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In Need of Protection

How Off-Road Vehicles and Snowmobiles Are Threatening the Forest Service's Recommended Wilderness Areas



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In Need of Protection:
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Executive Summary

Former Chief of the Forest Service, Dale Bosworth called “unmanaged recreation,” including use of off-road vehicles and snowmobiles, one of the “top four threats” to our national forests. Motorized recreation is also the top threat to the Forest Service’s recommended additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System. Increases in the volume of use, size of vehicles and advances in off-road vehicle and snowmobile technology are degrading the wilderness character of many Forest Service recommended wilderness areas.

The national forests in Idaho provide a unique opportunity to compare and contrast different management approaches to off-road vehicle and snowmobile use in Forest Service recommended wilderness areas. The national forests in the state are split between the Northern and Intermountain Regions of the agency. These regions manage the areas and uses differently.

Due to the degradation of wilderness character that has occurred as a result of motorized recreation, national forests in the Northern Region are prohibiting the use of motorized vehicles in recommended wilderness areas through travel management and land and resource management planning. Conversely, the national forests of the Intermountain Region continue to follow a loose national policy that permits existing uses of recommended wilderness areas to continue. Unfortunately, the national policy is leading to ecological damage, user conflicts, decreased opportunities for solitude and degradation of other wilderness values. Therefore, the Forest Service is not living up to its responsibility to ensure that the unique wilderness characteristics of these areas are maintained.

The time has come for a national policy that protects the unique character of the Forest Service’s recommended additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System. The same uses of designated wilderness areas that are prohibited by the Wilderness Act should be banned from recommended wilderness areas. Such a policy is a commonsense means of protecting the wilderness character of Forest Service recommended wilderness areas until Congress considers statutory wilderness designation. At a minimum, a national policy for recommended wilderness areas should require the following:

- Adoption of a desired conditions statement in land and resource management plans that RWAs should be managed to reflect the definition of wilderness found in the Wilderness Act of 1964.
- Adoption of standards in land and resource management plans that require each national forest to prohibit uses of RWAs that are inconsistent with uses allowed per the Wilderness Act of 1964.
- Phase-out incompatible uses through land and resource management planning or travel management planning.
- Approval by the Chief of the Forest Service of any exceptions to this policy.

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Introduction

In 1964 Congress passed the Wilderness Act “[i]n order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States.” The Act established the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS), including 16 “instant” wilderness areas. Additions to the NWPS are made by subsequent acts of Congress.

Section 3(b) of the Wilderness Act also set up a process whereby the Forest Service must make recommendations to Congress for additions to the NWPS. The Forest Service responded in the 1970s with the Roadless Area Review and Evaluation (RARE). However, litigation tied up RARE twice, so the agency elected to determine the wilderness suitability of individual roadless areas at the national forest level through the forest planning process.

Many national forests reviewed each roadless area for wilderness suitability and provided recommendations for additions to the NWPS in the first generation of forest plans. Subsequently, the Congressional delegations of all but two states with national forest system lands—Idaho and Montana—considered those recommendations and passed statewide wilderness bills in Congress. Idaho and Montana both attempted to produce and pass similar statewide legislation but fell short.

Since that time, both states have worked to resolve the wilderness debate through place-based legislation. The Selway-Bitterroot, Sawtooth, Hells Canyon, Gospel Hump and Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness Areas were all designated by separate acts of Congress. The last area to be designated in Idaho was the Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness in 1980.

With over 9 million acres of inventoried roadless areas in Idaho, many areas remain suitable for wilderness designation. Every forest plan in Idaho except the Nez Perce National Forest includes official Forest Service recommendations for additions to the NWPS (Table 1 and Figure 1).

Until Congress takes the opportunity to consider these recommendations, the Forest Service is obligated to protect the wilderness suitability of these areas. The Forest Service Manual states:

Any inventoried roadless area recommended for wilderness or designated wilderness study is not available for any use or activity that may reduce the wilderness potential of the area. Activities currently permitted may continue pending designation, if the activities do not compromise the wilderness values of the area.¹

Unfortunately some national forests have failed to curb the increasing use of off-road vehicles and snowmobiles in recommended wilderness areas (RWAs), which has resulted in the degradation of wilderness character and potential. Operating motorized vehicles, as a general rule, is a use that would be prohibited if an area were designated as wilderness. Therefore, permitting these uses to continue is, by definition, inconsistent with wilderness character. The use of larger off-road vehicles and snowmobiles, as well as technological advances, has decreased the naturalness of many RWAs, opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreation, and ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.² Specific examples are outlined in this report.

¹ FSM 1923.03

² See Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act of 1964 for a definition of Wilderness.

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Idaho provides a unique opportunity to compare the management of RWAs between two different regions of the Forest Service. The national forests in North Idaho are part of the Northern Region of the Forest Service, and those in South Idaho are part of the Intermountain Region. The former is phasing out off-road vehicle and snowmobile use in the RWAs because trends in use, size and vehicle technology are decreasing the wilderness potential of areas where motorized vehicles have been permitted to continue. Perhaps the *Clearwater National Forest Travel Management Plan, Draft Environmental Impact Statement* articulates these impacts best:

As motorized technology continues to be developed levels of access into remote, back-country locations will rise and with this increased use will come additional noise and disturbance which adversely affects attributes of wilderness character. These technology improvements allow motorcycles, bicycles and over-snow vehicles to increasingly overcome the expectations of the 1987 Forest Plan that assumed the difficult and rugged terrain would prove to be self-limiting to motorized access. Activities, including motorized/mechanized (bicycle) trail or road use, or motorized over-snow vehicle use, that may potentially lead to the decline of an areas ability to provide the level of wilderness character that was present when it was recommended in 1987 does not support the protection of wilderness character. Proposing motorized/mechanized (bicycle) activities as part of travel planning decisions in recommended wilderness areas will not result in best meeting the desired future condition in these areas.³

Meanwhile, national forests in the Intermountain Region continue to permit off-road vehicle and snowmobile use in every recommended wilderness area in the region. As this report demonstrates, there are real on-the-ground consequences of these two different approaches that can no longer be ignored. A consistent national policy is needed to protect the wilderness characteristics of these areas from the increasing size, technological capability and use of off-road vehicles and snowmobiles.

