if so, what types of facilities and activities to allow, the Commission first needs to classify lands within the PASEA.

Staff has assessed a range of land classification options for the PASEA, which take into consideration the area's significant natural resources, as well as potential recreational opportunities. In light of the potential for a ski area expansion, it was determined that the land classification action has the potential to have a significant adverse impact on the environment. As a result, an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is being prepared under the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA). The EIS consists of two parts. The first part assesses the potential environmental impacts of land classification alternatives, while the second considers the impacts of ski development alternatives. The purpose of this report is to introduce the land classification options developed for environmental analysis and to outline next steps towards a Commission decision anticipated in November 2014.

Land Classification

A range of recreational activities and facilities could be permitted in the PASEA dependent upon the land classification and conditional uses adopted by the Commission. Under Washington Administrative Code (WAC) 352-16-020 Land Classification System (Appendix 3), "State park areas are of state-wide natural, cultural, and/or recreational significance and/or outstanding scenic beauty. They provide varied facilities serving low-intensity, medium intensity, and high intensity outdoor recreation activities, areas reserved for preservation, scientific research, education, public assembly, and/or environmental interpretation, and support facilities."

The Commission may select specific land classifications for the PASEA that include Recreation, Resource Recreation, Heritage, Natural, Natural Forest Area, and Natural Area Preserve. In addition to other trail-based and dispersed uses, both the Recreation and Resource Recreation classifications allow for alpine skiing and alpine skiing facilities as a conditional use. That is, the Commission may permit the use, but it must be conditioned to assure design is compatible with overarching purpose of the land classification and abutting classification objectives.

To frame the discussion, staff developed a matrix of land classification options and recommended uses for each option (Appendix 2). The options range from the most conservative to the most permissive in terms of natural resource protection and recreational use (Appendix 4). Staff has analyzed the options described below in the EIS to assist the Commission in determining the appropriate classification of the PASEA.

Option 1: Natural Forest Area

In 1992-1993, the Washington Natural Heritage Program (WNHP) inventoried forests statewide to identify those eligible for classification as Natural Forest Area and Natural Area Preserve. The WNHP determined that the area referred to as the PASEA has considerable natural resource value and is eligible for classification as a Natural Forest Area.

This option proposes classifying the PASEA as Natural Forest Area (NFA) with the exception of the Chair 4 Road, a portion of the summit road, and an existing mountain bike trail, which would be classified as Resource Recreation. Alpine skiing would not be allowed in the NFA. However, other existing uses (snowmobiling, equestrian uses, and mountain biking) could continue to be allowed in designated Resource Recreation areas.

The NFA classification proposed in this option would limit development and promote use in the PASEA for preservation, interpretation and enjoyment of natural processes. As per the Commission's land classification system, the principal function of this area would be to "assist in maintaining the state's bio-diversity while expanding human understanding and appreciation of natural values."

Option 2: Resource Recreation and Natural Forest Area

This option would classify the area within the PASEA above the Chair 4 Road as Resource Recreation and the area below the road as Natural Forest Area. Within the Resource Recreation area, alpine skiing would be allowed as a conditional use, but no lift or formal runs would be constructed. Some clearing of downed, tipped, or damaged trees could be allowed to reduce hazards for backcountry skiers, improve access for search and rescue, and otherwise enhance the

skiing experience. Snowmobiling, mountain bike and equestrian trails could be allowed within the Resource Recreation designation. This option preserves the current use of the PASEA for undeveloped alpine skiing while affording natural resource protection through classifying the area as a mix of Resource Recreation and Natural Forest Area.

Option 3: Recreation, Resource Recreation, and Natural Forest Area

This option includes three land classifications within the PASEA:

- A Recreation classification in the 279-acre portion of the PASEA where MS 2000 has proposed expanding its developed ski area;
- A Resource Recreation classification in an area that buffers the developed ski area; and
- A Natural Forest Area classification in the area below the Chair 4 Road.

Within the 279-acre area designated as Recreation, a ski lift and runs could be permitted. More vegetation could be cleared within the area designated Recreation. The area designated as Resource Recreation would offer a higher level of resource conservation due to the forest management practices required in that classification. The area below the Chair 4 Road is not being considered by MS 2000 or staff for alpine skiing due to its habitat and terrain and would be classified as Natural Forest Area.

