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Snowmobiling's Endless Winter:

*Facilitating Physical Access Also Extends
The Snowmobile Season, Resulting In Harm
To Wildlife Security, Vegetation, Soils, And Water*

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Executive Summary

Citizen monitoring over the past decade has reported snowmobile use along the northern Swan Crest of the Flathead National Forest as late as July and as early as November. This use contradicts current Forest Plan standards intended to prohibit snowmobile travel April 1 - November 30 for protection of grizzly bear security, and April 1 - July 1 for protection of soils, watersheds, and spring wildlife needs including elk calving.

The photos in this report demonstrate snowmobiles are operating on backcountry areas free of snow, causing disruption of wildlife security and significant damage to vegetation and soils, if not water quality and fish. Unauthorized trails and bridges are shown to contribute to an inappropriate extension of the snowmobile season and consequent damage to resources. The photos provide clear evidence efforts to facilitate snowmobile access by leaving culverts, bridges or benched areas in decommissioned roads will lead directly to increased difficulty in enforcing seasonal use restrictions and cause harm to wildlife security, soils, water quality, and fish.

Introduction

Over the past decade, citizens have reported to the Flathead National Forest unauthorized trails and bridges used by snowmobiles. They have also reported snowmobile use during the months of November, May, June and July, when, according to Flathead Forest Plan Appendix C, snowmobile use is supposed to be prohibited to protect wildlife security, soil, and watersheds. [1]

Such inappropriate use continues unabated, with the exception of the court-ordered closure and reclamation of a trail cut illegally through Krause Basin around 1992. There, physical barriers and tree deadfalls were necessary to make motorized access impossible following repeated violations of the closure order and vandalized closure signs.

In spite of its inability to control snowmobile use via law enforcement alone, the Flathead is now proposing in its Winter Motorized Rec-

reation Plan and Moose Post-Fire Project to facilitate snowmobile use of decommissioned roads by leaving culverts in stream crossings and/or providing benched areas on slopes near streams. [2, 3] Broadly used definitions of road decommissioning and Flathead Forest Plan Amendment 19, however, require the culverts be removed and nearby slopes be recontoured to natural conditions in order to protect fish and wildlife habitat. Simply put, decommissioned roads are to be "treated in such a manner so as to no longer function as a road or trail." [4, 5]

This report uses photographs to illustrate how facilitating snowmobile access across streams and steep slopes negates natural barriers to snowmobile travel, allowing for snowmobile use during periods of inadequate snowpack. Results are increased and untimely impacts to wildlife security, vegetation, and soils, if not to water quality and fish as well.

The Unauthorized Lost Johnny Bridge

Over the years, reports of snowmobiling in May, June and July in the upper Lost Johnny and Strawberry Lake areas of the Swan Crest have left people scratching their heads, wondering how snowmobiles are getting there from the snow-free lower elevations and roads. After seeing snowmobiles above Strawberry Lake tearing up snow-free bear grass and a shrub field on June 13, 2002, I drove to the end of the Lost Johnny road on June 26 and found an unauthorized bridge across the creek.

The bridge showed recent use by snowmobiles, as did the abandoned

road on either side of the bridge and upland areas with and without snowpack. It is apparent the bridge has been there for a number of years. It is in fact collapsing on one side of the center pier.



Keith Hammer photo

This bridge over Lost Johnny Creek facilitates motorized vehicle access to an abandoned road network and upland areas.

It appears that, when the upland road network was abandoned, neither the stream banks nor the nearby road prism were returned to native contours, providing a narrower and more bridgeable gap. Portions of the road prism, and of course the stream banks, stand to be eroded should this bridge collapse and divert the stream to either side.

The following June 26 photo shows fresh snowmobile tracks on the bare, abandoned roadbed between the turnaround area at the end of the Lost Johnny road and the unauthorized bridge.



Keith Hammer photo

The following photo was taken June 16, 2002, above Strawberry Lake, where snowmobiles were seen on June 13 tearing bear grass and shrubs out and down into the soil while hill climbing between patches of snow.



Keith Hammer photo

The next photo, taken several hundred yards above the bridge, shows evidence there has been substantial snowmobile use of the bridge to facilitate post-April 1 up-country snowmobiling, with a clear trail torn down through the shrubs and into soil and rock.



