

Christopher Johnson

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Jason Kuiken

Forest Supervisor- Stanislaus National Forest 19777 Greenley Road
Sonora, CA 95370

Dear Supervisor Kuiken,

My name is Chris Johnson. Currently I have a family cabin/been living in the Stanislaus National Forest for the past 14 years near the village of Bear Valley. I have just learned about the potential closures of our public lands to snowmobiling and snow biking. Let me express my deepest frustrations/sadness with these potential closures.

I learned how to snowboard at Bear Valley Ski Resort and transitioned that into learning backcountry snowboarding along the Ebbetts Pass corridor. I got really big into backcountry snowboarding and used snowmobiles to access areas all along the pass (highlands, pacific valley, Kinny Lakes, story book, and many other areas). After many years of doing this I fell in love with the actual sport of snowmobiling and for the past several years, that is all I have done in the backcountry. Some of my absolute favorite riding areas are Pacific Valley, Highlands, Bear Trap/ Jelmini Basin, Lookout Peak and in all the different drainages/ creeks along the way. I continually push myself and push my riding to be able to access more areas and enjoy the beautiful forest and terrain. One of the best ways to access pacific valley isn't from the campground trailhead on the highway, but cutting across the top of the ridge just east of Mosquito lake. Continuing along that ridge south (not in wilderness) and dropping into the valley (at various points).

I am saddened to learn about the "preferred" alternative that the USFS-Stanislaus NF has released. The preferred alternative would no longer allow me to access Pacific Valley along the ridge, I could only access it from the campground entrance. Furthermore, you limit access within Pacific Valley. That entire west bowl

and southwest bowl would be out of the question for riding, along with riding on the east bowl near Henry Peak. My dad and I also love to ride north of Mosquito Lake, its easy enough yet challenging enough for my dad to enjoy. The time spent with my dad snowmobiling will be something that I will always remember. My dad taught me how to snowmobile when I was a child, and I love being able to continue to ride with him.

In addition to the extensive closures over Ebbetts pass, these closures effect my home. I live across the street from Sherman Acres (between Bear Valley and Tamarack) my address is 18716 state highway 4, Arnold at Bear Valley CA. My home is at 7000 ft elevation and we own 2 acres that back up to USFS land. Part of the reason why my family purchased this home/land back in 2003 was because it backed up to USFS land and I could access terrain with snowmobiles right from our home. I also love to go out along the north side of my cabin, through the acres and up along the ridge above Bear Trap and Jelmini Basin. I see that the areas to the north of bear trap and south of Corral Hollow (challenging terrain) could also potentially be closed to Snowmobiling. Again, this is absolutely tragic, especially for a community that relies heavily on winter recreation to keep the town alive.

Bear Valley CA is a small town, with 2 bars, 3 restaurants and a general store/post office. This town has been struggling to survive over the last decade. The people who live in that town mainly work construction in the summer, for the USFS or are employed year round by the ski area. In the winter time, nearly everyone has something to do with the ski resort, ebbetts pass, the village or the cross country ski center. The snowpack really determines how much revenue comes into the small town of Bear Valley. On not so good snow years, the town struggles to stay afloat and the heavy snow years are a great time for the town. Much like the ski resort, the snowmobile community fluctuates with the snowfall as well. Many out of town snowmobilers stay in the village, Tamarack or further down the hill in Arnold or Murphys. Those snowmobilers bring money/ revenue to the town (restaurants, bars, lodging). If you begin to close off these areas, many snowmobilers will choose to go someplace else to ride. Bear valley is a 48.2 mile Culde-sac in the winter time. People drive that culde-sac because they love Ebbetts Pass and love

Bear Valley. Bear Valley doesn't have the crowds it once did (back in its heyday) and we need all the tourists/visitors that we can get.

The last decade has been hit or miss for snow along Ebbetts Pass. Rarely are we able to snowmobile on terrain lower than 700ft elevation. That means that most of the Spicer Snowpark is inaccessible due to the lack of snow. In 2016/17 snow season we had a phenomenal year (mostly) we received a ton of snow, but with that came a ton of rain. Even though Spicer snow-park was open again, it was still inaccessible because of the flooding that was occurring. Bottom line is that riding anywhere west of Bear Valley is a gamble every year which is why we need to keep as much riding areas open along Ebbetts Pass as we can. So that people can still enjoy the sport of snowmobiling.

