



The Sierra Snowmobile Foundation was formed in the Spring of 2018 when the need for a more competent and cohesive voice for the OSV community was identified. This need resulted from the forthcoming OSV management plans in California. We are a 5013c organization with over 1500 social media followers, and constitute both OSV users and regular backcountry skiers.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the Stanislaus OSV management plan. We appreciate the interest the Stanislaus National Forest has shown in this process at this stage. The second open house meeting and multiple map revisions in the pursuit of further clarity is encouraging.

Listed below are two distinct sections of our comments. The first addresses contradictions, omissions and questionable conclusions found within the DEIS. The second, beginning on page 7 is a discussion of management proposals and our recommendations on how they can be improved.

DEIS contradictions and omissions

The DEIS incorrectly models current management as Alternative 2, failing to recognize existing designated OSV closure areas. This simple act creates an inherent inaccuracy in all comparisons of modeled alternatives, and brings into question the analysis itself. The closest representation of current use and current management is exhibited in Alternative 4, what should have been used for the analysis as the no-action alternative. In discussions with Stanislaus NF personnel, this seems well understood. For comparison purposes, we use Alternative 4 for comparisons with the current proposed action, Alternative 5. This is what the final document should reflect.

Purpose and Need

- **Provides public OSV access:** Information in Table S-2 Preferred Alternative 5 documents a 49% decline in acreage available for motorized OSV use (191,099 acres available for OSV in the current use Alternative 4; reduced to 97,763 in the Preferred Alternative). Table 31, page 117 shows a decline in both OSV and cross country ski use between 2007 and 2012. Both user groups have the same value for both survey years bringing the source into question. Table 32, page 117 documents a 53% increase in OSV registration for counties in the Stanislaus National Forest between 2012 and 2018 (70 vs. 1194). Statewide there was a 7% increase in OSV registration. Given the registration data, the forest fails to justify a 51% decline in available acres to OSV use.
- **Promotes the safety of all uses:** No documented safety issues between motorized OSV users and non-motorized users exist.
- **Minimizes impacts to natural and cultural resources:** DEIS fails to document any impacts under current conditions.



- **Minimizes conflicts between OSV use and other recreational uses on NFS lands and neighboring Federal lands:** DEIS did not document conflicts between user groups. The adjacent Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest has well established OSV motorized use.
- **Minimizes conflicts between different vehicle classes on NFS lands and neighboring Federal lands:** DEIS does not document conflicts between different vehicle classes on NFS or adjacent Federal lands.
- **Is compatible with the existing conditions in populated areas (taking into account sound, emissions, and other factors):** DEIS does not demonstrate existing conditions are not compatible regarding sound, emissions and other factors.

Discussion of Preferred Alternative/Proposed action.

Alternative 4

This alternative addressed the availability of motorized recreation opportunities significant issue by emphasizing motorized use. This section summarizes how the Forest Service would manage public OSV use on the Stanislaus National Forest under alternative 4 (Map 4).

Alternative 4 was developed with input from the Blue Ribbon Coalition and other OSV enthusiasts. This alternative was developed to address the significant issue related to decreased OSV recreation opportunities on the forest. **This Alternative is the closest model to existing management, and does not emphasize enhanced motorized use, other than to continue with current conditions. An accurate analysis needs to utilize this Alternative as existing management.**

Alternative 5

Alternative 5 (Responsible Official's identified Preferred Alternative) emphasizes protections for wildlife and natural resources as well as quality recreation experiences for both motorized and non-motorized recreation. Responds to all three significant issues (Table S-1) and would incorporate components of both alternatives 3 and 4 by: (1) designating a proportion of the high-quality and desirable cross-country OSV-use areas and trails identified by OSV enthusiast groups; (2) designating a smaller quantity of NFS lands as cross-country OSV-use areas or trails than alternatives 1, 3, and 4; (3) not designating any OSV-use areas or trails within Proposed Wilderness areas and a smaller quantity of NFS lands for OSV use located within Near Natural areas; (4) not designating areas or trails with access issues and that are not likely to provide sufficient snow on a regular basis to warrant their designation; and (5) including enhanced provisions to provide protections for the Yosemite toad and Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog (i.e., 24-inch minimum snow depth requirement), and Sierra Nevada red fox (i.e., season of use provision).

It Cannot be argued that the quality of experience for motorized use is emphasized when nearly 50% of the area historically available under current management is lost.

ISSUES

The DEIS identifies three issues:

1. Availability of Motorized Over-snow Recreation Opportunities;



2. Availability of Non-motorized Winter Recreation Opportunities;
3. Effects on the Diversity of Terrestrial and Aquatic Wildlife. Specifically, compared with Alternative 2, No Action to Alternative 5, Preferred Alternative.

The DEIS fails to document any issues and/or a purpose and need for the drastic reduction in historical OSV use in the Stanislaus Forest.

**Table S- 1. Significant issues Issue Topic
Cause and Effect**

1. Availability of Motorized Over-snow Recreation Opportunities

The proposed OSV-use designations have the potential to impact the quantity and quality of NFS trails and areas on NFS lands available for enthusiasts seeking enjoyable and challenging motorized OSV experiences by:

a) Eliminating popular, highly desirable areas that have been historically available for public, cross-country OSV use (e.g., some use within Near Natural Areas); **Table S-2: No Action (Alt4) = 191,099 acres available for public OSV use; Preferred Alternative = 97,763 acres available for public OSV, a 49% decline.**

b) Designating new, less desirable (in location and quality) NFS trails and areas on NFS lands for public OSV use; **Table S-8: Neither Alternative 4, Current management or Alternative 5, the Preferred Alternative create any new OSV opportunity.**

c) Designating an insufficient quantity (miles and acres) of NFS trails and areas for public OSV use; **Table S-9: The Preferred Alternative reduces the total miles of non-groomed OSV trails from 105.29 to 56.69 acres, a 46% reduction. Also reduces total acres of public OSV use by 49% (191,099 vs. 97,763).**

d) Providing an insufficient quantity (miles) of groomed public OSV opportunities; **Table S-10: No change in miles of groomed trails, 24.7 in both alternatives.**

e) Designating minimum snow depth requirements. **Table S-11: Alternative 5 recommends 24" snow depth in the Stanislaus Meadow and Highland Lakes areas; 12" in the remaining areas**

