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Working to protect and restore Western Watersheds

By Web and Email

March 11, 2016

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Web site: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=48393>
Email: Erin Noesser <elnoesser@fs.fed.us>

RE: Inyo National Forest Over Snow Vehicle Use Designation #48393

Dear Inyo National Forest planners:

Western Watersheds Project is pleased to provide the following comments in response to your questions "Do you have any concerns with snowmobile use on the Inyo National Forest?" and "Do you have any ideas for improving winter recreation of all types across the Inyo National Forest?" to help you develop a proposed action for the designation of over-snow vehicle. Although your request for comments is "pre-scoping" - i.e. not an official scoping period - you requested comments by March 31, 2016 so these comments are timely.

Western Watersheds Project works to protect and conserve the public lands, wilderness character, wildlife and natural resources of the American West through education, scientific study, research, public policy initiatives, and litigation. Western Watersheds Project and its staff and members use and enjoy the wildlife, cultural and natural resource of the public lands at issue here, for health, recreational, scientific, spiritual, educational, aesthetic, and other purposes. Western Watersheds Project has over 1,600 members nationwide. Western Watersheds Project has a specific and special interest in a number of important resources found on Inyo National Forest including the Bi-State sage-grouse, pygmy rabbits, rare birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish, and scenic and wilderness values that are impacted by the various activities that are authorized by the agency. Western Watersheds Project deeply respects the ability of all members of the public to use the nation's public lands but this requires that the Forest Service carefully and fairly balances and accommodate all those uses.

The National Forest Management Planning Act (“NFMA”) directs that National Forests are to “provide for diversity of plant and animal communities based on the suitability and capability of the specific land area in order to meet overall multiple-use objectives.” 16 U.S. Code § 1604(g)(3)(b). We expect the Forest to fully embrace this mandate in its planning for Over Snow Vehicle Use on Inyo National Forest. The Forest should only designate those trails for Over Snow Vehicle Use that minimize impacts to sensitive species.

When the Forest Service authorizes snowmobile use on public lands it is authorizing an activity that may be incompatible with many of the other uses that the public makes of these public lands whether it be bird watching, hiking, picnicking, wildlife viewing, scenic photography, or just people being people and fulfilling their basic human need for solitude and escape from the woes of the world. This incompatibility is because these snowmobiles are vehicles. Being vehicles they are noisy. They cause the ground to vibrate. Their movement disturbs other people and wildlife. They are motor driven and generate polluting, climate-warming gases. Groomed trails have visual impacts that can be seen for vast distances. Groomed trails also act as conduits for and provide road kill for opportunistic wildlife species such as coyotes and ravens that then impact sensitive species. The Forest Service needs to consider all those impacts in formulating its proposed action and needs to analyze all those impacts in its NEPA analysis.

Western Watersheds Project is particularly concerned that Inyo National Forest addresses the noise and air pollution issues since these affect much larger areas than the actual footprints of any designated over-snow travel routes.

Noise is not just an annoying facet of modern life, noise pollution actually alters ecological services (Francis *et al.*, 2012¹). Specifically, those researchers found that noise altered the community of animals that prey upon and disperse *Pinus edulis* seeds, potentially explaining reduced *P. edulis* seedling recruitment in noisy areas. If noise affects tree recruitment what other things does it do that are significant in a National Forest?

Certainly, noise from snow mobiles is expected to impact those animals and birds that are active during the winter. The pygmy rabbit, *Brachylagus idahoensis* is a sagebrush obligate species typically found in areas of tall, dense sagebrush that is active during winter. Inyo National Forest contains the southern-most extension of the pygmy rabbit’s range. The 1988 Inyo National Forest Plan lists the pygmy rabbit as a sensitive species and the Region-5 2013 Sensitive Species list update continues to carry the pygmy rabbit as a sensitive species. Pygmy rabbits are dependent on sagebrush to provide both food and shelter throughout the year. Their diet in the winter consists of up to 99 percent sagebrush. Pygmy rabbits are risk from snow mobiles through loss of habitat due to breaking of vegetation, collapse of burrows from vibration, and facilitation of predators. The large size of the auditory bullae in the pygmy rabbit indicates reliance on hearing, and a keen sense of hearing would enable pygmy rabbits to hear the approach of ground predators, and to detect wing noise and other auditory cues from raptors

¹ Francis, C. D., Kleist, N. J., Ortega, C. P. and Cruz, A., 2012. Noise pollution alters ecological services: enhanced pollination and disrupted seed dispersal. *Proceedings Royal Society London B: Biological Sciences*, 279(1739): 2727-2735.

(Bradfield 1975²). Noise of snowmobiles can thus mask sounds of predators, increasing pygmy rabbit vulnerability to predation.

The Mono Basin area of Inyo National Forest includes important habitat for the Bi-State population of greater sage-grouse. Last year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service did an about-face and withdrew its 2013 proposed decision to list the Bi-State population of greater sage-grouse as a threatened species under the ESA. That withdrawal decision is now being litigated in federal court.

Ample scientific evidence shows that sage-grouse are sensitive to both noise and movement. Several of the sub-populations are in dire straits; for example the wildlife agencies have been transplanting birds to the Parker Meadows lek (which while on private land is adjacent to Forest Service lands), and sage-grouse in the June Lake area may have already been extirpated already. We expect the Forest to develop a proposed action that completely avoids any impacts to this flagship species.

Western Watersheds Project thanks you for this opportunity to assist the Forest Service by sending in pre-scoping comments for this important travel management process. If you have any questions on our comments or would like further information please feel free to contact me at the email address or telephone number listed below.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael J. Connor", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

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ATTACHMENT:

Francis, C. D., Kleist, N. J., Ortega, C. P. and Cruz, A., 2012. Noise pollution alters ecological services: enhanced pollination and disrupted seed dispersal. *Proceedings Royal Society London B: Biological Sciences*, 279(1739): 2727-2735.

² Bradfield, T. 1975. On the behavior and ecology of the pygmy rabbit *Sylvilagus idahoensis*. MS. Thesis, Idaho State University, Pocatello, ID. 43 pps.