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Organization:

Title:

Comments: Comments on Stanislaus OSV Designation

Comments attached.

Thank you,

Clint Smitheman

October 1, 2018

To: USFS

Re: Stanislaus OSV Designation

Dear USFS,

In general I support Preferred Alternative Plan 5. As an avid backcountry and xc skier, I'm pleased that Plan 5 mitigates much of the current and potential conflict between snowmobiles and non-motorized winter use (snow play, snowshoe, xc ski, and backcountry ski/board) in the Stanislaus National Forest. Additionally I have a professional interest as a buyer/manager for Sierra Nevada Adventure Company that my customers (both local and from further afield (Bay Area, Southern California and international visitors)) have access to winter wilderness that is peaceful and safe.

I am an avid skier. I've skied every month of the year for the past 19 years, almost every month on the Stanislaus National Forest! I also have some snowmobile experience, several days of riding in Alaska, Canada, and Colorado, so I do understand the thrill and the usefulness of snowmobiles.

I'd like to provide a bit of background about where I ski so that the USFS has an idea of where there are areas of potential conflict between snowmobiles and none-motorized winter use. I will include only day trips. First, I learned as a child how to xc and backcountry ski near Pinecrest on the Gooseberry and Crabtree trails. Today with lighter and more versatile equipment I'm skiing much further into the backcountry on a day trip, sometimes surprising snowmobile riders who are out for a multi-hour ride.

Highway 108 corridor - Pinecrest area. Half day trip is skiing up Gooseberry past Dodge Ridge and back down Crabtree Road to the Crabtree Trailhead. Given firm snow conditions, I've also toured into Bell Meadow or as far east as the Gianelli Trailhead.

Hwy 108 Herring Creek to Eagle Creek road. Herring Creek road, when there is sufficient snowcover provides the best flat terrain for xc skiing. I've taken several long day tours that included Pinecrest Peak, Eagle Peak, and the full Hammill Canyon Loop (yes the last was finished by headlamp). My parents have also skied several tours to Eagle Peak via Eagle Creek road in the spring. One of my first snow camping ski trips with my father when I was a teenager was to the upper slopes of Cooper Peak.

Sonora Pass - like most bc skiers I'm skiing here only after Sonora Pass opens to vehicle traffic. Sonora Pass is now well known in the backcountry world and dozens of skiers are there during the weekends in May. I also do ski on the north side, St. Mary's Pass, Sonora Peak and this last spring skied into the upper Carson River Canyon between Sonora peak and White Mtn.

Highway 4 Corridor - north side between Bear Valley Resort and Cape Horn. This area has a lot of backcountry use from skiers, snowboarders, snowshoers, and folks snow camping. This area has also had several near fatal incidents involving snowmobiles and skiers! Although this area is closed to motorized use, lack of any signage by the USFS is allowing frequent snowmobile incursions into a prime backcountry area. Personally I frequent this area on a weekly basis during the winter and spring and if avalanche conditions are minimal ski into the upper Mokelumne drainage (Lake Valley, Underwood Valley, Wheeler Lake). I also frequently tour east up highway 4 to Mosquito Lakes and sometimes further. Once I skied to Ebbetts Pass and back to the Lake Alpine SnoPark in one day.

I will also note (and I know this from the sheer volume of daily snopark passes, snowshoe rentals and plastic sled sales) that none-motorized use of all 3 snoParks along the Highway 4 corridor exceeds snowmobile use by at least 20 to 1 perhaps more on major holiday weekends. Lake Alpine is a favorite destination for snowshoe and xc skiers. Snow play sledders number in the hundreds.

Spicer SnoPark is used almost exclusively by families for sledding and as a kids snowplay area. Personally I've skied as far as Spicer dam and back in a day.

There are two other forest service roads along the hwy 4 corridor that do see a fair amount of xc ski, snowshoe, and snowplay use, as much as parking allows. 7N09 (Cabbage Patch road) and 7N23 (Black Springs road). Both of these roads I do ski several times during the winter and I do have friends who do ski 7N09 on a weekly basis.

As I stated in the beginning I generally support Plan 5, but I do have several areas of concern. Along highway 108, the existing SnoPark (5,900') is located at too low an elevation to allow access for Snowmobiles and other winter enthusiasts to consistent snow pack on all but the most severe winters. In the last decade only two winters have been cold and wet enough to provide a dependable snowpack at the elevation in the Sierra, the last being 2010/2011. Even ignoring the rising snow levels from human caused global warming, it would take a reversal of the current climate back to conditions of the mini-ice age during the 19th century to create consistent snowpack at 5,900' in the central Sierra. I would propose that a 2nd snowpark be established at Eagle Creek road to be open during winters with below normal and/or higher elevation snowpack.

The other area of concern along hwy 108 is Herring Creek road. During heavy winters, this road does get a fair amount of multi winter use. There are two problems, insufficient parking (solved by creating additional parking and including within the state SnoPark program) and potential conflict between snowmobiles and xc skiers and snowshoers. This could be resolved by having a speed limit for snowmobiles along Herring Creek road to the top of the grade past the junction with 5N17. Ski and snowshoe only routes could also be established along 5N11 and 4N76.

Along the Highway 4 corridor there is an area of major concern. The Round Valley/Poison Canyon/Bee Gulch is an area with significant backcountry skier, snowboarder and snowshoer use. There have been several near fatal incidents between snowmobiles illegally riding in this area that have come within several feet of running over backcountry skiers. This area, although designated a none-motorized region by the USFS is not signed as such and snowmobile riders from out of the area are most likely unaware that they are restricted to riding just along highway 4 until they reach Stanislaus Meadow. I urge the USFS to work with the local backcountry community and provide signs that clearly mark this area as closed to snowmobiles and prevent another potentially fatal incident!

One final area of concern, although I rarely see snowmobiles here is Black Springs road or 7N23. On an average winter this is where the snowline starts along hwy 4 and this area is used a lot by snow play families as well as snowshoers and some xc skiers. Closing this road to snowmobile traffic to the junction with 7N09 would prevent conflict issues and still allow snowmobile access to the general region via 7N09 at Cabbage Patch Maintenance station.

Yours,

Clint Smitheman