

Jesus Statue Safe Atop Montana Mountain

A statue of Jesus—a World War II memorial—resides safely atop a Montana mountain today.

The federal government made the decision this week to renew the lease that keeps the memorial in place, delivering a sound defeat for an atheist organization that challenged the memorial. The American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) represented more than 70,000 concerned individuals in the case for the Jesus statue.

“This decision by the National Forest Service represents a significant victory in defense of the history and heritage of the region,” said Jay Sekulow, chief counsel of the ACLJ. “We’re delighted that federal officials understood what we have argued all along—that this statue of Jesus does not convey any government religious endorsement of religion. Instead, this historically important memorial is designed to commemorate the sacrifice made by those killed in World War II.”

A group of World War II veterans, who were also members of the Knights of Columbus, placed the statue of Jesus on Big Mountain at the Whitefish Mountain Resort in Montana in the 1950s. Inspired by monuments they saw in the mountains of Europe during the war, the veterans said the statue of Jesus, was put in place to commemorate the service of local WWII veterans—a war memorial.

In a letter sent to the federal government, representing more than 70,000 concerned individuals, the ACLJ urged the Forest Service to renew the lease saying the display is an important historical memorial.

“The statue’s history and purpose, its longevity, and its

setting all support the conclusion that no reasonable observer could think that renewing the Knights of Columbus' special use permit would be an unconstitutional endorsement of religion," the letter contended.

The challenge to the monument was made by the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), an **atheist group** that has challenged the National Motto, the National Day of Prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance. The group called the Montana memorial "a ruse and a sham" and demanded the National Forest Service end a long-standing lease, a move that would force the display to be removed. The government initially agreed with FFRF to end the lease. But a massive public outcry ensued, and the government put that decision on –reopening the issue to public comment.

In a statement issued this week, the National Forest Service says it has agreed to keep the statue in place, renew the special use permit for 10 years, and it acknowledged that this statue represents an important part of the history and heritage of the region.

Chip Weber, Flathead National Forest Supervisor, noted that the statue's historic value and eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places is in part directly linked to the current physical location of the statue. He also acknowledged that the National Forest Service received approximately 95,000 comments about the memorial.

"I understand the statue has been a long-standing object in the community since 1955, and I recognize that the statue is important to the community for its historical heritage based on its association with the early development of the ski area on Big Mountain," said Weber.