2. Availability of Non-motorized Winter Recreation Opportunities

The proposed OSV-use designations have the potential to impact the quantity and quality of NFS non-motorized winter recreation opportunities for enthusiasts seeking solitude and challenging physical experiences by:

a) Reducing the quantity of NFS land available for quiet, non-motorized recreation; **Table S-12: Alternative 5 represents a 29% increase in acres available for non-motorized (61,591 vs. 79,489).**



b) Increasing the distance of travel required in order to access desirable quiet, non-motorized recreation areas (perhaps to distances further than an enthusiast is physically able to travel); **Table S-13: Alternative 5 represents a 72% increase in acres, Alternative 4 a 64.2% increase**

- c) Creating conflicts between motorized and non-motorized winter recreation by:
- i. Increasing the area of overlap between non-motorized (e.g., snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, general snow-play) and motorized (i.e., OSV) use; **Table S-14: Alternative 5 represents a 49% loss of acres currently available to OSV motorized use from existing conditions Alt 4**
 - ii. Designating non-motorized Near Natural Areas and Proposed or Recommended Wilderness Areas for motorized OSV use;
 - iii. Consuming untracked powder desired by non-motorized winter recreationists, particularly cross-country skiers, snowshoers, and backcountry downhill skiers;
 - iv. Compacting, tracking, and rutting the snow, making the snow surface difficult to cross-country ski, snowshoe, or walk on;
 - v. Creating concerns for non-motorized winter recreationists' safety where winter recreation trails and areas are shared with OSV usage; vi. Creating noise impacts that intrude on the solitude these enthusiasts seek; **Table S-14: Alternative 5 represents a 49% loss of acres To OSV motorized use.**
 - vii. Creating local air quality impacts that intrude on the unpolluted air and solitude these enthusiasts seek; viii. Creating visual impacts that intrude on the unaltered scenery these enthusiasts seek; ix. Impacting the quiet characteristics of the Pacific Crest Trail; and
 - x. Impacting the Natural, Undeveloped, Outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation in Wilderness Areas.

This is an OSV management plan, NOT a non-motorized enhancement plan.

3. Effects on the Diversity of Terrestrial and Aquatic Wildlife

The proposed OSV-use designations and trail grooming have the potential to directly, indirectly, and cumulatively impact wildlife, including federally listed threatened and endangered species and their habitats by:

- a) Causing injury or mortality to wildlife species through crushing (or other contact) or disturbance (e.g., noise resulting in interrupted or lost breeding or feeding, or movement patterns) **Documented nowhere that there IS an issue; there is only a "potential".**
- b) Causing habitat destruction or modifications such as sedimentation, rutting, snow compaction of subnivean zones (i.e., the zone in and under the snow), or contamination of soils and water. **It is never documented that this IS an issue; there is only a "potential".**

Highlighted Species and concerns



Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog (*Rana sierrae*): It is our determination that the alternatives “**may affect, likely to adversely affect**” the Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog based on the potential to directly impact individuals moving over snow or ice during the early portion of the breeding season.”

<http://www.californiaherps.com/frogs/pages/r.sierrae.html>: “Mating and egg-laying occurs in water shortly after the snows have melted and adults have emerged from hibernation, which can be any time from May - August. Adults tend to live around the breeding pond, so most do not need to travel to the breeding site.”

https://www.fws.gov/sacramento/es_species/Accounts/Amphibians-Reptiles/sn_yellow_legged_frog/: “This species tends to spend the winter at the bottom of frozen lakes, emerging shortly after snow melts. In years of heavy snow, they may only be active for about 3 months.”

<http://nrm.dfg.ca.gov/FileHandler.ashx?DocumentID=7101>: California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System California Department of Fish and Wildlife Interagency Wildlife Task Group: “Reproduction: Breeding and egg-laying at higher elevations usually occur from June to August, depending upon local conditions.”

Yosemite toad (*Anaxyrus canorus*): “It is our determination that the alternatives “**may affect, likely to adversely affect**” the Yosemite toad based on the potential to directly harass overwintering individuals through noise disturbance and OSVs potentially striking individuals within OSV areas.”

<http://www.californiaherps.com/frogs/pages/a.canorus.html>: “Mating and egg-laying takes place from May to July shortly after the snow melts in shallow pools in meadows, the margins of lakes and quiet streams.”

“Males arrive at breeding sites a few days before females. (Males stay for 1 - 2 weeks, while females leave after a few days.”

OSV use does not correspond with Yosemite Toad, or Yellow-Legged Frog activity periods and should not be limited based on behaviors of these species, especially without supporting data.

Aquatic Species

Snow compaction is not an issue for aquatic species: “Therefore, *snow compaction and surface disturbance* was not considered further in this analysis as a reasonably foreseeable source of indirect effects to aquatic animal species.”

Coyote Incursion on terrestrial prey habitat

Packed trails resulting from snowmobile use facilitate coyote incursion into deep snow areas was identified as an issue, however “Whether or not this is occurring or the extent to which it is occurring, as a result of OSV use and related activities on the Stanislaus National Forest, is unknown.”