³ *Clearwater National Forest Travel Management Plan, Draft Environmental Impact Statement*, page 3-83.

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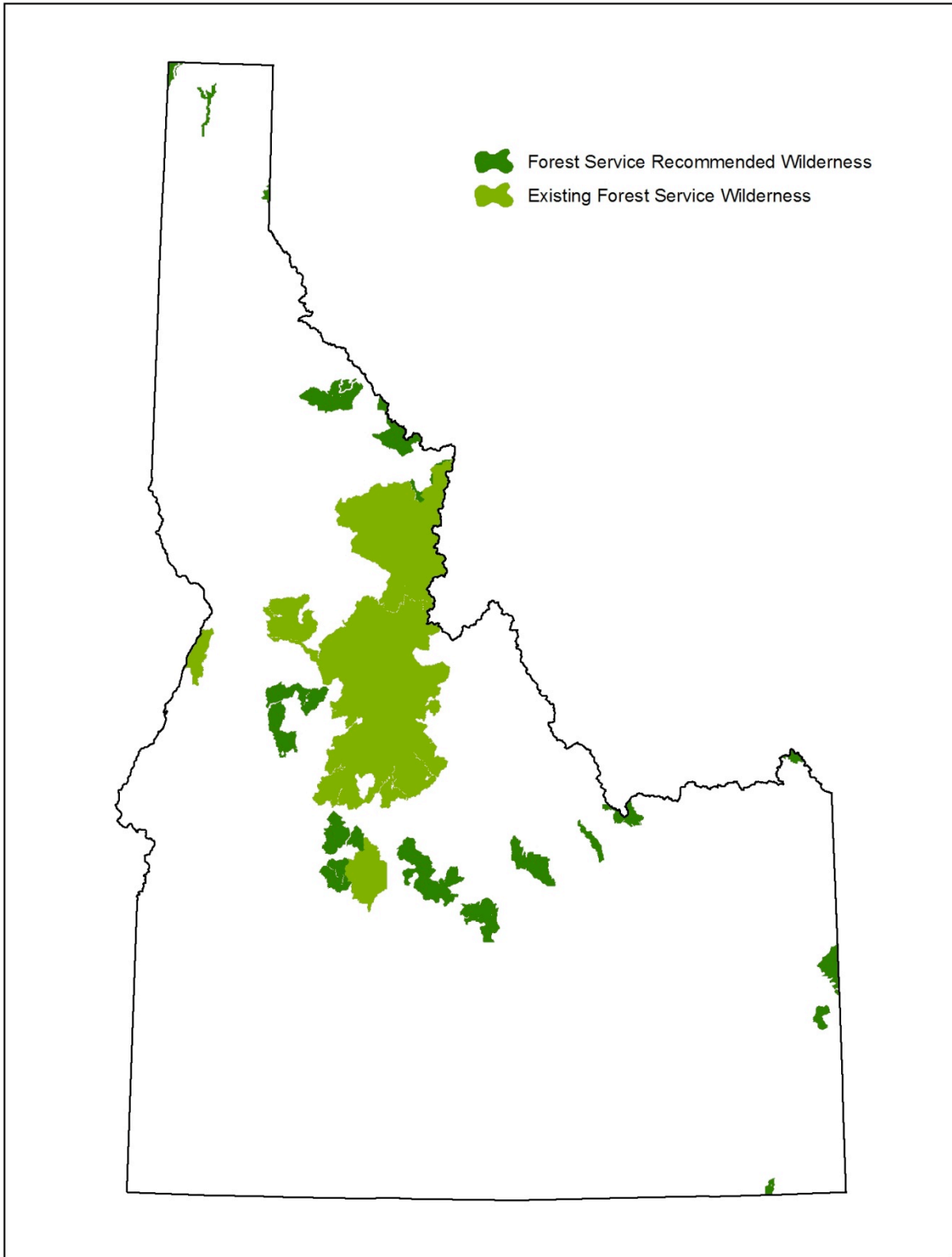


Figure 1. Forest Service recommended wilderness areas and designated Wilderness areas in Idaho.

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Table 1. Forest Service recommended wilderness areas in Idaho by forest and region, including size and allowable off-road vehicle or snowmobile use within the area.⁴

Region	Forest	Area	Acres	Trails designated for off-road vehicle use (%)	Open yearlong or seasonally to snowmobiles (%)
Northern	Idaho Panhandle	Mallard-Larkins	78,500	0%	64%
		Salmo-Priest	17,600	0%	0%
		Scotchman Peaks	9,400	0%	100%
		Selkirk Crest	26,700	0%	10%
	Clearwater	Great Burn (Hoodoo)	113,000	1%, pending travel plan	0%, pending travel plan
		Mallard-Larkins	66,700	0%, pending travel plan	0%, pending travel plan
		Selway-Bitterroot Additions	18,500	0%	0%, pending travel plan
	Nez Perce	None	0	N/A	N/A
	<i>Total</i>		<i>330,400</i>		
Intermountain	Payette	Needles	91,900	30%	9%
		Secesh	115,400	37%	68%
	Boise	Hanson Lakes	13,600	0%	100%
		Needles	4,300	18%	100%
		Red Mountain	86,100	93%	100%
		Tenmile-Black Warrior	79,900	9%	100%
	Sawtooth	Boulder-White Clouds	184,400	30%	92%
		Hanson Lakes	18,500	39%	100%
		Pioneer Mountains	61,000	11%	80%
	Salmon-Challis	Borah Peak	119,000	41% of the routes are designated for motorized use ⁵	0%
		Boulder-White Clouds	34,000	0%	0%
		Pioneer Mountains	48,000	10% of the routes are designated for motorized use ²	0%
	Caribou-Targhee	Caribou City	29,201	0%	100%
		Diamond Peak	29,521	0%	79%
		Italian Peaks	49,406	72%	91%
		Lionhead	11,314	0%	100%
		Mt. Naomi	13,246	20%	100%
		Palisades	61,173	1%	94%
	<i>Total</i>		<i>1,049,614</i>		
Idaho Total			1,380,014		

