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- Current News
- Archives

Community

- Columns
- Letters
- Editors Opinion
- Obituaries
- The Arts
- NEW! The Discussion room!

Calendar of Events

Classifieds

- Current Classifieds
- Legal Notices

About Us

- Advertising Info.
- Subscriptions
- E-mail Us

User Forum

- User Pictures
- User Videos

Outdoors - Lodging - Dining - Adventure - Shopping

Real Estate	4	Commercial	5
Retail	6	Rentals	
Services	17	For Rent	23
Spa Fitness	1	For Sale	5
Food	9	Help Wanted	2
Other	66	Meetings	2
		Real Estate	3
		Services	5
		Vehicles	10

Hub PHOTOS



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Hub EVENTS

Here a few recent calendar events

- Jan 12  
drawing of live model  
Ongoing, Mondays. 5:30 - 8:30 p.m. Studio behind Daymakers building in Ridgway. ...
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Jan 11  
Kelly Crane, DOW District Wildlife Manager, will discuss how to live in bear country without attracting ...

List All

-Log In to Forum

Current  
Newspaper  
PDF's

Subscriber  
Feature



## U.S. Forest Service to patrol winter playgrounds

December 26, 2008

By Samantha Tisdal Wright

With winter officially here, and plenty of snow up in the high country, U.S. Forest Service officials will start patrolling Red Mountain Pass and County Road 5 next week to enforce winter travel rules for motorized snow-sport enthusiasts. The patrols will be funded by the Red Mountain Pass Area Chapter (RMPA) of the Backcountry Snowsports Alliance.

Previously, RMPA funded USFS patrols only on the pass.

This winter, the effort has expanded to address a new resolution adopted by the Board of County Commissioners last year, which mandates that on certain county roads frequented by mixed-use winter outdoor enthusiasts (the most popular of those being County Road 5, which leads to Elk Meadows and Miller Mesa), snowmobiles must slow down to 10 miles per hour, when encountering non-motorized recreationalists.

"The Forest Service will alternate patrols on weekends - Red Mountain Pass on Saturdays and County Road 5 on Sundays," said RMPA Chairman Roger Schimmel. "They will contact users and explain what the rules and regulations are. They don't ski out into the backcountry and give tickets to people; it's more of an educational effort, taking surveys, monitoring conflicts."

Patrols will start in January, Schimmel said.

Also new this winter is a sign posted at the crest of Red Mountain Pass, outlining where motorized snow-sport enthusiasts may go. The posted rules, which have been in effect for several years, basically restrict motorized back-country recreating to the east side of the highway on Red Mountain Pass, from the summit and to the north, with the exception of the Ironton Nordic Ski Area.

"In general, the restrictions are being respected," Schimmel said. "It's rare to see snowmobile tracks on the west side of Highway 550."

The RMPA would like to see more restricted motorized snow travel on the other side of the pass. "Now, both sides of highway are available to motorized users in the San Juan Forest, which starts at the summit of the pass and goes south," Schimmel said.

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Toward this end, the organization has been actively contributing comments to the Forest Service as it develops revised winter travel management plans, for both the Grand Mesa/ Uncompahgre/ Gunnison (GMUG) region and the San Juan forest, encompassing Red Mountain Pass.

"The San Juan Forest's preferred alternative would restrict motorized winter travel on the east side of the highway from the summit to the south," Schimmel said. "We supported that preferred alternative."

But the new plans have been delayed by complications stemming from the Roadless Act issue, mandating additional environmental assessments for oil and gas exploration, said RMPA's Debbie Wheeler.

"Both the GMUG and the San Juan Forest Services are having to re-evaluate their proposals, so no action is expected to take place for at least a year," she said.

The Backcountry Snowsports Alliance represents winter backcountry recreationists by advocating the creation, preservation, and management of non-motorized areas on public lands.

The organization works to preserve backcountry areas for quiet human-powered use, promote winter backcountry safety and ethics, and cooperatively resolve conflicts among backcountry users.

"Our idea isn't to ban snowmobiling," Schimmel said. "We do believe that snowmobiling and back-country skiing are not compatible, and would prefer separate terrain. We just have to get along, right?"



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