Kolbe, Jay A.; Squires, John R.; Pletscher, Daniel H.; Ruggiero, Leonard F. 2007. The effect of snowmobile trails on coyote movements within lynx home ranges. *Journal of Wildlife Management*. 71(5): 1409-1418. " *The overall influence of snowmobile trails on coyote movements and foraging success during winter appeared to be minimal on our study area.*"

Due to warmer temperatures and more intense sunlight during winter months compared to other snowbound areas, the snowpack in California settles faster, and consolidates more regularly. This consolidation quickly matches compacted snow from OSV tracks and is a common site several days after a storm.

There is no sharply defined issue relating to either terrestrial or aquatic wildlife species threats from OSV use, much less any issue based in presented data.

There is also no quantified data or information presented in the DEIS documenting an existing problem within any of the three issues. In short, there was no justification that supports a nearly 50% decline in existing over-snow vehicle use. In fact only this proposed reduction presents a problem in that it intends to severely impact OSV recreation opportunities.

OSV Use Assumptions for Analysis –(pages 111 and 112, Vol 1)

Approximately half of motorized visitors indicated that they would not snowmobile or would snowmobile less if the trails were not groomed (Rolloff et al. 2009). **This is not an accurate description of western mountain state snowmobile use patterns, and certainly not reflective of the majority of use on the Stanislaus National Forest for *regular* users.**

Non-Motorized Winter Over-Snow Recreation

Desirable, high quality non-motorized winter recreation experiences are typically characterized by quiet activities such as cross-country skiing or snowshoeing in a natural environment that is not influenced by the sound, smell of exhaust, or sight of snowmobiles. Areas must be accessible from plowed trailheads, as non-motorized users typically do not travel long distances. Most non-motorized over-snow recreation takes place within three to five miles of trailheads (American Council of Snowmobile Associations 2014). Non-motorized visitors spend an average of 2.3 hours on the snow per visit (Rolloff et al. 2009).

This is an OSV management plan, not a non-motorized enhancement plan.

Pg 31, Vol 1

"Alternative 5 (Responsible Official's identified Preferred Alternative) emphasizes protections for wildlife and natural resources as well as quality recreation experiences for both motorized and non-motorized recreation."

The DEIS never documents protection for wildlife and natural resources as an issue, nor that there is a significant issue regarding quality of recreational experiences. Eliminating 49% of historical use areas does not emphasize the quality of experience for motorized users; rather, it puts existing users in 49% less area, increasing the likelihood of threats to resources through concentration of use.



Stanislaus OSV Management Recommendations

Minimum snow depth.

Contrary to recent in-person discussions had with FS personnel that the minimum snow depth requirements are a 'guideline for users', discussions of all Alternatives beginning on Pg 121 Vol 1 of the DEIS state citations will be issued for travel over less than the minimum requirement for an area (12 inches in most cases). California receives heavy sunlight and warm spells in winter months that generate a well-known thaw-freeze cycle. It is why the snowpack in the Sierra stabilizes quicker than consistently colder locales in the Rocky Mountains with regards to avalanche hazards. This thaw-freeze cycle results frequently in compacted snow on OSV routes forming near, or complete solid ice. The Minnesota Dept of Natural Resources¹ recommends a minimum of 5-7" of ice cover for OSV use over lakes, yet the DEIS clearly states that OSV users traveling over 7" of compacted snow at or near the density of solid ice would be subject to citation. If 7 inches of consolidated frozen water can keep users suspended above a lake beneath, it is certainly sufficient to protect asphalt and dirt roads.

The Forest must define adequate snow depth, but an overly simplistic number reflecting depth of a medium with vastly ranging densities is misguided. Use of a hard number does nothing more than create violators out of users posing no threat to resources, and potential defendants out of the Forest Service when anti-OSV groups begin measuring snow depths where OSVs have traveled, with the goal of further litigation.

The deficiencies in defining adequate snow depth by number alone are already acknowledged on Vol 1, pg 18

There is little scientific support for defining a universal, nationwide snow depth for protecting multiple resources. This is due to the variable nature of snowpack, and differences that occur regionally and nationally. For example: Maritime snowpacks, which form in the mountains closest to the ocean such as the Sierra Nevada and Cascades, are deep, warm, and dense with more moisture; Continental snowpacks found in the Rocky Mountains and Wasatch Mountains, are shallow and fluffy; and Intermountain snowpacks found in the Canadian Rockies and Bitterroots exhibit moderate snow depths, consistent throughout the winter. Maritime snowpacks, like those found on the Stanislaus National Forest, exhibit the greatest snow depths, the shortest accumulation periods, the fastest snowmelt rates and the earliest onset of snowmelt

¹ <http://lakeice.squarespace.com/bearing-strength/>



annually (Trujillo and Molotch 2014). Each of these characteristics of a maritime snowpack created unique challenges for establishing a minimum snow depth requirement as a surrogate for defining when snow conditions are adequate for OSV use.

Pg 21 Vol 1 Table 3. Resource specialist support for the inclusion of a minimum snow depth requirement:

Interestingly, one of the few empirical studies identifying a critical snow depth indicates that where snow cover exceeded 3 inches in depth there were no detrimental effects on grass or vegetation stands, although these were largely non-forest species (Proceedings of the 1973 Snowmobile and Off the Road Vehicle Symposium; 1974).

The wetter snow typical on the West Coast and on the Stanislaus creates a denser, more supportive snow than in most other regions. A 12 inch minimum requirement is unwarranted and puts undue burden on both user and agency.

Recommendation

We suggest the following definition be used in lieu of a hard number: **Adequate snow cover is defined by a layer of dense, packed snow, or deeper fresh snow sufficient to support your vehicle, and prevent damage to forest resources.**

This definition is easily understood, states the ultimate goal of resource protection outright, and uses this goal specifically to define the desired outcome.

Recommendation

If the intent of a 12 inch snow depth minimum is intended as a user guideline and not a basis for citation, the DEIS needs to have such language amended. Remove provisions for citations if users travel on less than 12 inches of fully supportable snow cover. Add language that the minimum is a guideline for users.