⁴ Figures for the acreage of each area were derived from the relevant forest management plans. Figures for motorized use were calculated with GIS software using spatial data provided by the Forest Service.

⁵ The term "routes" is used because there are both roads (5.3 miles) and trails (7.2 miles) designated for motorized use in the Borah Peak RWA. There are 4.8 miles of designated roads in the Pioneer Mountains RWA.

Travel Management Planning

As described earlier, former Chief of the Forest Service, Dale Bosworth called “unmanaged recreation,” including the use of off-road vehicles and snowmobiles, one of the top four threats to our national forests.⁶ In 2005, the Forest Service promulgated the “Travel Management Rule” in response to the threat, prohibiting cross-country use of off-road vehicles. The rule also requires each national forest to designate specific roads, trails and areas for motor vehicle use.⁷

The travel management plans developed under these regulations must also be consistent with the land and resource management plans (LRMP) required by the National Forest Management Act (NFMA). Travel management decisions must reflect the desired conditions, goals, objectives, standards and management prescriptions contained in LRMPs, including those related to RWAs.

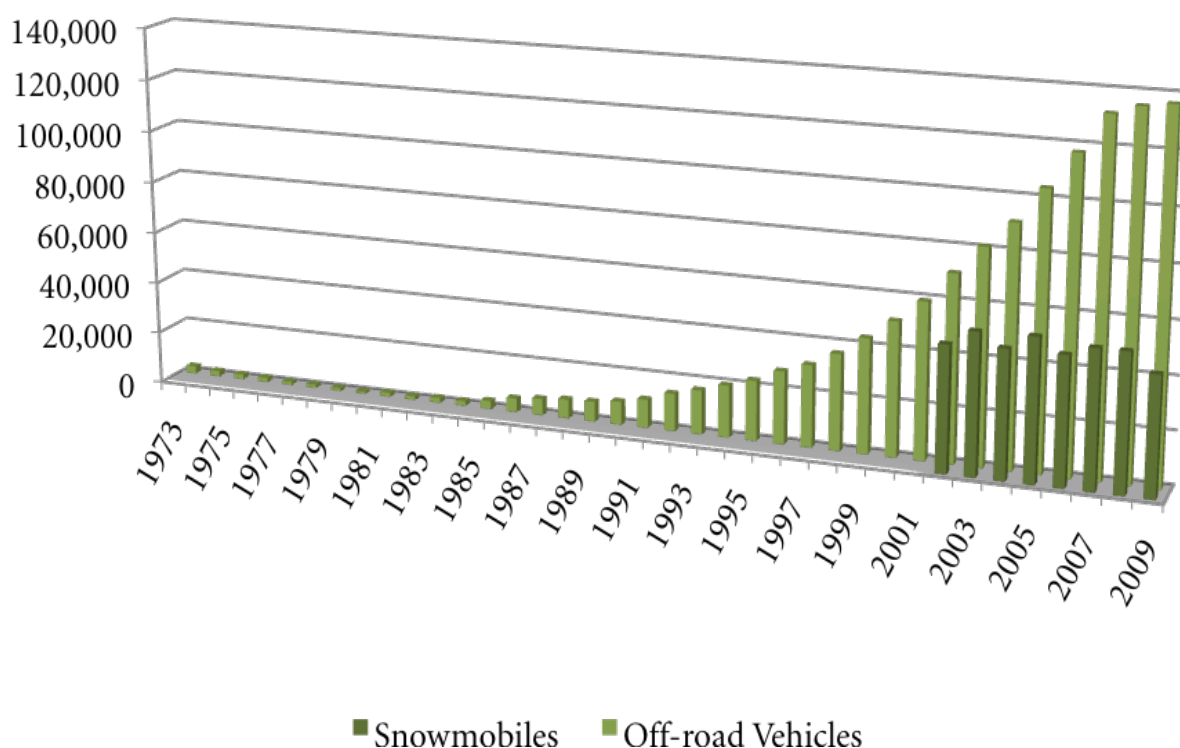


Figure 2. Registered off-road vehicles and snowmobiles in Idaho.⁸

Trends in off-road vehicle and snowmobile use in Idaho illustrate the magnitude of the threat that motorized recreation poses to our national forests and RWAs. The use of off-road vehicles has increased exponentially since the mid 1990s (Figure 2), due primarily to the rising popularity of all-terrain vehicles (ATVs).

⁶ <http://www.fs.fed.us/projects/four-threats/>

⁷ 70 Fed. Reg. 68264-68291.

⁸ http://parksandrecreation.idaho.gov/datacenter/recreation_statistics.aspx

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There are also larger off-road vehicles and snowmobiles on the market today than in the past. The 1980 Honda ATC 185 three-wheeler included a 180 cc engine and was used as a farm implement.⁹ By 1988 Honda was manufacturing a 4x4 ATV with a 282 cc engine, called the Four Trax 300.¹⁰ The Four Trax 300 was intended for recreational use not for farming and ranching. As the off-road vehicles became larger, more powerful and popular for recreational use, the Forest Service was pressured to change regulations governing the use of these vehicles on Forest Service lands. In 1991, the Forest Service quietly did away with the "40-inch rule," which previously prohibited the use of any vehicle greater than 40 inches in width on Forest Service trails. Forty inches happened to be the width of most dirt-bike handle bars. Most present-day travel plans and motor vehicle use maps accommodate modern ATVs by designating trails less than 50 inches in width.