Option 4: No Action

SEPA requires consideration of a no action alternative. In this case, no action would mean leaving the PASEA unclassified (Appendix 1). Up to this point, staff has generally managed the area as a de facto Natural Forest Area. However, backcountry alpine skiing has been informally allowed to continue even though this use is not otherwise permitted in Natural Forest Areas. Continuing to leave the area unclassified would mean no clear direction from the Commission with regard to management and future development of the area.

Key Issues

The sections below summarize key issues raised during EIS preparation.

Forest Habitat

Considerable discussion has taken place around the presence of "old growth" within the PASEA, with the implication that if the site contains old growth forest it is worthy of protection. There are many definitions of old growth and several have been applied to the site at various times. However, the most recent work on old growth forests in eastern Washington, led by the Washington Department of Natural Resources Old Growth Definition Committee, leans away from the use of "old growth" as a descriptor for forest stands in eastern Washington. The committee proposed the term "older forest" instead. Disturbances, such as fire, are more frequent on the east side of the state. Due to fire frequency, stand development in some forest types may be truncated by wildfire before reaching old growth stand development stages. However, old trees may persist in riparian areas or ravines. A definition of old growth for these forests is more accurately applied to individual trees rather than to entire stands.

Old growth development involves gradual changes in a variety of structures and functions. Since this evolution does not typically involve abrupt changes, the decision as to when the "old-

growth” stage begins is somewhat arbitrary. Classifying forests into two classes, “old growth” and “not old growth” does not do justice to the complexity of forest ecosystems.

Regardless of whether the forests of the PASEA meet a particular definition of “old growth,” they represent the highest level of significance of natural resources in the state park system and meet agency Natural Forest Area criteria. They are a matrix of young to late successional stands of trees (including old growth trees), intermixed with abundant wetlands, small meadows, and talus slopes. The area is rich in native structure, composition, and functioning processes, providing habitat for a large (and unknown) population of species ranging from large animals to a multitude of often overlooked invertebrates, fungi, and micro-organisms. The PASEA provides significant habitat – “old growth” or not.

Cultural Significance

The Spokane Tribe of Indians recently wrote a letter to the agency regarding proposed plans for the park. Due to Mount Spokane’s elevation and view, the mountain has spiritual significance to the Tribe. Traditionally, Mount Spokane was used for game hunting and huckleberry gathering, as well as spiritual quests. The Tribe continues to gather huckleberries and bear grass at Mount Spokane and has expressed concerns about the impacts ski area expansion might have on native edible plants and other resources. In addition, the Tribe is concerned that there are many stories and sacred areas throughout Mount Spokane State Park that exist in oral culture. The Tribe’s Archaeology and Preservation Program would like a Traditional Cultural Property Study completed for Mount Spokane State Park. Staff is currently engaged in discussion with the Tribal staff to determine what level of study is appropriate and how best to address their concerns.

Land Classification and Land Management

While land classification provides general direction for facilities and activities on State Parks’ lands, it is only one of the tools used for resource management. Many park properties have management plans specific to key resource needs, such as forest health or vegetation management. Even in areas classified as Recreation, staff may develop plans that will guide the management and protection of certain resources. For example, if the Commission were to choose Option 3 and classify a portion of the PASEA as Recreation and allow alpine ski expansion, staff would still be able to use a landscape management plan to set allowed practices for modification or removal of vegetation and other landscape features (e.g., standing snags, coarse woody debris, boulders, other terrain features) in developed ski runs and forested areas between them. The plan could include spatial components that limit modification of natural features in areas necessary to protect wildlife habitat and other natural processes, while allowing select modifications to ensure a safe and enjoyable skiing experience.

Next Steps

Staff anticipates releasing the draft EIS in July 2014, which will be followed by a 30-day public comment period. The EIS will include two parts: a *non-project* section, focused on land classification, and a *project* section, focused on proposed ski area expansion. At the end of the comment period, staff anticipates needing approximately six weeks to address comments and to issue a final EIS. The Commission will receive both the draft and final EIS, which will include detailed analyses of the potential impacts of both the land classification options and the ski area proposal.

At its November 20th meeting in Spokane, the Commission will be asked to make a decision on the land classification for the PASEA. If the Commission selects a land classification that allows alpine ski facilities, the Commission may also consider approving the proposed ski area expansion. However, these decisions are separate.