Steep Slopes

Assumptions Pg 111, Vol 1

The OSV use assumptions include:

- *Limited OSV use on steep slopes with heavy forest cover/high tree density (assume no use on slopes 35 percent or greater). In open terrain, with no trees, there is no slope-limiting factor for high-marking.*

While certainly tree density is a limiting factor for passage of OSVs, this will vary greatly by user ability, and a 35% slope (19.5 degrees), is far from any sort of reasonable standard. Modern snowmobiles regularly ascend treed slopes greater than this. It is quite evident that this metric was used to leave out



designations in thousands of acres of potential cross-country OSV use, (slopes surrounding Pacific Valley, Slopes near Eagle Meadows road etc). This does not reflect reality and must be changed. Designations of open areas should delineate an area, not highly specific individual features in terrain where OSV use is expected or not expected to occur. A steep treed slope designated as open that never sees use due to tree cover/gradient poses no threat whatsoever to resource protection. Such highly specific designations do however pose a risk of subjective interpretation of boundaries both for users and rangers.

The preferred alternative fails to provide adequate opportunity for riding in complex terrain, with varied pitches, characteristic of modern mountain snowmobiling. The proposal designates almost exclusively, low angle meadows, basins and roads and lacks any designation of true alpine terrain as available for OSV use. These opportunities exist in the nearby Bridgeport Winter Recreation Area but reaching it from the western slope of Hwy 108 is often difficult or impossible. Hwy 108 Faces south for most of the stretch from Kennedy meadows to Deadman Creek and often melts out to bare asphalt during warm or rainy spells, rendering passage impassible by OSVs. Hwy 108 also dips down to around 5,600 ft elevation near the former Dardanelle Resort and will often melt out for the same reasons. Steeper mountainous terrain within the Stanislaus needs to be designated for OSV use.

Recommendation

Regions with steep terrain within the Stanislaus have been popular for OSV use for decades. These include both treed and open steep slopes at and above 35 percent gradient. They should be designated as open since the forest has failed to provide evidence of resource damage, threatened plant or animal habitat, and certainly no user conflict in these remote areas.

-Pacific Valley to Highland Lakes road, including Lookout Peak, Black Dome, Slopes above Beaver and Willow Meadows, and the northern slopes of Bull Run Peak, Henry Peak, and the non-Wilderness northern slope of Peep Sight Peak

-Slopes within the Hwy 108 East area including the slopes of Eagle Peak, the ridge between Eagle Peak and route 5N11Y

Citations of Weak Source Material for Justification of not designated Steeper Slopes.

Every time steeper slopes are mentioned in the DEIS in regards to analysis, the following citation is listed (16 times total across both volumes), as below

Vol2

Pg 9, table C-2

Research indicated that "snowmobile activities may indirectly contribute to erosion of trails and steep slopes. If steep slopes are intensively used, snow may be removed and the ground surface exposed to extreme weather conditions and increased erosion by continued snowmobile traffic" (Olliff et al. 1999).pg 120



Olliff² cites another author for this claim from pg120 (Masyk 1973) The Snowmobile: a recreational technology in Banff National Park : environmental impact and decision making.

EROSION

Snowmobile activities may indirectly contribute to erosion of trails and steep slopes. If steep slopes are intensively used, snow may be removed and the ground surface exposed to extreme weather conditions and increased erosion by continued snowmobile traffic. The same results could occur when snowmobiles use exposed southern exposures. Because compacted snow generally takes longer to melt, trails are often wet and soft when the surrounding areas are dry. Consequently, these trails are susceptible to damage by other users during the spring (Masyk 1973).

This article from Masyk is under academic embargo³ and is unavailable. The embargo is through the year 2099, an effective redaction for some reason. A request for this entry has been unproductive at the time of drafting this comment. Even indirectly through Olliff, such out of date and unavailable research or its conclusions are no basis for determination of metrics regarding current snowmobile habits, usage, or impacts in 2018.

Recommendation

Use of Olliff as a source of data supporting OSV caused erosion should be removed and management decisions based upon this source material should be amended. This document presents a flimsy interpretation of potential, and not actual case studies of erosion caused by direct or indirect use of OSVs. Use of this document to support limiting OSV use to lower grades should be removed, and the DEIS should be revised to include steep slopes within each area designated for OSV use.

Seasonal dates

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5. Designate the following season of use developed as a result of the Minimization Criteria Screening Exercise (Table D-14, appendix D):

- *The portion of the Hwy 108 cross-country OSV-use area located at Sonora Pass (411 acres, Map 5) is closed to cross-country over-snow travel by vehicles designed specifically for that purpose,*

² <https://www.americantrails.org/files/pdf/wildlife-winter-yellowstone.pdf>

³ <https://prism.ucalgary.ca/handle/1880/15186>



every year on April 15, unless the Forest Supervisor issues a Forest Order for an earlier or later closure date (but no later than the last Sunday in April) in coordination with the Bridgeport Ranger District's seasonal management of the Bridgeport Winter Recreation Area (USDA Forest Service 2010, Bridgeport Winter Recreation Area Management Plan).

The area in question sits just on the western side of Sonora Pass, and consists of a meadow, bordered by hills to the south and hwy 108 to the north. This is the only area near the pass that isn't currently subject to the whims of Humboldt-Toiyabe NF rangers opening or closing the Bridgeport Winter Recreation Area. This fact serves as an asset to the OSV community because H-T rangers have consistently failed to abide by their own guidelines regarding the BWRC management, depriving the OSV community of riding opportunities when no threat to resources, and no possible user conflict exist.