1976 Kawasaki Sno-Jet

Advances in vehicle technology and capability have also increased the threat. In particular, significant technological advances in snowmobile capability have occurred. For example, in 1973 Honda made a prototype snowmobile called the White Fox that had a 178 cc two-stroke engine and weighed 227 pounds.¹¹ The Sno-Jet made in 1976 weighed 355 pounds and was powered by a 338 cc engine.¹²

In the mid-1990s, the introduction of "powder sleds" vastly changed the pattern of snowmobile use.

Advancements in technology led to greater power/weight ratios. For example, the 2011 Arctic Cat Z1

Turbo LXR has a 1,056 cc engine,¹³ a displacement more than three times the 1976 Sno-Jet.

These trends have challenged the Forest Service's ability to protect the wilderness characteristics of RWAs. Trails and areas once considered physically inaccessible to off-road vehicles and snowmobiles because of technological limitations are now readily accessible to modern day machines.

The wilderness characteristics of many RWAs in Idaho have been degraded by the advances in technology and use of off-road vehicles and snowmobiles. The natural integrity of RWAs has declined where trail tread widths have been widened by the larger classes of off-road vehicles now available on the market. Naturalness has also declined because of physical resource damage, including erosion, siltation, loss of vegetation and spread of noxious weeds. Use of snowmobiles has also decreased the naturalness of RWAs where trail grooming and high-marking occurs.

⁹ <http://www.atvriders.com/atvmmodels/honda-history-1980-atc-185.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.atvriders.com/atvmmodels/honda-history-1988-fourtrax-300-atv.html>

¹¹ See photo posted by the Snowmobile Canada website at <http://www.snowmobile-canada.com/his3.htm>

¹² <http://www.snojet.com>

¹³ <http://www.arcticcat.com/snow/Z1TURBOLXR.asp>

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Opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation have declined where the use of off-road vehicles and snowmobiles has increased. Where terrain was previously considered to be a limiting factor for vehicular access, advances in vehicle technology have made access to previously inaccessible areas possible. The ability to use modern motorized vehicles in formerly inaccessible areas negates the need to use traditional, primitive and unconfined modes of travel to access remote areas in RWAs. Further, the noise from these machines transmits across the landscape and disrupts the natural acoustics thereby spoiling the solitude sought by many nonmotorized recreationists.

Last but not least, increased use of off-road vehicles and snowmobiles in RWAs has affected ecological, cultural and other values in RWAs. In some RWAs, wildlife are less secure where previously inaccessible areas provided undisturbed refugia or migration corridors for a host of wildlife species. Many of the habitats in RWAs are particularly important because of their rarity and sensitivity.

While degradation of wilderness character has occurred in many RWAs, it is not too late for the Forest Service to act and protect these unique places. Travel management and forest planning processes can restore wilderness character by limiting the uses of RWAs to those allowed by the Wilderness Act. However, a national policy is needed to provide consistency in management and implementation.

Northern Region

The Northern Region of the Forest Service includes three national forests in Idaho—the Idaho Panhandle, Clearwater, and Nez Perce National Forest. As the forests within the region revise their travel management plans and forest plans, uses of RWAs that are inconsistent with the Wilderness Act are being phased out to protect the unique character of these areas. This forward-thinking approach will ensure that, when Congress considers whether or not to designate these areas as wilderness, the Forest Service will have fulfilled its obligation to preserve the wilderness characteristics of these areas.

Idaho Panhandle National Forest

There are four RWAs on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests. The permissible uses of off-road vehicles and snowmobiles vary by area. The 1987 Forest Plan permitted off-road vehicle and snowmobile use in all four RWAs. However, various resource issues have led to off-road vehicle and snowmobile closures.

The Salmo-Priest, Selkirk Crest and Scotchman Peaks RWAs were closed to off-road vehicle use to protect listed grizzly bear populations. Similarly, all of the Salmo-Priest RWA and the majority of the Selkirk Crest RWA were closed to snowmobile use to protect the last population of endangered woodland caribou in the coterminous United States. Despite these closures, seasonal monitoring by the agency and conservation groups reveals that snowmobilers continue to violate closures for both areas.



Snowmobile use in the Selkirk Crest and Salmo-Priest RWAs negatively impacts endangered woodland caribou survival during the critical winter months.
Photo by Jerry Pavia.

Designated snowmobile routes around the perimeter of the Selkirk Crest RWA facilitate illegal access into the caribou closure area and the RWA. Permitted snowmobile use within the “Trapper Burn” area between the Salmo-Priest RWA and the Selkirk Crest RWA has led to fragmentation of historic habitat in the Selkirk Crest RWA and habitat still used by caribou in the Salmo-Priest RWA. While snowmobile use is considered by the agency to be transitory in nature, wilderness characteristics are degraded on an ongoing basis by snowmobile use through increased noise, loss of opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of winter recreation, and impacts to ecological values including wildlife.

In 2006, the Forest Service nearly completed a revised forest plan for the Idaho Panhandle National Forest that would have prohibited off-road vehicles and snowmobiles in all four RWAs. However, nearly one-third of the Selkirk Crest RWA would have been dropped from the 1987 boundary to allow snowmobile use in the southern Selkirks. The Idaho Conservation League opposed this proposal because it would have sacrificed wilderness-quality landscapes in places like Fault Lake, Chimney Rock, Beehive Lakes, and Harrison Lake. These areas are also documented, historic caribou habitat. The revised plan was put on hold until recently because the Forest Service

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regulations used to draft the plan were enjoined in federal court. The plan revision is again underway using the 1982 planning regulations.

