

## CONSERVATION CURRENTS – JANUARY 2004

### **Potential UW Lab Site under Cashmere Mountain/Alpine Lakes Wilderness Area**

University of Washington physics scientists are on a mission to build a laboratory consisting of two parallel 3-mile tunnels and a series of experiment rooms, 7,400 feet under Cashmere Mountain near Leavenworth. The proposed underground lab would run east from Cashmere Mountain to Icicle Creek, partially under the Alpine Lakes Wilderness Area. Cashmere Mountain was the preferred location out of 12 candidate sites because of its shorter tunneling path, greater distance from regional fault lines and accessibility.

The lab will be used to conduct basic research in physics, astrophysics, earth sciences, geomicrobiology and related fields. It needs to be very deep underground to escape cosmic rays and other contaminants such as natural radioactivity.

News of the proposed lab broke in early November, prompting scientists to meet with key Leavenworth interests, then with a dozen environmental interests in Seattle on November 19<sup>th</sup> and, with roughly 300 Leavenworth residents on November 24<sup>th</sup>. At the Seattle meeting, Mountaineers Policy Assistant Fatima Oswald was part of the heated discussion between the scientists and long time Alpine Lakes Wilderness advocates. The advocates felt shut out and uninformed, while the scientists were apologetic, noting their inexperience in working with environmental interests.

Nevertheless, over the last two months, lab proponents have been showering all interests with the known impacts of building the lab thus far. Environmental Impact Statements will be needed. The scientists admit that there will be negative impacts during the proposed three to five year, \$300 million construction period. First, one or more 7,400-foot core rock samples will be taken to characterize the geology and suitability of Cashmere Mountain. This will be done outside the Wilderness area. Then during tunnel construction, it is estimated that 30 truckloads of rock will be removed each day for 2.5 years. Also, a 12kV power line high-speed cable is needed. Currently, proponents are looking to bury this line alongside Icicle Creek Road. And, water sources for construction and lab operation will be sought.

Two other planned project components are the Surface Campus and the Visitor Experience Center, both to be built in Leavenworth. The Surface Campus will be the main center of activity where scientists, technicians, postdoctoral researchers, and students will monitor experiments, build detectors and analyze data. The Visitor Center will be an outreach/education center.

The scientists say that if this project goes through, the National Science Foundation will provide funds up-front to cover all project impacts, including shut-down costs (in roughly 40 years) once the laboratory has run its course. The Mountaineers Conservation Division does not yet have a position on this proposed project, though we are concerned about the potential for both environmental and recreational impacts and felt it was important for Club members to be informed. This area is one of our major rock climbing practice areas as well as a major access point to the Alpine Lakes Wilderness, particularly the popular Enchantments. The Mountaineer membership is invited to contact the Conservation Division Chair Nancy Neyenhouse at [neyen82@hotmail.com](mailto:neyen82@hotmail.com), or Public Policy Assistant Fatima Oswald at [fatimao@mountaineers.org](mailto:fatimao@mountaineers.org), with comments.