In 2017, a historic winter by snowfall standards, the BWRC failed to issue an extension beyond the April 15 closing date, with over 150 inches of compacted, consolidated snow on the ground⁴. Highway 108 was not even opened until two months later⁵, limiting any potential foot traffic near the PCT. This is two months that the OSV community was denied riding opportunities in a once in a lifetime season, where there should have been no question that the BWRA could remain open past the closing date. If there was no extension issued in 2017, the OSV community has zero faith that this provision will be honored in any other year, by the Humboldt-Toiyabe, or the Stanislaus.

Recommendation

Remove the seasonal dates from the lands adjacent to Sonora pass. Rely instead on the guiding principles governing the rest of the forest to prevent resource damage, habitat threat, and use conflict. If there is sufficient snowpack, there should be sufficient riding opportunities. Once the pass is open, motorized use is prohibited on the H-T management lands. Leave this swath on the Stanislaus open. Also please visit Sonora Pass once the road is plowed during spring time and witness the hundreds of skiers not following the PCT trail corridor.

Illogical Boundaries Not Tied to Topographic Features, or Existing Wilderness Boundaries

Designated OSV cross-country areas in the Proposal in Pacific Valley, Lookout Peak, Bull Run Peak, Beaver Meadow, Willow Meadow, Jelmini Basin, Bee Gulch, Long Valley, Eagle Meadow/Hwy 108 East

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https://www.nohrsc.noaa.gov/interactive/html/map.html?ql=station&zoom=&loc=38.3014+N%2C+119.6246+W&var=ssm_depth&dy=2017&dm=5&dd=15&dh=0&snap=1&o9=1&o12=1&o13=1&lbl=m&o7=1&o20=1&mode=pan&extents=us&min_x=-119.8&min_y=38.2666666666663&max_x=-119.558333333333&max_y=38.3999999999996&coord_x=-119.6246&coord_y=++38.3014&zbox_n=38.30148148147773&zbox_s=38.30148148147773&zbox_e=-119.62464062499758&zbox_w=-119.62464062499758&metric=0&bgvar=dem&shdvar=shading&palette=1&width=800&height=450&nw=800&nh=450&h_o=0&font=0&js=1&uc=0

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<https://goldrushcam.com/sierrasuntimes/index.php/news/local-news/10088-caltrans-reports-sonora-pass-state-route-108-will-open-on-tuesday-june-13-at-2-00-p-m>



all contain nebulous boundaries defining riding areas. As mentioned before regarding steeper slopes, it is evident that slope gradient was used as a determining factor, a horribly unrealistic determining factor.

These boundaries present both user and agency alike with incredibly difficult to decipher designations, leaving far too much open to interpretation. This subjectivity will create the potential for trespass violations, unjust citations for users, and litigation from those interpreting incidences of Forest Service non-compliance with management.

Recommendation

Designate AREAS as open that use as boundaries, ridges, creeks, or existing wilderness boundaries.

- Pacific Valley to Highland Lakes Road should be designated as an open area to the northern boundary of Carson-Iceberg Wilderness. This boundary runs along logical topographic features from the Western Rim of Pacific Valley, to Bull Run Peak, just north of Peep Sight Peak to the Broomfield campground on Highland Lakes road. This Wilderness boundary was drawn along this ridge for a reason: It makes sense and is easy to identify.

- The area south of Jelmini Basin from Corral Hollow to the Mattley Creek Trailhead should be designated as open to the existing Mokelumne Wilderness Boundary. This boundary serves as the stopping point for the designation in adjacent open areas, this should be no different. The steep slopes above the North Fork of the Mokelumne are the defining limitation here, which form well above the Wilderness boundary.

- The area designated as Hwy 108 East should be designated as open to OSV travel up to the northern Wilderness boundary of Emigrant Wilderness, as demonstrated in Alternative 4. As with Pacific Valley, this Wilderness boundary was chosen for a reason. It follows a well-defined ridge from Castle Rock, the Three Chimneys to East Flange Rock, around to the steep drainage above Relief Creek. The geologic formations at the top of much of these ridges serves as a good barrier from crossing into Emigrant Wilderness. OSV use up to Wilderness boundaries is common in Forests across the country and this region is no different. From a management perspective, designating this area as open is easy to understand and easy to communicate: East from the Highway, to the Wilderness boundary Ridge. This area contains a well known and used designated groomed route (Eagle Meadows Road) for access, a vast selection of terrain from safe low angle meadows, to steeper complex terrain for both OSV use and backcountry skiing accessed via OSV. Utilization of this area for OSV travel has the potential to draw visitors from locales not accustomed to our more stable California Snowpack. In conjunction with the possible accessibility of the BWRC depending on the season, the Stanislaus National Forest has the potential to identify a truly unique and appealing resource to the OSV and Backcountry snowmobile accessed ski communities that could be promoted nationwide, and is remote enough to not pose a loss of opportunities for human-powered recreation.

- Designate the area inside of and completely outside of the Herring Creek Loop as open to OSV use. There is no existing management plan (such as Near Natural) that precludes this. This should be included in the Hwy 108 East area designation. Surrounding lands contain both low and high angle terrain that present excellent opportunities for both OSV use and OSV-accessed skiing.

- Continue with proposed designation of North Hwy 4 as open to OSV use, as illustrated in Alternative 4, with Hwy 4 to the south, and the Mokelumne Wilderness Boundary to the north as perimeters.



5,000ft elevation

The use of 5,000ft elevation as the standard by which to evaluate suitable OSV terrain is specious. “5,000 feet” or “5,000 foot” appears 27 times in Vol 1 of the DEIS, referenced in every case as basis for designating potential areas open to OSV use. In 2015, Winter Wildlands Alliance circulated literature during scoping stating they didn’t “didn’t believe the Forest should analyze areas below 5,000 ft” to the Lassen, Plumas, Tahoe, Eldorado, and Stanislaus National forests⁶. Although plaintiffs (along with Snowlands) in the original two Lawsuits regarding implementation of the Travel Management Rule subpart C for OSV use, and the grooming program, adopting standards from WWA is neither appropriate, nor applicable. This process and the resulting documents need to be based on best management decisions, impartial analysis, and not on appeasement to avoid future litigation.