In the DEIS you talk specifically about conflicts between OSV and other recreations in the winter time. I have not once come across this conflict on Ebbetts Pass. Actually, I have given skiers a tow to get back to the parking lot from Lake Alpine and assisted in searching for lost skiers. The relationship between the human powered community and snowmobile community is great right now along Ebbetts Pass.

I understand that the human powered community would like areas to ride in, and that has happened on Ebbetts Pass. Recently the snowmobile community gave up Round Valley so that the human powered community could access that without hearing/seeing/ snowmobiles tracking up all the powder. They even got a brand new snow park along with it! One of the agreements from that was that snowmobilers could continue to access Pacific Valley. In all fairness, Pacific Valley is quite a distance for someone operating solely on human power to reach, be able to ski a few runs then return to the parking lot all in the same day. In addition, the Stanislaus NF is unique because the human powered community can access wilderness within a mile of the snow park. There is so much wilderness, that the human powered community can go to quite a few awesome places within a short distance that the snowmobile community cannot (horse canyon, woodchuck basin, Mt. Reba, Lake Valley). I would love nothing more than to be able to access Avalanche Meadow, Cliff Meadow and Sandy meadow but I cannot.

I often frequent Pacific Valley and Highlands lakes in the summer time. While I am out camping/hiking I do not see any evidence that snowmobiles have ridden there from the winter time. I do not see any garbage, do not see any tracks in the dirt, I do not see any disturbances in the soil or habitats in the area. When the snow melts, so does any evidence of snowmobiles.

I fully support a decision to create a “Near Natural Winter Motorized Access” plan. By creating this plan, we could legitimately be able to ride in Pacific Valley, Bear Trap and several other places (including the areas directly south of where I live, and link up to the Lake Alpine Snow-park). I understand that it is a gray area currently riding there, but people have been riding those areas for decades; its what people talk about when you ask if they have ridden Ebbetts Pass.

The way the map is drawn around Lookout Peak in Alternative 5 is quite interesting. It is a mixture of Near Natural and slopes deemed “too steep” for snowmobile access. With how advanced todays new snowmobiles are, those areas are not too steep. I have ridden between pacific valley, around lookout peak and over to highlands road several times. There is a route to get between the two safely (if you know where your going). On the north side of Lookout Peak, just south of Highway 4 there is a large pillow line created by small cliffs. When the snowpack is good, its fun to get into those pillow lines and drop down into them. Obviously conditions have to be right in order to ride these areas (due to avalanche danger) but the people who are getting into these areas have been trained and understand the risks involved.

Another area that I frequently ride that is the area just east of Tryon Meadow/ Bear Tree Meadow in the Highlands Lake area. I ride this area quite frequently nearly all the way to the Humboldt Toiyabe National Forest. This area is quite fun to ride. There are open meadows, hillclimbs, great tree riding and fun creek/ drainage riding. It is really a great intermediate riding zone where people can perfect their skills and progress their riding. From looking at the maps it shows that this is proposed wilderness in addition to being near the Pacific Crest Trail. Proposed Wilderness is not actually wilderness so it should be treated as such. Once congress votes (which is hasn't as of yet) to make that area wilderness than we, the people, should be able to access that public land without penalty. In regards to the Pacific Crest Trail, I have hiked along it

several times in early summer and have not once seen a snowmobile track or ski track along the trail. Snowmobiles are ridden on the snow and they do not affect the soil in any way if they are not riding on the soil and the tracks in the snow disappear when the snow melts.

In proposal 5, it is proposed that the Stanislaus Meadow and the road to Highlands/Highlands lakes are a 24” minimum requirement for snowmobiles to ride. This is quite a difficult thing to propose for two reasons. One, who is going to enforce this? And 2 there are varying snow conditions. I absolutely will not ride my snowmobile on 12 inches of powder with no base, where my track goes into the dirt. However, 12 inches of hardback snow in the spring time, I absolutely will ride my snowmobile on. Due to these vastly different snow conditions, I find it quite unfair to say snowmobilers cannot ride in these areas with less than 24” of snow. The snow depth requirement should be at the discretion of the snowmobiler, if the snow conditions do not warrant a snowmobile to ride across, then the snowmobiler chooses not to.

