
Forest Service will restrict the back of Ajax

Snowmobiles will be restricted to county roads in dispute over powder stashes

BY [SCOTT CONDON](#)

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ASPEN — The U.S. Forest Service will crack down on snowmobile use on the back of Aspen Mountain next winter and restrict the machines to county roads, Aspen-Sopris District Ranger Irene Davidson said Tuesday.

The Aspen Skiing Co.'s Aspen Mountain Powder Tours will be able to continue to use snowcats for its operation, she said. The public will not be able to stray off county roads to shuttle powder skiers back to the top of slopes.

“There will be a public outcry,” Davidson acknowledged.

She said the new direction complies with the White River National Forest's management plan for the Richmond Ridge area. Public motorized use was restricted in 1992 in the area, but the regulation wasn't enforced until the 2004-05 winter and then only intermittently.

Forest Service officials indicated last fall they would open the area to public motorized use — with no restrictions. They said they simply couldn't enforce the restrictions.

Davidson suggested Tuesday the agency might not have been trying hard enough.

“We weren't choosing to spend our money there,” said Davidson, who is approaching her second winter as the ranger for the Aspen-Sopris District.

The agency will restructure the operating permit issued to Aspen Mountain Powder Tours, a Skico subsidiary, to raise money for enforcement.

In the past, the permit for the powder tour operation was wrapped into the Skico's larger permit for using public lands for the Aspen Mountain ski area. Now a separate permit will be issued for the power tour operation, allowing funds to be kept by the Aspen-Sopris Ranger District.

The Forest Service has complex funding regulations. The funds collected from the Skico for use of public lands, for example, aren't kept at the local district but instead go to the agency's general fund in Washington, D.C.

However, much of the revenue raised through annual fees collected from outfitters and guides is kept at the local level. A restructuring of Aspen Mountain Powder Tour's permit will allow the Aspen-Sopris Ranger District to keep more funds locally, Davidson said.

The Forest Service intends to have a person patrolling the Richmond Ridge area two to four times per week. The emphasis will be educating snowmobile users about the new regulation, Davidson said, but tickets can also be issued. She was uncertain what fine can levied for people who ignore closures.

The decision caught Skico officials and the founder of a citizens' group fighting for public access by surprise Tuesday.

Skico spokesman Jeff Hanle declined comment when notified by The Aspen Times of Davidson's decision. He said company officials hadn't heard about the decision from the Forest Service so they had nothing to say.

Mike Sladdin, founder and president of Powder to the People, was disappointed by the decision.

"This basically goes against everything we've been working toward with broad community support over the years," he said.

Sladdin said he thought there was an open, collaborative process with the various parties with a stake in the issue. Now it "appears" there was "intense, behind-the-scenes lobbying by the Ski Company," he said.

The Skico's Aspen Mountain Powder Tours and Powder to the People reached a truce in the powder dispute four years ago. A so-called "gentlemen's agreement" between them allowed public snowmobiles to use a temporary road groomed on the snow by Aspen Mountain Powder Tours near McFarlane's, a particularly popular area among powder hounds

In return, Powder to the People members agreed to keep their sleds out of other areas where the powder tours are offered.

Davidson said Powder to the People members abide by the agreement and aren't creating the problem. But a lot of other skiers who use snowmobiles and people out on snowmobiling trips are creating problems by traveling on public restricted land and venturing onto private property.

She said she sees it as the agency's duty to follow the forest plan. A related document, called a travel management plan, is being released this month. It will also recommend the restrictions on motorized travel.

Sladdin said the decision gives the Skico exclusive use of the backcountry slopes. The Forest Service decision restricts public use of snowmobiles on the east side of Richmond Ridge and the Skico's business arrangements severely restrict the public's use on the west side of the ridge. The Skico leases private property west of the ridge, and the property is posted to keep the public from trespassing.

Forest Service officials have long disputed claims they are denying access to public lands. The public is welcome to ski or ride slopes on public lands and skin or walk back to the top of the slopes, they note.

The restrictions on the west side of Richmond Ridge appear aimed more at snowmobiles than at skiers or riders.

Sladdin was unconvinced that the Forest Service will be able to enforce the restrictions. He predicted there will be "bandito" skiing on the back of Aspen Mountain this winter.

Davidson stressed that her decision doesn't effect snowmobilers' use of the public, county roads on the back of Aspen Mountain, including Richmond Ridge Road, Little Annie Road and Midnight Mine Road.

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