

April 6, 2024

To: Anthony Botello, Forest Supervisor
Flathead National Forest
650 Wolfpack Way
Kalispell, MT 59901

Thank you for the opportunity provide comments on the Flathead Forest Plan Suitability Changes: Winter Travel Management and Recommended Wilderness EA.

Unless you hire several more Law Enforcement Officers to patrol areas, issue citations, and confiscate snowmobiles and snow bikes, particularly in those areas that are currently open to OSV use, that will be closed in the proposed Flathead Forest Plan Suitability Changes: Winter Travel Management and Recommended Wilderness EA. These areas will be trespassed. As a wilderness ranger from 1978-2014, I have 35 years of experience dealing with illegal snowmobilers and snowbikes trespass in the Mission Mountains Wilderness (MMW), violating every major drainage in the MMW and up into the high country. This has continued since the MMW was designated federally protected wilderness status in 1975 (as reported to me by USFS employee Cal Tassinari, Wilderness Ranger and Trails Coordinator on the Swan Lake Ranger District from 1960-1980). Unless there are more serious consequences like confiscating snowmobiles and steep fines, it will NOT stop. With the increase in coyote/wolf whacking or 'ote rolling, this is a very serious law enforcement issue. There were snowmobilers in the Missions who ran down and exhausted a mountain goat just so they could get a photo for "bragging rights." This practice has to stop as evidenced by the Cody Roberts case in Wyoming (Heinz, 2024).

Illegal motorized use is so prevalent that people advocate cutting locks on gated access posted on government websites, online newspapers, and other social media (Bader, 2024). Whether it is people cutting locks or running over wolves with snowmobiles and laughing about it, the lawless element is a threat to wintering wildlife, soils, vegetation, and for people who seek quiet trails.

Shortcomings of the Flathead Forest Plan Suitability Changes

1. I oppose the proposed language allowing for administrative use of mechanized and motorized vehicles and equipment in Recommended Wilderness Areas (RWAs). There should be NO administrative exemptions and equipment in RWAs. RWAs are to be managed according to The Wilderness Act of 1964 (PL 88-577) until final determination is made to designate these areas for wilderness or released for multiple use. There is a Minimum Tool policy in designated wilderness and RWAs where a Minimum Requirements Analysis Framework (MRAF) is conducted as a precursor to NEPA. Nowhere in the suitability document is this mentioned. All work in both designated Wilderness and RWAs can be done with traditional tools and if necessary, and use of pack stock to haul supplies/equipment to the work site. All workers should be required to practice Leave No Trace Principles.

2. The EA does not adequately consider the threat to wolverines and whitebark pine as threatened species facing numerous changed circumstances due to climate change. Nor does it recognize the documented shortening of the grizzly bear denning season due to climate change. The EA fails to use the best available science in determining the grizzly bear denning period. Due to climate change almost all grizzly bears can be considered reliably in their winter dens only from January 1 to February 15 resulting from a recent federal wolf trapping injunction.
3. There should be no political tradeoffs when designating suitable areas as closed to OSVs to protect non-motorized recreationists, grizzly bears, lynx, wolverine, and whitebark pine. Maintaining connectivity of lynx from Canada to the Northern Rockies extends along the western front of the Swan Range (Squires, et al., 2013) where I live and I am very concerned with how this EA fails to adequately address lynx displacement with the proposed changes.
4. This proposal favors motorized OSV users over quiet recreation visitors who will be displaced.
5. The proposal fails to address soils and vegetation and that application of a minimum snow depth requirement to protect them from OSV damage. See attached photos of illegal snowmobile damage caused in the Hellroaring drainage, within the MMW. Many OSV users do NOT self-regulate, knowing there is little to no law enforcement presence in areas where they are trespassing.

Conclusion

The EA proposal states that “the odds of being apprehended and the minimal penalty if apprehended may be so small, they are not considered to be a deterrent” to illegal OSV trespass (p. 90).

Nothing has changed except the agencies claiming they now have the problem under control and it's not harming wildlife.

Thank you for your consideration.

Kari Gunderson, PhD.
Wildland Recreation Management
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References

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Hammer, K. (2001). Gate-Crashing: Road Closure Gates Cannot Effectively Eliminate Trespass. Swan View Coalition.

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