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## **Backcountry Ski/Snowboard Focal Areas for Lolo National Forest Plan Revisions 2023**

**Montana Backcountry Alliance** is a state-wide group representing the backcountry ski and snowboard community. Formed in 2005, our mission is "to preserve quality traditional human-powered winter recreation experiences, reduce conflict, improve opportunity, and promote safety among backcountry winter users in Montana." The recent and dramatic increase in backcountry ski/snowboarders in Montana has made our mission more pressing.

**Winter Wildlands Alliance** is the national non-profit working to inspire and empower people to protect America's wild snowscapes. Our alliance includes 29 grassroots groups in 13 states, including Montana Backcountry Alliance, and has a collective membership exceeding 130,000.

Backcountry skiing/snowboarding in Montana is primarily on Forest Service lands due to the relatively high elevation and large amounts of snowfall. However, Forest roads are often impassible to cars and trucks in the winter, and combined with the laborious nature of winter backcountry travel, the opportunities for safe, backcountry skiing daytrips are fairly limited to near plowed parking areas. Dangerous conflicts arise when over-snow vehicles (OSVs) travel at high speeds in the same areas as backcountry skiers, or when OSVs "high-mark" on slopes where skiers are present, increasing the chances of avalanches.

The backcountry skiing and snowboarding community recognizes and values the multiple-uses and mixed recreation opportunities on the Lolo National Forest. We see this forest plan revision process as an important step in creating safe, non-motorized backcountry skiing and riding opportunities in the select locations below, which represent the most popular and accessible locations our community currently uses. We recognize that the Forest Service will not be making travel management decisions in the forest plan revision, however, the winter Recreation Opportunity Spectrum map will set the stage for future winter travel planning under Subpart C of the Travel Management Rule.

Given the importance of these areas for the non-motorized winter recreation community, we believe the areas described below, and depicted on the attached maps, should be classified as *Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized* in winter. In some cases, such as Morrell Mountain, we feel it's appropriate also include a narrow Roaded Natural ROS setting, narrowly buffering the road. In addition, the Forest Service should consider management area designations such as Backcountry or Recreation Emphasis for these places. For example, Marshall Mountain is a good candidate for a Recreation Emphasis Area. In addition, Hoodoo Pass, merits a Wilderness recommendation and should be classified as Primitive on the ROS maps.

- 1) **Lolo Pass:** Lolo pass is one of the most popular backcountry ski and snowboard destinations close to Missoula. The pass is also a destination for snowmobilers creating a potential conflict in recreation. Backcountry skiers/riders access a variety of terrain from several plowed pullouts along Hwy 12, and from the parking area at the pass. While the vast majority of snowmobile use is on the Idaho side of the pass, motorized use is currently permitted in the places where people ski/ride on the Lolo, creating the potential for significant safety concerns.
- 2) **Marshall Mountain** is a former ski resort located just 10 minutes from Missoula. While the base and some of the ski terrain is being purchased by the City of Missoula, much of the area above the former ski area lies on Forest Service land regularly skied by backcountry skiers/riders. It is not uncommon to see a nearly full parking (80+cars) lot full of backcountry skiers/snowmobilers. Snowmobile use is uncommon in the area, but currently allowed. We feel this use is incompatible with the City's vision for Marshall Mountain Park and has the potential to create safety concerns.
- 3) **Lolo Peak** is a popular backcountry ski spot in the fall and spring. The road to access the trailhead is several miles long and is gated in the winter, limiting winter use. Currently there is no snowmobile use in the area.
- 4) **Morrell Mountain** in the southern Swan Mountains is a popular backcountry ski/snowboard destination. This area sees >500 non-motorized user days per year through two yurts run by Montana Backcountry Yurts. This has been an area of contention between the snowmobile and backcountry ski/snowboard communities since the Revised Travel Plan was put in effect in 2002. Most important is the watershed to the south of Morrell Mountain (Section 26). This area provides the best skiing opportunities at a reasonable level of access. Blind Canyon is also in the southern Swan Mountains and sees more limited use of this area by backcountry skiers/snowboarders.
- 5) **Hoodoo Pass** is a popular early season backcountry ski/riding location. While much of the area is non-motorized, MBA members have reported several violations by snowmobiles in non-motorized areas, specifically the Great Burn Recommended Wilderness area, which can be accessed from Hoodoo Pass.
- 6) **Saint Regis Basin** is to the South of Lookout Pass along the crest of the Bitterroot Divide. This basin has some of the best backcountry skiing/snowboarding in western Montana. The Lookout Ski Area has recently expanded into some traditional backcountry ski areas. Saint Regis is the only basin that is feasibly accessible by backcountry skiers/snowboarders on the pass. Much of Saint Regis Basin is also an Inventoried Roadless Area (IRA) as well as non-inventoried roadless area. Prior attempts to collaborate with local snowmobile clubs have proved ineffective and current use policies create significant safety concerns.