

If mapping at Holland Lake Lodge shows a proposed expansion will push "substantially" outside the current permitted acreage, the U.S. Forest Service would require an environmental assessment for the controversial project, according to the Flathead National Forest.

A proposal to upgrade the Swan Valley resort and extend services into a winter season has sparked protest. The owners argue renovations are needed for the health of the resort, its infrastructure and its ability to operate sustainably into the future.

But members of the public have opposed the Forest Service's initial decision to grant the project an exception to a thorough environmental analysis — a "categorical exclusion" — that likely means no formal environmental assessment or environment impact statement.

The private resort operates on public land with a current permit to use 10.53 acres, according to the Forest Service. The expansion proposal identifies a footprint of 15 acres for the project, and a separate 3.8 acres for wastewater.

Friday, Flathead Public Information Officer Tami MacKenzie said professionals have started mapping the site, but she did not yet have the results. She said categorical exclusions allow projects to include small adjacent areas, such as a few feet, but more acreage could tip the analysis into a full environmental assessment.

"An additional 5 acres is probably more than we would want to analyze in a (categorical exclusion)," MacKenzie said.

She said the Forest Service may release its decision on whether to grant the exception later this week or the following, and it's reviewing public comment in the meantime, such as the concerns about water quality and impacts to **grizzly bears**.

"Those things also go into helping us making an informed decision on what level of planning to use," MacKenzie said.

A public "reading room" shows 6,507 letters were submitted in response to the proposal, and opponents include elected Democrat U.S. Sen. Jon Tester and Republican state Sen. Mike Hopkins.

In comments and at public meetings, many people have called on the Forest Service to do a thorough environmental review and not grant a categorical exclusion. Martin Nie, director of the Bolle Center for People and Forests at the University of Montana, is among those.

In his Oct. 5 letter, Nie talked about working for a center named after the late Arnold Bolle, named in the Gallery of Outstanding Montanans in the Capitol as the "Dean of Western Forests," he said.

He said Bolle led an investigation of forest management in 1969 that resulted in a report that found the Forest Service's culture didn't involve the public "in any way but as antagonists," and he said decades later, the same is true.

"Rarely have I been approached by so many citizens about a local project or proposal, all with deep concerns and lots of questions about the proposed expansion and the Forest Service's misuse of NEPA," Nie wrote of the National Environmental Policy Act, which sets the standards for exceptions and reviews.

He said granting exceptions to some projects "is both reasonable and necessary," but the Forest Service is using the NEPA exclusion "to an alarming degree," some 84 percent of the time.

But federal regulations prohibit the exception where there are "extraordinary circumstances," such as where threatened or endangered species might be affected, and he said the Flathead National Forest's own plan

identifies unique characteristics of the area.

"The ecological setting of Holland Lake provides a textbook example of extraordinary circumstances that warrant closer environmental analysis and full public participation," Nie wrote.

Christian Wohlfeil majority owner of the lodge, recently sold minority shares of the property to POWDR, a private "adventure lifestyle" company that intends to purchase the resort. In an email Friday, spokesperson Stacey Hutchinson said POWDR is grateful to all who have commented, and she said feedback has come from Montana and beyond, even internationally.

"Many people had constructive ideas that we're now discussing how to incorporate into our plan," Hutchinson said. "It is part of our company's ethos to ensure that future generations enjoy the good fortune to experience our outdoors as we do — with healthy ecosystems and wildlife, and clean air and water. This includes Holland Lake Lodge where guests have been coming for generations."

This week, a group that formed to oppose the expansion released a petition asking the Forest Service to "protect Montana from industrial tourism and commercial recreation on our public land" by not granting the permit. As of Sunday, more than 2,800 people had signed it.

Save Holland Lake is calling on the Forest Service to deny the permit — "and stop wasting taxpayers' time and money," said Bill Lombardi, a member of the group and nearby resident, in a text message.

In a phone call, Lombardi said the public still needs to know the precise acreage of the project, whether the permit is valid, and the specific plan for extending operations. **Grizzly bears**, bull trout and a pristine lake are among the resources the group points to in asking the Forest Service to deny the permit.

"We value our public lands, clean air and water, abundant wildlife and the strong communities in the Seeley-Swan Valley, and don't want these resources to be despoiled by commercialization of OUR public land," reads an email about the petition.