



**Federation of Mountain Clubs**  
Accessing the backcountry one step at a time

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### **Backcountry access from ski resorts**

Dear Mr. van Dongen,

The Federation of Mountain Clubs of BC (FMCBC), which represents the interests of over twenty outdoor recreation clubs and some 4,000 members in British Columbia, has become aware of discussions about a new law that would allow the province to fine skiers and snowboarders who cross ski resort boundaries to ski into the backcountry. Apart from the expense and difficulty of enforcing such law, the FMCBC has other concerns which are summarized below.

The FMCBC understands and shares concerns about the potential for injury, death and complex rescues caused by unprepared and inexperienced skiers and snowboarders skiing outside ski resort boundaries (often called skiing “out-of-bounds”).

However, the FMCBC is concerned that such a law will restrict access to crown land and provincial parks for experienced and prepared backcountry skiers. Efforts to reduce the number of unprepared skiers and snowboarders leaving the controlled ski resort areas should instead focus on improving education and backcountry access policies at ski resorts. Ski resort operators need to provide users with clear backcountry access policies, and in appropriate terrain and conditions, offer access for properly prepared, equipped and trained backcountry skiers.

The FMCBC believes that public lands should be open for recreational uses like backcountry skiing, hiking, climbing and kayaking etc. if they are compatible with the preservation of the natural environment. Backcountry skiing, like other activities such as sport fishing, hiking and kayaking, is dependent on specific natural areas with relatively good access. These areas are limited and, in the case of backcountry skiing, the access to them is often facilitated by ski resorts.

To clarify the terminology, backcountry skiing is skiing or snowboarding on terrain outside of a resort’s Controlled Recreation Area, where the land and the snow pack are not monitored or patrolled (this does not include skiing in closed areas *within* a ski resort’s boundaries). Backcountry terrain includes *all* terrain that is not patrolled: the vast majority of ski terrain in British Columbia is backcountry terrain.

Backcountry skiers need training and experience in how to avoid avalanches, and they usually travel in small groups and carry equipment to perform self-rescue in the event of an avalanche. Clubs can provide such groups in which more experienced participants can demonstrate safe backcountry travel techniques to less experienced participants. Backcountry skiers typically access slopes on foot, or by using snowmobiles, snow-cats or helicopters. Backcountry skiers also use lifts to access backcountry terrain adjacent to ski resorts.

Several ski resorts have been built in areas that have historically been used by self-propelled backcountry skiers. The presence of a large resort detracts from the wilderness experience possible in that location. In these situations, it is desirable for backcountry skiers to use the lifts and to quickly pass through the resort into the wilderness terrain beyond rather than spend their time hiking up near or within the resort boundaries, which is commonly restricted by the resort operator.

In some situations where resorts are set next to a provincial park such as at Whistler Blackcomb, the resorts offer discounted lift access tickets to facilitate use of the park. Whether for convenience or by necessity, access through the Controlled Recreation Area of ski resorts is valuable for many backcountry skiers to ski on crown land and in provincial parks.

Because ski resorts attract many people without avalanche and terrain knowledge, inexperienced people often pass through boundaries and can get into trouble. This interface between controlled terrain in a ski resort and uncontrolled terrain beyond the ski resort creates issues. Differences in signage and policies between resorts and between out-of-bounds areas and closed areas can create confusion for skiers about what is allowed and what is not.

Different management strategies are employed by resorts to deal with out-of-bounds issues. Each ski resort has a unique situation and requires a different combination of management solutions. There is also a wide range of skills and motivations among skiers who ski into the backcountry from resorts. The Canadian Avalanche Centre is currently conducting a study of skiers and management options. More information on the subject can be obtained from the Canadian Avalanche Centre through their website, [www.avalanche.ca](http://www.avalanche.ca), or contact Mary Clayton ([mclayton@avalanche.ca](mailto:mclayton@avalanche.ca)).

In summary, the FMCBC is concerned that fines for accessing the backcountry from a ski resort would reduce public access to crown land and provincial parks for experienced and prepared backcountry skiers. Other management options are available and being studied to reduce the occurrence of inexperienced and ill-equipped skiers and snowboarders going out-of-bounds in ski resorts.

Sincerely,

Brian Wood  
President  
Federation of Mountain Clubs of BC

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