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Organization:

Title:

Comments: To USFS:

I am writing in support to grant permission for grooming trails in Turnagain Pass, specifically in Front Country of Non-Motorized, originating from Center Ridge parking area. As a lifetime Alaskan resident and frequent trail lover, I feel that as our climate changes, higher elevation is becoming essential to enjoy what Alaska [still] has to offer its south central residents during a few months each year. Over the last three years, hundreds of miles of trails have been inaccessible in the Anchorage bowl area during winter months. Decent Nordic Skiing has become scant or gone. As a result, the population that is getting out to utilize said trails favor running, biking, hiking, or walking, thus utilizing the single-track trails and multi-use trails woven through established Nordic trails for outdoor exercise. These are so well used, the path is typically pure ice and therefore dangerous.

Natural snow exists however, in certain places above Palmer and Wasilla, such as Government Peak Ski area and Hatcher Pass, with great grooming reliably existent. When considering the area south of Anchorage, the options are nonexistent or sparse, weather permitting. Turnagain Pass had a few groomed loops in the 1980s, followed by only backcountry skiing for a select crowd until a recent effort by the volunteers of Girdwood Nordic Ski Club (GNSC), who made it possible for dozens of families and a few competitive ski teams to Nordic ski in February 2016.

Nordic Skiing is a healthy, fun, social lifestyle activity, not to mention rooted deeply in history, which treads lightly in terms of sound, weight, frequency, and season. The physics of the sport cause one to float across the snow with minimal impact and in turn gives skiers a deeper appreciation for the outdoors and the sensitive environment they ski upon.

As the USFS updates its plan in the Kenai Peninsula region, I urge decision makers to allow accredited grooming organizations, such as Nordic Skiing Association of Anchorage (NSAA) and GNSC to groom specific zones of the Turnagain Pass Non-Motorized Front Country. This instance alone will encourage less motorized use to occur. Countless skiers and winter enthusiasts for a mere couple months over the course of a year will prefer groomed trails, carpooling, and sharing a trail, while staying below avalanche danger, and teaching and maintaining fitness with their families.

While the USFS plan aims to require adaptive strategies as the future arrives, I encourage the option of connecting Johnson Pass to Center Ridge with the crossing of several gullies and creeks in mind. Many safe bridges could be built to give Alaskans the ability to fat bike new terrain and share the trail with other non-motorized users. Skiing and fat biking currently have immense social and economic value, while the two favor similar conditions and trail design. Aware that the 1.1 million acres is the most utilized of the Chugach National Forest, this tiny percentage permitted to follow historic trails, still near the highway corridors, is an asset to local activity, tourism, appreciation, and historic preservation.

When considering impact, environmental sustainability, soil quality, healthy habitat of hundreds of wild animals, their watershed and ecosystem issues, be mindful of dog traffic. Other countries and states either prohibit dogs or enforce strict fees for not cleaning up after dogs. Beautiful places in the world successful at this goal make it so easy for people to pick up after their dogs that there is inevitably more compliance. Moreover, people are fined when they do not. Biodegradable bags are always available at trailheads as well as enclosed trash containers specifically labeled for dogs. These should be available at all restroom stops throughout Turnagain Pass as well as the state, to simply make a statement, regardless of enforcement. This would educate people, who need to realize that they have a responsibility to respect the environment and its precious inhabitants, of all kinds, today and in the future.

I appreciate your time and consideration. Depressed by the oft falling rain, I feel such guilt burning fossil fuels to access higher elevation, yet such joy to appreciate the alpine environment. Good people are ready to help make access possible for others to enjoy the beauty of Turnagain Pass and the healthy future of our future.

Peace,
Briana Sullivan
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