Keith Hammer photo

The unauthorized Lost Johnny bridge serves as an example of how providing stream crossing access, rather than relying upon naturally occurring seasonal snow bridges, greatly and inappropriately extends the season of use for snowmobiles.

Hungry Horse Ranger District staff were unaware of the existence of the Lost Johnny bridge when I contacted them August 8, 2002. Furthermore, while the existence of a bridge or cleared trail in the area was suspected for a number of years, it apparently was not documented until I made the long drive up Lost Johnny road on June 26, 2002.

Promises of adequate enforcement of seasonal snowmobile closures in the backcountry ring hollow should off-season use be encouraged by leaving culverts and/or benched areas in decommissioned roads. If a stationary snowmobile bridge defies detection and remedy by the Forest Service, how does it expect to detect and ticket snowmobilers when they violate a seasonal backcountry closure order?

Leaving Culverts, Bridges And/Or Benched Areas Near Streams In Decommissioned Roads Is A Recipe For Disaster

In addition to extending the length of the snowmobile season, leaving culverts in streams, bridges across streams, or benched areas in decommissioned roads near streams invites disaster for soil, water quality and fish. There is good reason why Flathead Forest Plan Amendment 19 and other definitions of road decommissioning require all stream-bearing culverts be removed and the slopes near streams returned to native contours.

The following photo shows the 1999 washout of a 54" culvert in Nokio Creek on the Flathead National Forest, which washed some 1,000 cubic yards of Road #114 downstream.



Forest Service photo

It is precisely because culverts like this fail even on open roads, where the culverts are easily monitored and maintained, that culverts must be removed from decommissioned roads, where they are difficult to monitor and maintain. Indeed, the Forest Service's own manual on road decommissioning warns against leaving culverts and portions of road prisms in even low risk crossings by stating "it is realized that structures and embankments not removed may be inaccessible for maintenance or repair after road obliteration work is completed." [6] The potential for disaster is heightened by the fact stream crossing structures most in desire by snowmobilers are likely to be the higher risk culverts buried deeply in incised crossings with steep slopes.

Road decommissioning conducted in 1998 on the Flathead's Coal-Mathias Road #1687 serves as an example of how leaving benched areas near streams on decommissioned roads can result in damage to streams and fish. The following photo shows benched areas left in the "recontoured" slopes following culvert removal.



Keith Hammer photo

The next photo, of the same slope the following summer, shows how benches can help channel water and sediment directly to the stream channel.



Forest Service photo

While the Forest Service apparently helped channel water along the bench on the decommissioned Road #1687, doing so and leaving the bench in the first place runs contrary to Amendment 19 and the definition of "decommission" developed by the interagency Forest Ecosystem Management Assessment Team. The FEMAT defines decommission as "to remove those elements of a road that reroute hillslope drainage and present slope stability hazards." [7]

Add snowmobile use to these streamside benches and slopes and things promise to get even worse. As the photo to the right shows (as well as photos to follow) snowmobiles can dig significant ruts into the ground to channel water and sediment. This photo was taken near the end of the Lost Johnny road on June 26, 2002. The rut is of snowmobile width and shows significant use by snowmobiles.



Keith Hammer photo

Snowmobiles operating on benches or slopes near streams, especially when encouraged to do so during low or no snowpack by the existence of man-made stream crossing structures, may indeed cause substantial impacts to vegetation, soils, water quality and fish.

Clearing Of Brush And Deadfall Also Extends The Snowmobile Season

The clearing of brush and tree deadfall can also inappropriately extend the period of snowmobile use, causing increased and untimely impacts to wildlife security, vegetation, soils, water quality, and fish. Once natural impediments to motorized travel are removed, significant numbers of snowmobilers pay little heed to seasonal restrictions for wildlife security or to ensuring there is adequate snowpack to protect the land. [8]

On the following page is a series of photos of a portion of an unauthorized snowmobile trail cleared and maintained in the Flathead's Krause Basin from about 1992 until 1999. This

