



## Recreation Groups Call for an End to Snowmobile Loophole on Forest Lands

BOISE, Idaho --- Millions of Americans turn to national forests for peace, quiet and healthy outdoor exercise during winter months. Unfortunately, due to a regulatory loophole exempting snowmobiles from the Forest Service management framework, winter visitors seeking peace and quiet are often met instead with noise, exhaust and deep ruts from snowmobiles.

A coalition of 90 recreation and conservation organizations representing 1.3 million members is asking the Forest Service to close the snowmobile loophole and thereby bring winter management on national forest lands under the same guidelines used for summer motorized use.

The groups have submitted a formal petition to U.S. Department of Agriculture Under Secretary Harris Sherman and USDA Forest Chief Tom Tidwell asking that the 2005 Travel Management Rule be amended to remove the current exemption for over-snow vehicles. The Travel Management Rule, also known as the ORV Rule, is the framework used to designate which trails, roads and areas on each National Forest unit are open to motorized use and where motors are prohibited.

“This is a matter of fairness and consistency,” said Mark Menlove, executive director of Winter Wildlands Alliance, the organization leading the petition effort. “We acknowledge that snowmobiles are a popular winter use and that they have their place on national forest lands. But the current ‘anything goes’ approach to winter management allows one user group to dominate the winter landscape at the expense of all others and it puts fragile winter ecosystems at risk. We’re simply asking that snowmobiles be managed under the same guidelines used for off-road vehicles during all other seasons.”

Up until the 2005 Rule took effect, all off-road vehicles, including snowmobiles, were managed under a uniform set of standards on national forest lands. However, the 2005 Rule repealed the previous off-road vehicle regulations. Over-snow vehicles were exempted from the new Rule but no replacement regulations for managing snowmobiles and other over-snow vehicles use were issued.

In response to concerns from snowmobilers that applying the Travel Management framework to over-snow vehicle use would eliminate off-trail snowmobiling, the petition points out the 2005 Rule includes a tool for allowing off-trail or cross-country snowmobile use in appropriate areas by directing each national forest unit to designate “roads, trails and areas” for motor vehicle use. The Rule defines “area” as a “discrete, specifically delineated space that is smaller, and in most cases much smaller, than a Ranger District.”

The petition also asks that motorized and non-motorized areas be clearly defined on a Winter Motor Vehicle Use Map for each forest using existing and easily recognizable physical boundaries such as ridges, creeks, fences, roads, etc. in order to facilitate adherence and enforcement.

In asking that snowmobiles be brought into the Travel Management framework, the petitioning groups commended the Forest Service on successfully implementing the Travel Management Rule to better control wheeled off-road vehicle use. “The 2005 Rule isn’t perfect,” said Menlove, “but it has proven to be an effective tool for managing motorized use. There is no logical reason why this framework shouldn’t be applied year-round and used to designate appropriate areas for snowmobile use while protecting other areas for peace, quiet and natural resource values.”

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