LEGAL AUTHORITY:

RCW 79A.05.030 - Powers and duties - Mandatory

RCW 79A.05.035 - Additional powers and duties

WAC 352-16 - Naming of state park areas and the land classification system

SUPPORTING INFORMATION:

Appendix 1: Existing Mount Spokane Land Classifications

Appendix 2: Land Classification and Conditional Use Options Matrix

Appendix 3: Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission Land Classification System

Appendix 4: Land Classification Option Maps

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Reviewer(s):

Randy Kline, SEPA REVIEW: Pursuant to WAC 197-11-704, staff has determined that this Commission agenda item is a report and therefore is not subject to State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) review.

Terri Heikkila, Fiscal Impact Statement: Report only. No fiscal impact.

Jim Schwartz, Assistant Attorney General: June 27, 2014

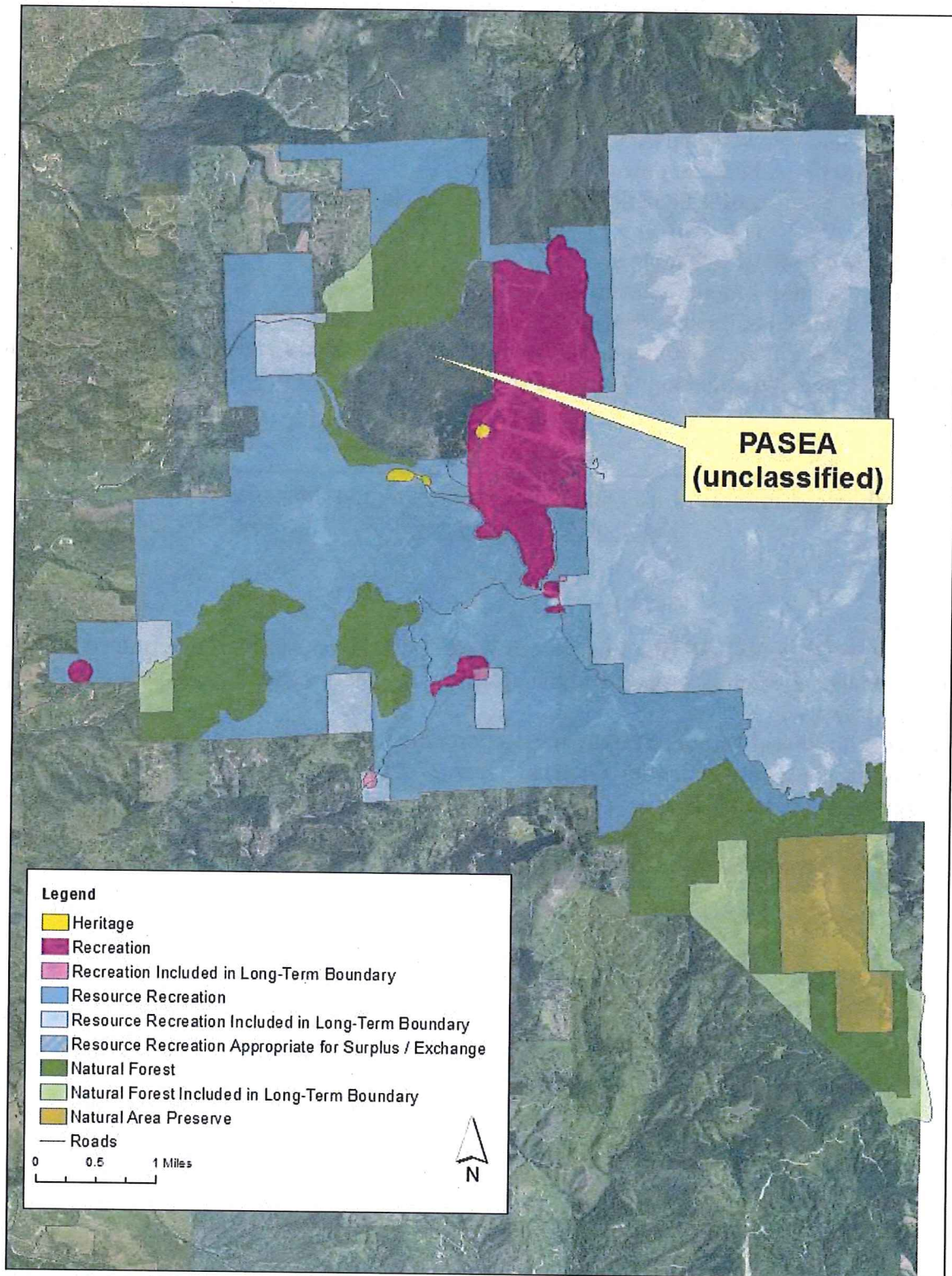
Peter Herzog, Assistant Director

Approved for Transmittal to Commission


Don Hoch, Director

APPENDIX 1

Existing Mount Spokane Land Classifications



APPENDIX 2

LAND CLASSIFICATION AND CONDITIONAL USE OPTIONS MATRIX

Options:	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3
Land Classification	Land Classification: Natural Forest Area (NFA) with Resource Recreation for the Chair 4 Road and other existing road/trail	Land Classification: Resource Recreation and Natural Forest Area	Land Classification: Recreation, Resource Recreation and Natural Forest Area
Recommended Conditional Uses	Approved Conditional Uses: Alpine Skiing and Facilities: Not Allowed In Resource Recreation: Snowmobile, equestrian and mountain biking on the Chair 4 Road; mountain biking on existing trail Interpretive trail; Interpretive kiosks; Filming, special events; Trails – hiking Trail and off-trail – cc skiing Snowshoeing	Approved Conditional Uses: Alpine Skiing Activities: Allowed above Chair 4 Road in Resource Recreation classification; not allowed below the Chair 4 Road in the NFA Alpine Skiing Facilities: Not allowed Snowmobile, mtn. bike and equestrian trail in designated locations	Approved Conditional Uses: Alpine Skiing and Facilities: Expanded skiing in Recreation area; limited skiing in Resource Recreation area; not allowed in area classified NFA below the Chair 4 Road Snowmobile, mtn. bike and equestrian trail in designated locations

Recreational areas are suited and/or developed for high-intensity outdoor recreational use, conference, cultural and/or educational centers, or other uses serving large numbers of people.

Resource recreation areas are suited and/or developed for natural and/or cultural resource-based medium-intensity and low-intensity outdoor recreational use.

Natural forest areas are designated for preservation, restoration, and interpretation of natural forest processes while providing for low-intensity outdoor recreation activities as subordinate uses, and which contain:

- (a) Old-growth forest communities that have developed for one hundred fifty years or longer and have the following structural characteristics: Large old-growth trees, large snags, large logs on land, and large logs in streams; or
- (b) Mature forest communities that have developed for ninety years or longer; or
