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Comments: The Vermont Association of Snow Travelers (VAST) has reviewed the successional habitat creation project proposal and has the following public comment to offer.

VAST has an important partnership with the USDA Forest Service and the local VAST Clubs work very hard in maintaining the existing snowmobile trails within the boundaries of the Green Mountain National Forest, keeping the important connections open between the Northern and Southern portions of the forest. It is our mission to provide a safe and sustainable Statewide Snowmobile Trails System (SSTS) for our membership and we strive to meet this objective through trail advocacy, year-round trail maintenance and providing access to the 4700 miles of corridor snowmobile trail across the state. Keeping snowmobile trail corridors open on public and private land is imperative with the continual changes in landownership.

The Early Successional Habitat Creation Project incorporates a number of management activities that will improve the forest for all users. VAST is very supportive of these proposed management activities and their positive impacts to the forest. While these management activities are taking place we ask that the USDA Forest Service work closely with VAST and the local snowmobile clubs to plan out and allow the use of alternate routes around plowed roads and management activities to enable the continuity of the SSTS to remain intact.

Given the history of the past few winters it is becoming apparent that the snow is strictly elevation driven, and the Green Mountain National Forest provides some of the higher elevation snowmobile trails in Vermont. This area of the state is a popular riding area for the 22,000 members of VAST. We have trail counter data that can reflect this statement. If roads/trails are plowed and/or closed traffic would be funneled onto other trails that may not be able to handle the increased amount of traffic.

One proposal that would eliminate some of this concern is that only half the road be plowed for management activities while the other half remain snow covered for snowmobile use where width makes this possible. This has been tried in other areas of the state with some success. If this is not possible we would ask that the roads be shared and/or alternate trails be constructed to pass snowmobiles safely around the equipment involved in the management activities.

There is some concern amongst the USDA Forest Service about parallel trails, however these types of trails are necessary in this type of recreation. Alternate trails help to disperse traffic and users and ultimately spread the trail impacts of a busy weekend out over additional trail segments instead of all along one. This provides a better experience for the users and overall easier and better trail maintenance performed by the volunteer groomer operators.

We certainly support the proposed plans for habitat improvement, however we want to maintain as much snowmobile trail continuity as possible along unplowed, snow covered trails/roads as the management activities are taking place. We want to work together with USDA Forest Service staff to keep trails open as often as possible once management activities are finalized. Our winters as of late have forced a good share of the riding in Vermont into these higher elevation areas with snow. If trails are closed and continuity is lost, or trails are decommissioned the ramifications for the recreational activity of snowmobiling will be significant.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment.

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