Whether originating from the Enterprise Team, Region 5, or from within the Stanislaus, this metric has also appeared in the DEIS documents from the Tahoe, Lassen, and Eldorado National forests and is obviously taken from WWA management strategies, repeated again in their comments during the scoping period⁷. In the Lassen NF, Lake Almanor sits at approx 4,500ft elevation and is home to a network of very well-known historical OSV trails. In the Stanislaus, the Northern California Power Agency (NCPA) regularly uses Snow Cats or heavy road plowing to reach McKay’s Reservoir at just under 3,400 ft elevation. Please contact NCPA to verify.

While lower elevations certainly don’t see as much accumulation as the upper reaches of the Stanislaus, criminalizing innocuous OSV use when deep snowpacks do develop below 5,000ft (or 4,000ft or 3,000ft) in remote, non-wilderness areas serves nothing laid out in the purpose and need for this plan. Designating low lying lands that seldom or never see OSV use (like much of the 2,000ft river canyons) is logical. Citing local residents who enjoy OSV travel when snow covers these low elevations in sufficient snow to appease litigators is not. Once “adequate snow cover” is defined, this is self-regulating.

Recommendation

Remove 5,000ft as an analysis metric. It’s inclusion conflicts with reality during cold, heavy snow years, and shows obvious bias towards litigators whose mission is limitation and eradication of OSV use on public lands.

Bridges and Stream Crossings

We support the proposal to install temporary bridges at crossings of Upper Bloods Creek, Duck and Silver Creeks near North Fork Diversion Reservoir on the Slickrock Jeep trail, Eagle Creek and Long Valley Creeks. This will enable safe, easy access across these waterways on well-traveled OSV routes when snowbanks along these streams can make travel difficult.

⁶ See supplemental document: WWA Plumas Email at bottom

⁷<https://winterwildlands.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Snowlands-Stanislaus-Alternative-FINAL-as-mail-ed.pdf>



However, we strongly oppose the proposal to criminalize OSV incidental contact with streams at well-used summer creek crossings.

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OSV Use

- *OSV use in designated areas and on designated trails is not allowed on open or flowing water (National BMP REC-7).*

California often receives large, warm weather events that produce several inches of rain during winter months. This frequently causes streams to open up, and wash away small structures, which temporary bridges would most certainly be. Prohibiting sustained travel over unfrozen lakes is reasonable. Preventing OSV travel through creek crossings that are frequently used by wheeled vehicles (such as Eagle Creek) all summer long is not. The rubber of a snowmobile track and the aluminum of snowmobile track supports are of no more consequence to a stream crossing as the rubber of truck tires and the aluminum or steel of truck rims. It is entirely plausible that these crossing bridges fail to be installed in fall months, or that they wash away in a storm event. Neither of these circumstances should create impassable barriers to OSV travel that do not exist to wheeled travel in summer.

Water Quality Management for Forest System Lands in California, Best Management Practices⁸ suggests that road crossings occur at right angles and on properly grades approaches and egresses. These summer crossings already meet these requirements.

Recommendation

Install temporary bridges as proposed, but also assign these locations as ‘designated’ crossings for OSV use, even in the absence of a temporary bridge. This allows continued use of roads and areas beyond these crossing zones, and treats OSVs in the same manner as wheeled summer vehicles. These crossings have already been graded to allow for environmentally safe, or mitigated resource impact for summer use, and OSV travel should be no different.

Grooming

The 24.7 miles of routes available for grooming are appreciated and represent long-standing practice on the Stanislaus. The omission of Hwy 108 beyond Kennedy Meadows should be added to aid OSV travel to Sonora Pass and the Bridgeport Winter Recreation Area. This stretch of Hwy often blows over with snow, melts in sporadic patterns and makes passage difficult if not impossible to reach Sonora Pass at times. Although likely to be seldom used, its designation as available for grooming provides for the possibility that when conditions are favorable and safe for the snowcat operator, access to the pass is facilitated through grading of the irregular snow surface. The stretch near Nightcap Peak at the 9,000ft elevation point is the typical crux of the route as wind deposition often eliminates any sign of the road grade. Based on discussions with previous grooming operator Rourke Hembree, grooming uphill

⁸ https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5362512.pdf



through this area is often the greatest barrier to its inclusion in the past. An effort should be made (by us if necessary) to allow for downhill grooming of this area from the East, as part of the existing grooming program on the Humboldt-Toiyabe.

Recommendation

Designate Hwy 108 from the existing SnoPark gate to Sonora Pass as available for grooming. Whether or not this occurs should be left strictly to the ability and comfort of the grooming operator, when he or she deems it is safe to do so. Given its remote location from the Hwy 108 SnoPark, a provision should be included to allow for grooming from the east, as an extension of the existing grooming already occurring from the H-T NF.

Bear Valley Ski area

Bear Valley Ski Area has a long history of serving as a venue for spring time gatherings that include snowmobile assisted skiing, snowboarding and OSV use after business has ceased for the season. Designating this area for OSV use during the business season is obviously absurd, but equally absurd is preventing OSV use on the property once there is no risk to mountain customers. Not allowing OSV use here once operations have ended would end a long local tradition of spring gatherings. Even at these gatherings there is far less motorized use than throughout the season on this property.

Recommendation

Allow OSV use on the Bear Valley Ski area Property once business operations have completely ceased on the hill for the season. Preserve a long standing local tradition.