Snowmobiling is also permitted within the Scotchman Peaks RWA. However, actual snowmobile use is minimal. The 2006 revised plan would have slightly expanded the Scotchman Peaks RWA and prohibited both off-road vehicles and snowmobiles in the area. There is strong support in Bonner County for statutory wilderness designation of the Scotchman Peaks.



Snowmobile use at Kidd Lake in the Great Burn RWA is legal on the Clearwater National Forest, while just over the state line in Montana, it is illegal on the Lolo National Forest.

The last RWA on the Idaho Panhandle is the Mallard-Larkins, which straddles the shared boundary with the Clearwater National Forest. The St. Joe Ranger District recently completed a travel management plan that restricts the use of off-road vehicles in the Mallard-Larkins RWA to protect its wilderness character and opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreation commensurate with the Wilderness Act. The latest travel management plan for the St. Joe Ranger District does not prohibit snowmobile use in the area. However, the revised forest plan would have closed the area to snowmobiles. When the revised plan is completed, the prohibition of snowmobiles in the Mallard-Larkins RWA is expected to be carried forward.

Clearwater National Forest

There are three RWAs on the Clearwater National Forest identified by the 1987 Clearwater National Forest Plan. Off-road vehicles and snowmobiles are permitted in the Mallard-Larkins, Great Burn (Hoodoo) and proposed Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness additions. Conversely, the Forest Plan for the adjacent Lolo National Forest prohibits the use of snowmobiles and off-road vehicles within the portion of the Great Burn in Montana.

In 2007 the Clearwater National Forest began developing a new travel management plan for the forest. The draft plan released in 2009 proposed to prohibit the use of off-road vehicles and snowmobiles in all three RWAs with one exception—the existing ATV trail to Fish Lake (3 miles) in the Great Burn. The draft plan would close 38 miles of existing off-road vehicle trails within all three RWAs. Approximately 196,000 acres would be closed to snowmobiling. The preferred alternative would provide consistent management of the Great Burn and Mallard-Larkins RWAs across state and national forest boundaries. The Forest Service presented the following rationale in developing the preferred alternative:

The increase in vehicle capability, numbers, and local use, puts areas of recommended wilderness at far greater risk of degradation and loss of wilderness character than they were when the Forest

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Plan was written. In addition, other areas recommended for wilderness have not received serious consideration for designation once motorized use has become established.

To date, the Clearwater National Forest Travel Management Plan, Draft Environmental Impact Statement is the best example of a plan that takes proactive steps to protect RWAs and their wilderness character. The plan correctly concludes that, due to the increasing size, capability and sheer numbers of off-road vehicles and snowmobiles, it is no longer possible for the agency to allow such uses in RWAs and protect their wilderness character at the same time.

Nez Perce National Forest

The 1987 Nez Perce National Forest Plan did not identify any RWAs on the forest. However, in 2006 the Clearwater and Nez Perce National Forests were in the midst of developing revised forest plans, which were not completed because of the injunction of the forest planning regulations in federal court. During the revision process, the Clearwater and Nez Perce National Forests reviewed every inventoried roadless area on the two forests for wilderness suitability. Each roadless area was given a "wilderness attributes rating" or WAR score. The East and West Meadow Creek Roadless Areas received WAR scores slightly higher and slightly lower, respectively, than the Great Burn RWA on the Clearwater National Forest.

For decades, the Idaho Conservation League has supported designating the Meadow Creek watershed as wilderness because of the area's intact fish and wildlife habitat, opportunities for primitive and unconfined modes of recreation, and its size (213,000 acres). During the planning process, the Idaho Conservation League worked to convince the Forest Service that Meadow Creek should be recommended to Congress for wilderness designation.

In 2007 the Nez Perce National Forest proceeded with a revision of the forest's travel management plan to comply with the 2005 travel management rule. Since Meadow Creek maintains high wilderness attribute ratings, the Idaho Conservation League and The Wilderness Society worked cooperatively to protect the Meadow Creek watershed from degradation by off-road vehicles.



The expansion of ATV use into the Meadow Creek Roadless Area has degraded water quality, fish habitat and tribal cultural resources.

A monitoring project conducted in 2008 uncovered severe off-road vehicle damage to sensitive meadows in the upper reach of Meadow Creek, clearly evidence of diminished naturalness and ecological value. In response, the Forest Service issued an emergency closure order to stop the damage and allow recovery of the meadows to begin. However, the emergency closure order will only remain in effect until the final travel management plan is completed.

Intermountain Region

The Intermountain Region of the Forest Service includes five national forests in Idaho—the Payette, Boise, Sawtooth, Salmon-Challis and Caribou-Targhee National Forests. The region follows a loose national policy concerning RWAs, that allows existing uses of RWAs to continue unless degradation of wilderness characteristics occurs.¹⁴ All five national forests in the Intermountain Region allow off-road vehicle and snowmobile use in their RWAs. This policy is degrading the wilderness characteristics of many RWAs within the region, as described below.

Payette National Forest

Two RWAs identified in the 2003 Payette Forest Plan. Like almost all national forests in the Intermountain Region, some level of off-road vehicle and/or snowmobile use is permitted within the RWAs on the forest. Existing uses in the Secesh and Needles RWAs are permitted to continue unless they degrade wilderness character. Specifically, the “Southwest Idaho Ecogroup” forest plans for the Payette, Boise and Sawtooth National Forests provide that:¹⁵

Mechanical transport in recommended wilderness areas where it currently exists may be allowed to continue unless: a) It degrades wilderness values, b) Resource damage occurs, or c) User conflicts result.



Motorcycle use on the Victor Creek Trail in the Secesh RWA is eroding trails.

