

Winter Wildlands Alliance Proposal 3
Shoshone National Forest Travel Management
Request for Public Input

Ranger District: Clarks Fork

New Proposals

1. What is the proposal? (loop; route; closures; restrictions , etc.)

Clearly and concisely state the Proposal. Include as much detail as possible.

We propose that the High Lakes Wilderness Study Area be closed to snowmobile use.

2. Where is the proposal located?

Give general description of project location (example: 5 miles SW of Cody, WY) as well as UTM coordinates, Township/Range/Sec, or Lat/Long if you have that information.

High Lakes Wilderness Study Area on the Beartooth Plateau

3. Why is your proposal desired or needed?

Under the 1984 Wyoming Wilderness Act snowmobiling is allowed within the High Lakes Wilderness Study Area (WSA) “in the same manner and degree as was occurring prior to” 1984. The Forest Service is legally obligated to manage snowmobile use within the WSA at 1984 levels, and in a manner that is consistent with what use was in 1984. This obligation was upheld and the requirements of the Wyoming Wilderness Act further defined in a 2006 U.S. District Court ruling concerning helicopter-assisted skiing in the Palisades WSA. In this ruling the judge clarified that the 1984 Wyoming Wilderness Act requires that the Forest Service preserve wilderness character, as defined in the 1964 Wilderness Act, and not authorize any use that would diminish wilderness character as it existed in 1984.¹

Snowmobile technology has changed considerably since 1984, to the point where modern snowmobiles bear only a passing resemblance to the machines of the early 1980s. Until the 1990s snowmobiles were generally restricted to packed trails and roads as the earlier machines would easily become bogged down in deep snow. In the mid-1990s, the development of the “powder sled” vastly changed the pattern of snowmobile use. Developments in OSV technology continue to lead to lighter, more powerful, and more agile machines. Modern snowmobiles are able to travel easily through deep snow and up steep slopes. In addition, in recent years we have seen the development of “snow bikes” – dirt bikes modified with snowmobile tracks – which can navigate through tight trees and other areas that snowmobiles cannot reach. Both high-powered mountain sleds and snow bikes are widely used by people recreating in the High Lakes WSA.

Given that 1984-era snowmobiles could only travel off-trail in the most ideal of conditions (on consolidated spring snow if at all), it is extremely unlikely that snowmobiles ventured far from the groomed Beartooth Highway when the High Lakes WSA was established. Therefore, it seems likely that in 1984 there was limited, if any, snowmobile use within the WSA. In contrast, current OSV use within the WSA is common and wide-ranging. We do not feel that it is possible for the Forest Service to realistically manage snowmobile use within the WSA so that such use is consistent with what was occurring in 1984 and that the only option that will conform with the Forest Plan is to close the WSA to all snowmobile use.

¹ Greater Yellowstone Coal. v. Timchack, No. CV-06-04-E-BLW, slip op. at 6 (D. Idaho Nov. 21, 2006).

The Bitterroot National Forest recently addressed this issue when writing a winter travel plan. Wilderness Study Areas in Montana were established in the Montana Wilderness Study Act of 1977 and, as in Wyoming, snowmobile use is allowed to continue in these areas so long as it is maintained at 1977 levels. The Bitterroot recently completed a travel plan in which the Forest Service had to find a way to quantify historical snowmobile activity and then make a management decision. The Bitterroot concluded that “the limited available data on use levels in the WSAs indicates a substantial increase over 1977 levels”. The Forest Supervisor determined that establishing a limited quota system was not feasible and that the only way to ensure the wilderness character of the WSAs on the Bitterroot was maintained as it existed in 1977 was to close the WSAs to all motorized use.²

² Bitterroot Travel Plan draft Record of Decision, page 18. Available at http://a123.g.akamai.net/7/123/11558/abc123/forestservic.download.akamai.com/11558/www/nepa/39018_FSPLT3_2444335.pdf