A different area of the map that I didn’t realize was near natural was the Bee Gulch area all the way to cape horn on the north side of Highway 4. When the snow conditions are good, this is quite a fun area to ride. I know that it is a south facing slope, so it is quite difficult to hold snow on less than optimal years, but during the 16/17 season, I was able to access it. This area was quite fun and a great intermediate/ advanced riding area. Its also a great area to ride in the spring time. When Cal-Trans is able to plow the highway all the way to the end of Lake Alpine, it opens up new parking areas and areas to unload sleds. I was able to ride in July 2017 along Bee Gulch and Woodchuck Basin. It was awesome being able to access that area so late in the year. Again, if you create a “Near Natural Winter Motorized Access Plan” then this area would remain open to snowmobiling.

It would be great to get more parking at the Alpine Snow-Park. I know that the bathrooms were created and about 10 more spots opened up, but it really isn’t enough parking for snowmobilers with trailers. It is difficult to find parking with the amount of snowmobilers as well as winter snow-park goes in the winter time. It creates a safety hazard along the highway. When the parking lot fills up, and the parking fills up along the highway prior to Highway 207 to the Ski area, people will park along the east side of 207 and along the north side of

4, west of 207. All of that along the highway parking creates dangerous congestion between people walking from their vehicles to the snow park and vehicles driving along the highway. I know that this is something that is not incorporated into the current travel management plan, but I think its something that needs to be address in the future.

Every spring, the weekend after the ski resort closes, the snowmobile community comes together for a fun family weekend at the ski resort. Every year it grows larger and larger. Last year we had around 150 people total for the entire weekend. Kids get to ride around on small 120cc snowmobiles, people try out other people snowmobiles, its a fun event for the entire family. Last season there was even a fun little hillclimb contest that people could compete in for fun. It was honestly an absolute blast and this event has been going on for as long as I can remember. This event needs to keep happening, its great for families and please do not close off this area once the ski resort closes.

Ebbetts pass offers a wide variety of terrain when learning how to snowmobile. The Stan meadow is perfect for beginners just learning how to make pow turns. Highlands Lakes is where intermediate riders go to push their skills and where advanced riders can get into some challenging terrain. Pacific Valley is where the advanced riders go to push their limits. All these areas (plus many more) all contribute and make up the amazing riding areas within Ebbetts Pass.

In speaking with one of the main influencers of the human powered enthusiasts/ local business owner (Paul Peterson) in Bear Valley, we came to a few conclusions that we would like to see. Paul stated that he would like to keep things the way they are, to keep Round Valley Closed to snowmobiling (which I am absolutely fine with) and to not groom the Slick Rock Trail, linking Lake Alpine with Utica Reservoir. Paul stated that nearly everyone who enjoys human powered access goes out to Round Valley and the immediate surrounding areas.

The Human Powered community and the snowmobile community have a great relationship on the Ebbetts Pass corridor, by limiting snowmobile access I fear that tensions will increase between the two sides because snowmobilers will think you are closing off our favorite areas for non motorized users only.

There has been a long standing unofficial slogan for Bear Valley and Ebbetts Pass. People call it a “Winter Wonderland” where people from all over can come and enjoy every single thing winter has to offer; playing in the snow, sledding, skiing, snowboarding, snowmobiling, snowshoeing, cross country skiing, backcountry skiing/snowboarding and many more things. I have snowmobiled all across California and I can honestly say that some of the best backcountry snowmobiling is along Ebbetts pass in the Stanislaus National Forest. When I meet new people out snowmobiling elsewhere in the state I always ask if they have ridden Ebbetts, and every single person who hasn’t says they would love too because they heard how awesome it is. What I am trying to get at, is that we need to keep these areas open, designate a Near Natural Winter Motorized Access plan so that we can continue to access Ebbetts pass how its always been accessed; to keep our area we love, truly, a winter wonderland.

Thank you for your time and allowing the public to comment on this controversial topic.

Respectfully,

Chris Johnson

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Johnson", written in a cursive style.



Pacific Valley
below west ridgeline



Pacific Valley



Bee Gulch Area



Bee Gulch





North East of Bear Tree Meadow



North East of Bear Tree Meadow