Near Natural Designation/Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS)

The Forest Plan Direction planning document⁹ defines the Near Natural designation as follows:
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Near Natural

Management Emphasis

Emphasis is placed on providing a natural appearing landscape in a non-motorized setting. Public motorized use is not normally allowed and no timber harvest is scheduled. Wildlife habitat management, watershed protection, dispersed non-motorized recreation, livestock grazing and minerals uses are allowed. The area is characterized by a high quality visual setting where changes are rarely evident. Land altering practices are limited in scope and duration. It meets the Forest Service criteria for the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum class of Semi-primitive Non-motorized. Special timber harvest methods to enhance recreation or to salvage losses may be employed.

⁹ https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd535378.pdf



Cross country OSV use conflicts with none of the goals of this designation other than being motorized. However, given the medium upon which OSVs travel, a natural appearing landscape is and has been maintained despite OSV use. If tracked snow is a non-natural appearing landscape then backcountry skiing would be restricted as well.

The Recreation Opportunity Spectrum is outdated, and the Near Natural Designation needs to reflect existing national standards for satisfying compliance with the spectrum. Near Natural seems to exist exclusively in the Stanislaus.

The ROS fails to acknowledge or include an accurate provision for OSV use, its lack of impacts to resources, and treats OSVs as equivalent to motorcycles, jeeps, or side by sides. The ROS leaves only the realm of “general forest” or designated roaded (roaded natural) areas for OSV use, since a motorized designation must include roads or trails. The use of Near Natural Designations to satisfy the primitive or semi-primitive non-motorized provision of the ROS ignores the hundreds of thousands of acres within the Stanislaus managed as Wilderness that satisfy this provision. In addition, the idea that solitude, appreciation for the undeveloped natural landscapes are not compatible with winter motorized use, or that an area must be roaded for motorized use fail to acknowledge the true nature of OSV travel.

Updating the ROS is outside the scope of this process. Updating the Near Natural Designation definition is not. Near Natural can be defined to maintain the obviously summer-biased intent of primitive or semi-primitive non-motorized, with a provision for winter motorized use which in no long-standing way changes the natural appearance of the landscape. Summer hikers walking off trail have a greater impact on resources than an OSV traveling over a suitable snowpack. Winter motorized use causes no change to the terrestrial landscape and should not be lazily grouped with summer motorized use.

The idea that solitude or an appreciation for an untouched natural environment is only provided by human powered primitive travel is inaccurate, and the product of an outdated mindset. Some of the most solitary experiences possible are gained by motorized use, especially in winter months into areas few to no winter hikers will ever travel. Since this is an OSV travel management plan, there is no better time to expand upon the inadequate, and rather ancient ROS.

Current management decisions in the Stanislaus also reflect the idea that a Near Natural designation is a precursor to eventual Wilderness designation. These Near Natural areas will not and *have not* in any way changed their character with years of snowmobile use.

While few of these areas fit the minimum requirement of 5,000 acres established in the original Wilderness Act of 1964, it is also unrealistic to follow this line of reasoning that every non-developed acre within a forest must be put on a path to one day be designated as Wilderness. The Stanislaus contains or abuts 4 Wilderness areas totaling over half a million acres, most or all of which cover specifically the higher elevation snow-bound terrain necessary for OSV use. Further restrictions to OSV use are unwarranted by current documentation on use conflict, natural resource damage, wildlife habitat threat, and in taken in consideration with existing OSV closures, are egregious overkill.



Recommendation

Designate current Near Natural Areas as *Near Natural Winter Motorized*, or Near Natural Winter Multi-Use. Exceptions should include areas around Round Valley or Waterhouse Lake where a deliberate management decision in the past has designated these areas as winter non-motorized, to maintain quiet recreation opportunities. An exact scenario as this exists in the Tahoe National Forest in the Grouse Ridge Non-Motorized area. Summer motorized infrastructure is not present, and OSV use is allowed.

Wilderness Buffer Zones

Acknowledgement of existing law, congressional intent and precedent regarding buffer zones next to existing Wilderness appears in the DEIS under discussion of Alternative 1¹⁰. However, this is the only time it is mentioned. In fact discussions of all remaining alternatives discuss many closed areas as helping “aid in prevention of trespass into Wilderness”. This contradiction needs to be addressed in the final documents.

The preferred alternative contains a multitude of Near Natural areas adjacent to existing Wilderness. In discussions with Stanislaus Forest Personnel, these areas were planned to maintain this designation for 1) suitability for future Wilderness Designation and 2) “to reduce the likelihood of trespass into Wilderness”. Point 1 is addressed above. Point 2 is reiterated in the DEIS, most notably in Table D-16, beginning on page 80, Vol 2, Column 5:

Table D- 16. Minimization criteria screening exercise: 36 CFR 212.55(b)(3): Conflicts between OSV use and existing or proposed recreational uses on National Forest System lands and neighboring Federal lands.

¹⁰ Pg 134-135 Vol 1

Congress does not intend that the designation of wilderness areas ... lead to the creation of protective perimeters or buffer zones around each wilderness area. The fact that non-wilderness activities or uses can be seen or heard from areas within the wilderness shall not, of itself, preclude such activities or uses up to the boundary of the wilderness area. (Kelson and Lilieholm 1999).

Virtually identical language has been included in 30 other Wilderness statutes enacted since 1980 (Gorte 2011). This concept is also supported by Forest Service Manual 2320.3 that directs consideration of uses on both sides of Wilderness boundaries, but states,

Do not maintain buffer strips of undeveloped wildland to provide an informal extension of wilderness. Do not maintain internal buffer zones that degrade wilderness values.

Several “Near Natural” areas from the 1991 Land and Resource Management Plan exist in the Preferred alternative adjacent to areas designated as open to OSV use. These areas exist as stated in the LRMP are in place to maintain suitability for eventual Wilderness or Wild and Scenic River Designation.



2. Would OSV use occur within 0.5 mile of a (a) a neighboring Federal land boundary, (b) wilderness boundary, or (c) popular non-motorized recreation destination (area or trail)? If yes, which ones (a., b, or c.)?