In 2009 the Payette National Forest completed a travel management plan for off-road vehicle use. The travel management plan designated 61 miles (33%) of the 183 miles of trails in the Secesh and Needles RWAs as open to motorcycles, including the Victor Creek, Twentymile Creek, Secesh River, Buckhorn Creek and other trails. These motorized routes cut through the two RWAs from one side to the other, fragmenting wildlife habitat and nonmotorized zones in between the trail corridors. Consequently, opportunities for solitude in these RWAs have been diminished. Motorcycle use on popular trails like the Twentymile Creek Trail results in user conflicts where hikers and equestrians would otherwise find excellent opportunities for primitive and unconfined modes of recreation. Resource damage has also occurred due to motorized use on trails such as Victor Creek.

The Payette National Forest also recently completed a winter travel management plan. While the winter travel plan did not expand the physical acreage open to snowmobiles in the Secesh and Needles RWAs, more than two-thirds of the Secesh RWA remains open to snowmobile use. A smaller proportion of the Needles RWA is also open to snowmobiles. Places like Twentymile Creek, Duck Lake, and Buckhorn Summit have become increasingly popular with snowmobilers.

¹⁴ See FSM 1923.03

¹⁵ Payette Land and Resource Management Plan. 2003. Pages III-73 and III-74.

Advances in snowmobile technology and capability have led to snowmobile access in terrain that was formerly inaccessible. Snowmobiles high mark slopes and track up otherwise untouched snow deep in the backcountry, leaving their mark in an otherwise pristine landscape. Noise caused by snowmobiles can be heard far across the landscape and is disruptive to other users, diminishing naturalness, solitude, and opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreational experiences.

Boise National Forest

The Boise National Forest recently completed travel management plans on a district-by-district basis. The scope of the district travel plans was limited to the portions of each district where cross-country use of off-road vehicles had not been previously restricted. Since cross-country off-road vehicle use was already restricted in the RWAs on the forest, there were no changes made to existing route designations in RWAs.

This was an unfortunate omission by the Boise National Forest, which boasts more motorized trails (by percentage) than any other national forest in Idaho. With the proximity of this forest to the rapidly growing Treasure Valley, recreational uses of the Boise National Forest are closely following growth trends in the valley. On summer weekends, people from Boise, Nampa, Caldwell and other suburbs flock to the Boise National Forest to camp and partake in other recreational activities, including off-road vehicle use. The Red Mountain, Hanson Lakes and Tenmile-Black

Warrior RWAs are all within a three-hour drive of nearly one-half million people.



ATV use on the Black Warrior Trail diverted the creek from its native stream channel in the Tenmile-Black Warrior RWA.

The Red Mountain RWA is particularly at risk, where more than 92% of the trail miles are open to motorcycle use. Opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreation are difficult to find without leaving the trail and venturing into terrain that would be difficult to access on foot. Recreational vehicle and off-road vehicle use is supported at Forest Service facilities on the perimeter of the Red Mountain RWA at Bull Trout Lake and Bear Valley where many Treasure Valley residents camp during summer weekends.

Although the Tenmile-Black Warrior RWA is perhaps a bit more difficult to access, off-road vehicle use also threatens the wilderness character of this RWA, which would make a logical addition to the Sawtooth Wilderness. The Blue Jay and Tenmile Ridge Trails on the edge of the RWA are increasingly popular with motorcycle enthusiasts, which has decreased opportunities for solitude, quiet, and primitive and unconfined types of recreation.

Resource damage has also occurred in the Tenmile-Black Warrior RWA, particularly in Black Warrior Creek where illegal ATV use caused significant resource damage that resulted in an emergency resource closure order. While Table 1 and Appendix A indicate that less than 9% of the trails in the Tenmile-Black Warrior RWA are open to off-road vehicles, the true figure remains

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uncertain. Many trails open to off-road vehicles follow the boundaries of the RWA and could be counted "in or out." Such trails are excluded from Table 1 and Appendix A.

In the Hanson Lakes RWA, significant resource damage has occurred on the Bench Creek and Swamp Creek Trails from illegal four-wheeler use. The increased trail tread width, erosion and siltation has reduced the naturalness and ecological integrity of the area. Motorized use has also decreased opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined types of recreation in the Hanson Lakes RWA due to intrusion by noise and disruption of the primitive and remote characteristics of the RWA.

Snowmobile use is also an issue in all four RWAs on the Boise National Forest. Not a single acre of these four areas is closed to snowmobile use. It's not clear that a winter travel plan has ever been developed for the Boise National Forest despite the popularity with winter motorized and nonmotorized recreationists. The open nature of the timber stands and above-tree-line terrain in all four RWAs make for easy snowmobile access. Issues with wolverine denning habitat and mountain goats exist, but they have not been addressed through winter travel management planning.

Sawtooth National Forest

The Sawtooth National Forest is home to some of the most popular RWAs in Idaho. The Boulder-White Clouds RWA has a long and colorful history that includes the ascendancy of Cecil Andrus in Idaho politics. Although the threat to this great area in the 1960s was a proposed open-pit mine, the modern threat is off-road vehicles. Existing off-road vehicle use is permitted to continue in the Boulder-White Clouds RWA under the Sawtooth Forest Plan. Nearly one-third of the trails in the Boulder-White Clouds RWA are open to motorcycles, and more than 90% of the RWA is open to snowmobiles. Resource damage has occurred on the Little Boulder Creek and Warm Spring Trails as a result of motorized use, lessening the natural character in these trail corridors. Motorcycles also regularly use nonmotorized trails in Upper Warm Springs, Castle Divide, Born Lakes and Garland Lakes. Motorized use has lessened opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined types of recreation since the area was first recommended for wilderness in 1972.