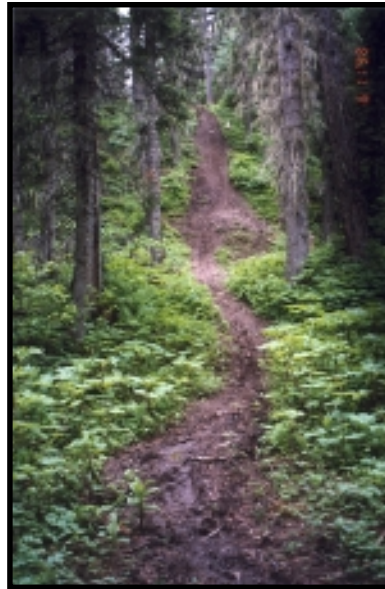
trail also came to be used by wheeled motorized vehicles. Removal of brush and deadfall resulted in snowmobile use including November and April, in spite of a longstanding area closure for wildlife security April 1 - July 1 and September 1 to November 30.

In spite of the fact the trail had been cleared and maintained without a permit, the Forest Service refused to close the trail until a lawsuit was brought and a court order issued. Pursuant to the court order, the trail was physically blocked and reclaimed after motorized vehicles repeatedly ignored the posting of a legal closure order and signs. [9]



Bob Muth photo

Prior removal of brush and deadfall allows snowmobile access on little to no snow.



Keith Hammer photo

Already nicknamed "mud hill" by snowmobilers, dirt bikes and 4-wheelers also take advantage of the cleared hillside.



Keith Hammer photo

Following a court order, volunteers physically block, water bar, and plant native shrubs and trees on mud hill.

Conclusion

The photos and discussion provided in this report demonstrate efforts to facilitate snowmobile access inevitably lead to an inappropriate extension of the snowmobile season and untimely impacts to wildlife security that cannot be rectified by the posting of closure orders. Damage to vegetation and soils can be expected to extend to water quality and fisheries if culverts, bridges, and benched areas on hillsides are retained near streams on decommissioned roads.

Further impacts to water quality and fish can be expected if slash and other sediment-trapping material is removed from decommissioned roads near streams in order to facilitate snowmobile access or if such material is scuffed off by snowmobile use. All of the above measures are also certain to facilitate undesired wheeled motorized vehicle use.

While the Lolo National Forest is perhaps ill-advised in proposing to leave informal, unmaintained foot paths in its decommissioned

roads, it is making it absolutely clear no such slash-free paths will be allowed within 300 feet of streams and they will be legally closed to motorized vehicles. [10]

The Flathead National Forest, on the other hand, is proposing to not only allow snowmobile use on decommissioned roads, but to facilitate it by leaving culverts and/or bridges and/or benched areas near streams. [11, 12] Replacing natural impediments to motorized vehicle travel with paper closure orders greatly increases the reliance on chronically scarce law enforcement to ensure protection of wildlife security and other resources.

In the years 1999 and 2000, the Flathead issued only four citations for the 365 cases of vandalism and road closure violations it discovered. [13] As neighboring forests like the Kootenai move toward more physical deterrents to motorized use for this very reason [14], the Flathead instead appears intent on heading directly toward disaster.

Sources

1. Flathead National Forest Plan Appendix C - Travel Planning Direction. December 1985.
2. Flathead National Forest. Scoping letter for the Winter Motorized Recreation Forest Plan Amendment. July 18, 2002.
3. Flathead National Forest. Moose Post-Fire Project Draft Environmental Impact Statement. June 2002.
4. Forest Ecosystem Management: An Ecological, Economic, and Social Assessment. Inter-agency report of the Forest Ecosystem Management Assessment Team (FEMAT). July 1993.
5. Flathead National Forest Plan Amendment #19 Decision Notice and Environmental Assessment. March 1, 1995.
6. U. S. Forest Service. A Guide for Road Closure and Obliteration in the Forest Service. June 1996.
7. Source #4.
8. Unpublished monitoring and reports by Keith Hammer, Swan View Coalition, and others.
9. Court order issued by U. S. District Judge Donald Molloy in the matter of *Swan View Coalition and Montana Ecosystems Defense Council v. United States Forest Service*. May 19, 1999.
10. Lolo National Forest Post-Burn Record of Decision and Final Environmental Impact Statement. July 17, 2002.
11. Source #2.
12. Source #3.
13. Flathead National Forest law enforcement records summary. Provided Swan View Coalition under cover of letter by Terry Chute. February 12, 2001.
14. Kootenai National Forest. Letter from Bob Castaneda to Swan View Coalition. February 5, 2001.