

Dear Forest Service,

Thank you for publishing the new high resolution maps which allow better understanding of the particular features. I am a backcountry skier along the Highway 4 corridor, but I also own a snowmobile for transportation to get deeper into the backcountry with the purpose to ski different terrain. I rarely use my snowmobile for the sake of snowmobiling, even though I understand that it can be a fun sport if one is able to maneuver in deep snow. I just choose to focus on backcountry skiing.

In general, I applaud the Forest Service for the balanced result of Alternative 5. I think the staff has done a very good job to balance the various interests between silent non-motorized travel in the backcountry, and motorized snowmobiling. Here are my specific comments:

1 – For non-motorized backcountry skiers, the area north and east immediately accessible from the two snow parks (Round Valley and Alpine) is of utmost importance and should absolutely be closed to motorized over the snow traffic. It is realistically the only area that is accessible for snowshoers and backcountry skiers directly off the road that provides exciting and quiet terrain. I welcome the fact that all alternatives, except the no action alternative 2, clearly declare Horse Canyon, Round Valley and Bee Gulch to be closed to snowmobiles. For that reason, alternative 2 is absolutely unacceptable to me, because it allows snowmobile access to the only area accessible in a short time without motorized transportation. I am aware that this area was already semi-closed due to an arrangement with the Forest Service, but I have encountered snowmobiles in this area, albeit rarely. Sharing this terrain is simply impossible. It would lead to too much conflict. The terrain is complex, and the silence in this area is unbelievable valuable. I also encourage the Forest Service to display clear signage that access to this area to snowmobile is forbidden.

2 – Even though I have always reached the Woodchuck Basin Trailhead via snowmobile myself, I welcome the fact that Woodchuck Basin itself has also been declared closed to motorized traffic. This area is also a wonderful skiing spot in close proximity to the Lake Alpine snowparks. As you are probably aware, there has traditionally been very frequent snowmobile traffic into Woodchuck, particularly up to the ridge north east of the trailhead and even into the wilderness. I have seen snowmobiles all the way up to the Wheeler ridge at 8677 ft. This points to a critical element of this plan: Enforcement. Without any enforcement, this plan is worth nothing. It is critical that snowmobilers stay out of the wilderness, and have to be penalized if they are encountered there.

3 – I am personally completely in agreement that snowmobilers can enter the area north east of Cape Horn along the Highway 4 corridor. I do not think there is any potential for conflict because skiers do not frequent this area and it is not very useful for skiing. But snowmobilers must stay out of the wilderness! I have done several tours starting Woodchuck Trailhead, up to Wheeler Ridge and then drop into the bowl south of Wheeler, back to Highway 4 and to the snowmobile parked at Woodchuck Trailhead.

4 – Stanislaus Meadows would theoretically be an interesting area for cross country skiers, but it is very unlikely that there is conflict, because the majority of XC skiers will not reach this area without

a snowmobile. I find it unlikely that somebody would take a snowmobile to Stanislaus Meadows, and then cross country ski there. For backcountry skiers, Stanislaus Meadows is of no value.

5 – The area east of Stanislaus Meadows up to the Western ridge of Pacific Valley will stay open, which will continue to provide interesting riding options there.

6 – Pacific Valley will mostly stay accessible to snowmobilers, and I welcome that, because for backcountry skiers, it is great terrain, and a snowmobile gives so much better access to this area. I welcome very much that the Forest Service has declared Bull Run Peak, Henry Peak as well as the whole West slope of Pacific Valley closed to snowmobiling. I feel this is a great compromise, as long as it is enforced.

7 – I have personally never skied in the area which is proposed to be closed according to Alternative 5 (“preferred”) north of Lookout Peak, as well as around Black Dome. I don’t know the exact rules why this area is planned to be closed, but I do not believe the risk of conflicts between motorized and non-motorized travel is very great. I know that snowmobilers have used Pacific Valley as a way to connect to Highland Lakes, but that appears to be difficult anyway due to the required crossing of the wilderness boundary.

8 – I am of course excited to see that the road to Highland Lakes continues to be open. The North East bowl of Folger and the East bowl of Hiram are fantastic terrain for backcountry skiers, and of course a snowmobile is a great way to get there. However, I am equally concerned about enforcement. As you are probably aware, tracks are often leading straight into the wilderness past Hiram, and the North East bowl of Folger is frequently tracked out by brutal use of snowmobiles in an area where simply nobody should be because it is in the wilderness. This is to me the worst kind of blatant disregard of rules by some snowmobilers. Without any kind of enforcement, this plan will largely be worthless. I realize that these are remote areas to patrol, but snowmobilers have to obey the rules.

In conclusion, I want to again thank the Forest Service for a balanced preferred proposal. I am probably not the typical user of a snowmobile, but given how vast the areas are that are still open, I personally do not understand the excitement in the snowmobiling community. This community needs to understand that there are legitimate reasons why certain areas that are prone to conflicts must be closed. Knowing the highway 4 corridor, I do not believe the claim of vast economic loss due to these closures. I think most people who rent snowmobiles are not expert users anyway, and will stick mostly to the trail along Highway 4. I heard of expert users who are renting houses in Bear Valley, but I don’t know how big this community really is, and how materially they are really impacted by the closures of certain areas.

Best regards,
Michael Bechauf
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