There are no designated off-road trails in the portion of the Pioneer Mountains RWA managed by the Sawtooth National Forest. However, nearly 80% of the Pioneer Mountains RWA is open yearlong or seasonally to snowmobiles. Significant snowmobile recreation occurs in the Upper Little Wood drainage and is permitted

seasonally in Hyndman Basin. While snowmobile use is considered by the agency to be transitory in nature, impacts to wolverine are likely resulting in this high mountain environment where this species has been confirmed. Advances in snowmobile technology have also facilitated access to formerly inaccessible terrain in the Pioneers. Consequently, opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined types of recreation have been diminished, including backcountry skiing



Motorcycle use is causing resource damage to the Little Boulder Creek Trail in the Boulder-White Clouds RWA.

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and snowshoeing. Conflicts between snowmobilers and skiers and snowshoers have occurred. The Pioneers Mountains RWA is closed to snowmobiles on the Salmon-Challis National Forest side.

Nearly 40% of the trails in the portion of the Hanson Lakes RWA managed by the Sawtooth National Forest are designated for off-road vehicle use. Resource damage has been caused by off-road vehicle use on the Swamp Creek and Trap Creek Trails, including illegal four-wheeler use. Increases in trail tread width, erosion and siltation has occurred in both portions of the RWA managed by the Boise and Sawtooth National Forests. One-hundred percent (18,500 acres) of the portion of the Hanson Lakes RWA managed by the Sawtooth National Forest is open to snowmobile use.

In 2008 the Sawtooth National Forest completed a travel management plan that included only the portions of the forest open to cross-country use of off-roads at the time. Unfortunately, the scope of this plan did not include any of the three RWAs on the forest, despite increasing problems with resource damage, user conflicts, and illegal use of nonmotorized trails.

Salmon-Challis National Forest

Snowmobile use is prohibited in all three RWAs on the Salmon-Challis National Forest, including the Borah Peak, Boulder-White Clouds and Pioneer Mountains RWAs. The 1987 Forest Plan also prohibited off-road vehicle use in all three RWAs at the time. Unfortunately, the Forest Plan was amended in 1993 to allow nine different exceptions for off-road vehicle use on specific routes in all three RWAs. This amendment was followed by exponential growth in off-road vehicle use, putting the wilderness character of all three RWAs at risk.



Illegal ATV use is causing resource damage to the Swauger Lakes Trail in the Borah Peak RWA.

In 2009 the Salmon-Challis National Forest revised the forest-wide travel management plan, primarily to end cross-country off-road use on the forest. At the request of the Idaho Conservation League and The Wilderness Society, the Forest Service considered and analyzed an alternative that would have prohibited off-road vehicle use in all three RWAs to enhance and protect the wilderness characteristics of all three areas, reduce user conflicts, address resource impacts and increase opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined types of recreation consistent with the Wilderness Act.

The selected alternative closed the Herd Peak-Toolbox Trail to off-road vehicles

in the portion of the Boulder-White Clouds RWA managed by the Salmon-Challis to address problems with cross-country off-road vehicle use and enforcement. Unfortunately, the existing designated routes in the Borah Peak and Pioneer Mountains RWAs were carried forward despite documented evidence shared with the Forest Service that resource impacts and degradation of wilderness character was occurring as a result of off-road vehicle use.

For example, motorized use of the Swauger Lakes Trail in the Borah Peak RWA has resulted in documented resource damage to the trail tread, sensitive meadows and wildlife habitat. The Idaho Conservation League and The Wilderness Society also documented illegal four-wheeler use along

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the entire length of the trail. Forest Service records that are part of the travel management plan revision also indicate that ATV users illegally graded portions of the trail with machinery to a wider tread width. All of these activities have lessened the natural character of the area and opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreation.

In the Pioneer Mountains RWA, an old mining road in Wildhorse Canyon is open to use by all vehicles. While the rough conditions of the road formerly limited use by motorized vehicles to some degree, the increasing use of four-wheelers has made motorized access easier in Wildhorse Canyon. Increased motorized access in Wildhorse Canyon has also increased dispersed camping and noise levels. Consequently, opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined types of recreation have declined.

The 2009 travel plan did not take into account increasing trends in the size, use and capabilities of off-road vehicles since the 1993 travel management plan was adopted. The 2009 plan did not analyze these trends in the context of the existing designated routes in all three RWAs and how those trends would affect the wilderness character of each area.

Caribou-Targhee National Forest

There are six RWAs on the Caribou-Targhee National Forest. Management of off-road vehicle and snowmobile use varies in each area. For Example, the 2003 Forest Plan for the Caribou National Forest identified two RWAs, including Mt. Naomi and Caribou City. The plan prohibits the use of off-road vehicles in both areas during the “snow-free” season but permits cross-country snowmobile use during the winter months. These travel management designations remained unchanged in the 2005 Caribou National Forest Travel Plan.

The 1997 Forest Plan for the Targhee National Forest identified four RWAs, including the Diamond Peak, Italian Peak, Lionhead and Palisades RWAs. Between 80 and 100% of each of these RWAs is open to snowmobile use (Table 1). Consequently, opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined types of recreation are limited, and impacts to wintering wildlife are on-going.

Off-road vehicle use also varies between each RWA. There are no designated off-road vehicle trails in the Diamond Peak or Lionhead RWAs. However, 72% (31 miles) of the trails in the Italian Peaks RWA are open to off-road vehicle use, offering few opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreation. The inconsistency in the management of each RWA has also led to public confusion about how the Forest Service regulates uses of RWAs. User conflicts also occur between backcountry skiers and snowmobilers.



Snowmobiling in the Palisades RWA is degrading wilderness character, including ecological integrity and solitude. Photo by Thomas Turiano.