- (c) Unusual forest communities and/or interrelated vegetative communities of significant ecological value.

APPENDIX 3
WASHINGTON STATE PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION
LAND CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

WAC 352-16-020 Land classification system. State park areas are of state-wide natural, cultural, and/or recreational significance and/or outstanding scenic beauty. They provide varied facilities serving low-intensity, medium intensity, and high intensity outdoor recreation activities, areas reserved for preservation, scientific research, education, public assembly, and/or environmental interpretation, and support facilities. They may be classified in whole or part as follows:

- (1) **Recreational areas** are suited and/or developed for high-intensity outdoor recreational use, conference, cultural and/or educational centers, or other uses serving large numbers of people.
- (2) **Resource recreation areas** are suited and/or developed for natural and/or cultural resource-based medium-intensity and low-intensity outdoor recreational use.
- (3) **Natural areas** are designated for preservation, restoration, and interpretation of natural processes and/or features of significant ecological, geological or paleontological value while providing for low-intensity outdoor recreation activities as subordinate uses.
- (4) **Heritage areas** are designated for preservation, restoration, and interpretation of unique or unusual archaeological, historical, scientific, and/or cultural features, and traditional cultural properties, which are of state-wide or national significance.
- (5) **Natural forest areas** are designated for preservation, restoration, and interpretation of natural forest processes while providing for low-intensity outdoor recreation activities as subordinate uses, and which contain:
 - (a) Old-growth forest communities that have developed for one hundred fifty years or longer and have the following structural characteristics: Large old-growth trees, large snags, large logs on land, and large logs in streams; or
 - (b) Mature forest communities that have developed for ninety years or longer; or
 - (c) Unusual forest communities and/or interrelated vegetative communities of significant ecological value.
- (6) **Natural area preserves** are designated for preservation of rare or vanishing flora, fauna, geological, natural historical or similar features of scientific or educational value and which are registered and committed as a natural area preserve through a cooperative agreement with an appropriate natural resource agency pursuant to chapter 79.70 RCW and chapter 332-60 WAC.

WAC 352-16-030 Management within land classifications. (1) The director shall develop management guidelines for each land classification listed in WAC 352-16-020. The guidelines shall provide specific direction for each classification, outlining the philosophy of each classification, its appropriate physical features, location, allowed and prohibited activities, and allowed and prohibited developments. (2) Nothing in this section shall be construed to allow uses that are otherwise prohibited, nor prohibit uses that are otherwise expressly allowed, by the commission, this code, or by statute.