It is obvious that travel near existing Wilderness or Near Natural designated land was used to weigh impacts of OSV use. This is inconsistent with, and contradicts precedent and management intent mentioned in the DEIS.

Recommendation

Remove use of the 0.5 mile Wilderness or Near Natural standard for meeting the minimization criteria.

Establish a LOCAL stakeholder group to provide input on Final Plan

The distant litigators have had their say, and their comments will be submitted. In previous stakeholder meetings for the Lassen and Tahoe National Forests, stakeholder meetings have been attempted with no substantive input leading to cohesive management strategies. This is primarily due to previous litigators being present operating on the assumption that they have advanced or preferred standing. Their input has been proven to be severely lacking in local, on-the-ground knowledge of the management areas in question. The concept however, is sound and can lead to the best, most well-informed management strategies moving forward provided genuine local knowledge is available.

Recommendation

Contact local business owners (Bear Valley Adventure Center, Heidi's Ski shop, Sierra Services Bear Valley Snowmobile etc), current and former grooming contract operators, and local users to form a collaborative group, with the end goal of producing well-informed, logical management strategies.

Conflict of Use

There is a widely repeated theme in the DEIS that motorized use somehow precludes non-motorized quiet recreation. Certainly it can detract from a specific experience but contact is not conflict. Despite the settlement agreements as the impetus for this process, not all human-powered winter users believe their day is ruined by the presence of a snowmobile. In fact the DEIS does acknowledge this stating that some users use the compacted snow left by a snowmobile pass to aid in travel. However the DEIS is also littered with language taken directly from Snowlands literature. The phrase "consumption of untracked powder" appears 5 times in Volume 1, and 10 times in Vol 2, yet solely in the context of OSVs consuming this powder. Completely ignored is the reality that passage of ANY KIND of object in powder snow "consumes" it, as does sustained sunlight, and 40F degree air temperatures. This language is adopted directly from Snowlands documentation¹¹ yet is presented in context of analysis, not presented as what it is: a limited perspective provided in previous comments. Use of this language in defining metrics for the analysis demonstrates a clear bias to either simultaneously or directly create a non-motorized user enhancement plan, not an OSV management plan.

¹¹ <https://www.snowlands.org/wtm/faq.html>



Patterns of use need to be established. Although in process likely for the first time in any substantive way, this has not been done in support of this document. Recommended closures to OSV use as far away as the Tryon Peak Recommended Wilderness/Highland Lakes Rd areas (13 miles from parking on either side) have use conflict listed as if it actually is a location frequented by human-powered users.

The Stanislaus is and will be getting input from OSV users. For a representation of current human-powered use, we recommend using publicly available data provided in the Strava Heatmap.¹² Strava is a GPS based phone application used by runners, cyclists, and skiers to log vertical, miles traveled, and to track fitness. As evidenced by high use at Dodge Ridge and Bear Valley ski areas, it is also used as a way to get timed race runs down ski slopes. Within this heat map, the expected areas of high use can be seen for human-powered travel: Round Valley, the Bear Valley XC groomed trails, as well as the groomed roads coming from the Alpine and Spicer Meadows SnoParks. Obviously not every foot-powered traveler logs their days on Strava but it does provide a reasonable map of high and low density use that follows logical expectations. This is data, not hearsay. Please use it.

Recommendation

Establish genuine use patterns using a variety of tools (Ranger reports, observation logs, Strava etc) to accurately determine the potential for use conflict. Consider use conflict where it is likely to occur, not where there is no evidence or reasonable suspicion as a point of departure.

The SSF recognizes that we have a unique opportunity to build the working relationship with the USFS and move forward hand in hand. A few disgruntled users with loud voices is not what represents our local backcountry community. Please use the Sierra Snowmobile Foundation as a conduit for information as this process moves forward.

Again, thank you for the extra time you have dedicated to this process beyond your legal requirements. It is very much appreciated.

Kevin Bazar
Sierra Snowmobile Foundation

¹² <https://www.strava.com/heatmap#12.89/-120.02722/38.45209/blue/winter>



Footnotes and other documentation

7.



The Plumas National Forest wants to hear from you! From now until November 13 you have the opportunity to weigh in on how they should manage snowmobiles on the forest.



The Plumas National Forest is looking for input from the public on which routes and areas they should designate for snowmobile use. This information will help to inform the Forest Service's analysis of a new winter travel management plan for the Plumas. As an initial step, the Forest Service has developed a "proposed action" which serves as a starting point for future discussion. You can review the proposed action and other documents associated with this project on the [Plumas National Forest website](#).

We are concerned that the Forest Service is proposing to allow snowmobiles across 96% of the Plumas National Forest. The Forest Service needs to be more specific in determining which areas are open to snowmobiles. For example, we don't think the Forest Service should be spending time and resources analyzing where to allow snowmobiles in areas below 5,000 feet. On the Plumas these low elevation areas don't get enough snow to warrant being open to snowmobiles and we believe the Forest Service should focus their efforts on managing areas where it actually snows. On the bright side, we are pleased to see that the Forest Service is proposing to manage two important backcountry skiing areas as non-motorized - an area on the east side of Bucks Lake Wilderness and terrain on the west side of the Lakes Basin, adjoining Plumas-Eureka State Park. However, the Forest Service should, and can, do more to craft a balanced winter travel plan. We believe they should also manage the east side of Lake Davis and the Frazier Creek area, northeast of Gold Lake, for non-motorized recreation.

Bear Valley ski area Spring snowmobile gatherings following close of business, 2017



<https://www.facebook.com/kevin.schoon.79/videos/1410255795700364/UzpfSTEwMDAxMDQwNTk1OTgzNT01NjYzMDE1OTAzOTMyNjg/>