Conclusions

As this report demonstrates, the Northern and Intermountain Regions of the Forest Service have sharply contrasting management approaches for recommended wilderness. Since 2003, the national forests of the Northern Region have been phasing out uses of RWAs that are impairing or have the potential to impair wilderness values as defined by the Wilderness Act of 1964. Draft plans on the Idaho Panhandle and Clearwater National Forests propose phase-outs of off-road vehicles and snowmobiles in RWAs.

In contrast, every national forest within the Intermountain Region allows some level of off-road vehicle and/or snowmobile use in one or more of their RWAs. For example, approximately 92% of the Boulder-White Clouds RWA managed by the Sawtooth National Forest is open to snowmobiles. Similarly, approximately 33% of the trails in the Secesh and Needles RWAs on the Payette National Forest are designated for off-road vehicle use.

These contrasting management strategies result in public confusion, inconsistent administration and user conflicts. As on-the-ground evidence indicates, allowing off-road vehicles has degraded wilderness character within the RWAs of the Intermountain Region. Deep ruts, stream bank erosion, impacts to wildlife habitats, illegal use of hiking trails by off-road vehicles, decreased opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreation, diminished solitude and user-conflicts are increasingly widespread throughout the RWAs in the Intermountain Region.

A national policy is needed for consistent management of Forest Service RWAs throughout the country. This policy should reflect the original intent of Congress in passing the Wilderness Act—to recommend additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System and to protect the wilderness character of such lands until Congress considers the agency's recommended additions to the NWPS. If the Forest Service finds particular lands suitable for wilderness designation, then the agency should support its own recommendations by allowing only the uses that are consistent with wilderness designation. At a minimum, a national policy that protects the wilderness character of RWAs should require the following:

- Adoption of a desired conditions statement in land and resource management plans that RWAs should be managed to reflect the definition of wilderness found in the Wilderness Act of 1964.
- Adoption of standards in land and resource management plans that require each national forest to prohibit uses of RWAs that are inconsistent with uses allowed per the Wilderness Act of 1964.
- Phase-out incompatible uses through land and resource management planning or travel management planning.
- Approval by the Chief of the Forest Service of any exceptions to this policy.

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Appendix A Data regarding motorized recreation in each RWA

Area	Forest	Motorized Trails (mi)	Non-motorized Trails (mi)	% Motorized Trails	Acreage	Acres Open to Snowmobiles Yearlong	Acres Open to Snowmobiles Seasonally	% Open to Snowmobiles	Notes
Hanson Lakes	Boise	0	0	0.0%	13,600	13,600	0	100.0%	
Needles	Boise	0.9	4	18.4%	4,300	4,300	0	100.0%	
Red Mountain	Boise	47	3.8	92.5%	86,100	86,100	0	100.0%	
Tenmile - Black Warrior	Boise	3	31.7	8.6%	79,900	79,900	0	100.0%	
Caribou City	Caribou-Targhee	0	32	0.0%	29,201	29,201	0	100.0%	
Diamond Peak	Caribou-Targhee	0	14	0.0%	29,521	23,407	0	79.3%	Approximately 9,797 acres are also open to snowmobiles on designated routes only. These areas are not counted toward the total acres open to snowmobiles.
Italian Peak	Caribou-Targhee	31	11.8	72.4%	49,406	44,981	0	91.0%	Approximately 6,182 acres are also open to snowmobiles on designated routes only. These areas are not counted toward the total acres open to snowmobiles.
Lionhead	Caribou-Targhee	0	12.8	0.0%	11,314	11,314	0	100.0%	
Mt. Naomi	Caribou-Targhee	3.2	13	19.8%	13,246	13,246	0	100.0%	
Palisades	Caribou-Targhee	1.1	104.9	1.0%	61,173	57,660	0	94.3%	Approximately 7,836 acres are also open to snowmobiles on designated routes only. These areas are not counted toward the total acres open to snowmobiles.
Great Burn	Clearwater	1.2	117.7	1.0%	113,000	0	0	0.0%	
Mallard - Larkins	Clearwater	0	48.7	0.0%	66700	0	0	0.0%	

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Area	Forest	Motorized Trails (mi)	Non-motorized Trails (mi)	% Motorized Trails	Acreage	Acres Open to Snowmobiles Yearlong	Acres Open to Snowmobiles Seasonally	% Open to Snowmobiles	Notes
Selway - Bitterroot Additions	Clearwater	0	23.1	0.0%	18,500	0	0	0.0%	
Mallard - Larkins	Idaho Panhandle	0	106.8	0.0%	78,500	49,963	0	63.6%	
Salmo - Priest	Idaho Panhandle	0	12.1	0.0%	17,600	0	0	0.0%	
Scotchman Peaks	Idaho Panhandle	0	8.4	0.0%	9,400	9,400	0	100.0%	
Selkirk Crest - Long Canyon	Idaho Panhandle	0	27.9	0.0%	26,700	2,666	0	10.0%	
Needles	Payette	25.1	60	29.5%	91,900	8,177	0	8.9%	
Secesh	Payette	36.2	62.1	36.8%	115,400	78,583	0	68.1%	
Borah Peak	Salmon-Challis	12.5	24.5	33.8%	119,000	0	0	0.0%	In addition to 7.2 miles of motorized trails in the Borah Peak RWA, there are also 5.3 miles of roads.
Pioneer Mountains	Salmon-Challis	4.8	42.5	10.1%	48,000	0	0	0.0%	While there are no motorized trails in the Pioneer Mountains RWA, there are 4.8 miles of designated roads.
Boulder-White Clouds	Salmon-Challis	0	12.8	0.0%	34,000	0	0	0.0%	
Hanson Lakes	Sawtooth	9.3	14.7	38.8%	18,500	18,500	0	100.0%	
Pioneer Mountains	Sawtooth	6.7	52.9	11.2%	61,000	44,780	3,945	79.9%	
Boulder-White Clouds	Sawtooth	50.7	115.9	30.4%	184,400	157,103	12,730	92.1%	