Land Classification Management Guidelines Recreation Areas

TITLE	DEFINITION	PHILOSOPHY	PHYSICAL FEATURES	LOCATION	ACTIVITIES	DEVELOPMENTS
<p>Washington State Parks Recreation Areas</p>	<p>State Parks Recreation Areas are suited and/or developed for high-intensity outdoor recreational use, conference, cultural and/or educational centers, or other uses serving large numbers of people.</p>	<p>State Parks Recreation Areas are to respond to the human needs for readily available areas for outdoor recreation and facilities to congregate for education, artistic expression and other ennobling pursuits. They are to provide a variety of outdoor recreational, educational, artistic, and cultural opportunities to large numbers of participants. Primary emphasis is on the provision of quality recreational services and facilities with secondary recognition given to protection of the areas natural qualities.</p>	<p>State Parks Recreation Areas generally are made, not found. They shall be located throughout the state with primary emphasis to service major centers of urban populations and/or outstanding recreational tourist attractions. Scenic and inspirational values shall be considered but are secondary to the site adaptability and population criteria. When part of a large diverse park, recreation areas should be sited in proximity to public roads and utilities.</p>	<p>State Parks Recreation Areas may allow and provide for a wide variety of indoor and outdoor day, weekend and vacation activities. Provision may be made for high intensity participation in camping, picnicking, trail use, water sports, winter sports, group field games, and other activities for many people. Off-trail equestrian and/or bicycle use may be appropriate in selected areas if approved by the commission. Activities requiring high levels of social interaction are encouraged.</p>	<p>State Parks Recreation Areas shall provide appropriate facilities and services for the participation and enjoyment of high concentrations of outdoor recreationists and/or participants in indoor educational, cultural and artistic activities. A high degree of development is anticipated. Facilities may include road and parking networks, swimming beaches, full service marinas, trails, bathhouses, artificial lakes and pools, play fields, large sanitary and eating facilities; standard and utility campgrounds, stores, picnic grounds, group shelters, conference centers, environmental learning centers, hostels, and administrative support facilities.</p>	

Land Classification Management Guidelines Resource Recreation Areas

TITLE	DEFINITION	PHILOSOPHY	PHYSICAL FEATURES	LOCATION	ACTIVITIES	DEVELOPMENTS
<p>Washington State Parks Resource Recreation Areas</p>	<p>State Parks Resource Recreation Areas are suited and/or developed for natural and/or cultural resource-based medium- and low-intensity recreational use.</p>	<p>State Parks Resource Recreation Areas are sites where the high quality of a particular natural or cultural resource or set of such resources is the lure for human recreation. Thus, the rationale for recreation is based on the value of attractive natural or cultural resources. Management of these areas must stress the centrality of preserving the quality of the natural and cultural resources while allowing appropriate and sustainable levels of human use and enjoyment.</p>	<p>State Parks Resource Recreation Areas have a variety of physiographic features. While they may contain areas of environmental sensitivity, most portions of each area will be able to withstand low- to medium-intensity recreation use without significant environmental degradation.</p>	<p>State Parks Resource Recreation Areas may be located anywhere in the state where natural or cultural factors produce land and water sites particularly suited for recreation in a natural setting. Access to these sites should be reasonably proximate to major urban centers, but some access restriction may be necessary to avoid overuse of resources. Within large diverse parks, these areas should be located at least a moderate distance from public roads and high use intensity areas, while still maintaining reasonable public access for their intended use.</p>	<p>State Parks Resource Recreation Areas provide opportunities for low- and medium-intensity recreational experiences including, but not limited to, picnicking, primitive camping, a variety of recreational trail experiences, interpretive facilities, historic/cultural exhibits, nature observation, photography, orienteering, kayaking, canoeing, floating, and fishing. Off-trail equestrian and/or bicycle use may be appropriate in selected areas if approved by the commission. Basketball, tennis, organized group sporting activities requiring formal sports fields, commercial-sized piers and docks, standard and utility camping, indoor accommodations and centers, developed swimming areas, and other similarly intense uses are not appropriate. Scientific research is permitted.</p>	<p>State Parks Resource Recreation Areas development shall be permitted to the extent necessary to serve allowed activities. Parking, sanitary facilities, and other ancillary developments and support facilities should be constructed in a manner that is consistent with the site's ability to manage environmental change.</p>