

Comparing snowmobiles from 1984 and 2016 can give some indication of differences in how the machines, and sport, have evolved in the past 32 years. 1984 marked the debut of the Yamaha Phazer, which due to its relatively light weight and maneuverability, made it the premier powder sled of its time. The 1984 Phazer had a 2-stroke, 485-cc engine and a 116 inch track. Meanwhile, the 2016 Mountain Sled of the Year (according to snowmobile.com) - the Polaris AXYS Pro-RMK - has a 795-cc 2-stroke engine and a 155 inch track. The longer track allows for more floatation in deep snow and, combined with the more powerful engine, allows riders to highmark steep slopes.

1984 Yamaha Phazer



2016 Polaris AXYS Pro-RMK



The World Championship Snowmobile Hill Climb provides a good indicator of how these technological advances translate to advances in snowmobile performance. This event takes place each March in Jackson Hole WY and draws competitors from across the United States and Canada. Competitors race to see who can snowmobile a set course to the top of SnowKing ski resort in the shortest amount of time, or barring a “top out”, who can get the highest. Although the first Hill Climb was in 1976, 1986 marked the first year that a competitor made it to the top of the mountain, riding a custom modified sled.¹ It wasn’t until 1993 that “stock models” began making it to the top of the mountain. Today participants routinely make it to the top of the climb in under two minutes, with some doing so in under one minute.²

There are two legal cases that should help the Forest Service inform how to manage snowmobile use within the High Lakes WSA while complying with the Wyoming Wilderness Act. The first, Greater Yellowstone Coalition vs. Timchak, addresses the Bridger-Teton National Forest’s decision to permit increased helicopter use within the Palisades WSA. The court struck down this decision because it failed to preserve the “opportunities for solitude” that existed in the WSA at the time of designation (1984). The impact that the noise from motorized – helicopter - has on a backcountry skiers “opportunities for solitude” was a major determinant in the court’s decision. A more recent case out of Montana, Montana Wilderness Association vs. McAlister, is perhaps even more relevant as it pertains to travel planning decisions made for a WSA on the Gallatin National Forest. In this case the court ruled that the travel plan did not maintain the WSA’s 1977 wilderness character or current user’s ability to enjoy the 1977 wilderness character. As with the Palisades case, the court noted that noise impacts from snowmobiles would adversely impact backcountry skiers’ opportunities for solitude. The court also recognized that technological advances in snowmobile technology have dramatically changed motorized use patterns within the WSA.

¹<http://www.off-road.com/snowmobile/feature/jackson-hole-world-championship-snowmobile-hill-climb-11081.html?printable>

² <http://www.snowdevils.org/HResults.htm>