

Winter Use plan released

By [SCOTT McMILLION](#) Chronicle Staff Writer

The National Park Service released yet another winter use plan Monday. This one calls for tighter limits on how much snowmobiling grows in the future.

Previous plans had called for allowing up to 720 "cleaner, quieter" sleds a day into the park. This one calls for limiting them at 540. Actual use in recent years has averaged from 250 to 290 sleds a day.

The new plan also limits snowcoaches to 83 a day and calls for them to be cleaner and quieter in the future.

At West Yellowstone, the busiest entrance, the daily snowmobile limit would drop from 400 sleds a day to 300.

That is roughly twice the actual visitation of the past four years, and for a group of retired Park Service employees, it's too much.

"If Yellowstone's managers decide upon a policy of allowing 540 snowmobiles per day, they would be choosing a form of access that increases air and noise pollution and harm to Yellowstone's wildlife," The Coalition of National Park Service Employees said Monday in an analysis of the plan.

That group, along with a number of environmental groups, calls on using snowcoaches to transport tourists in the park. They cite government research that says noise and air pollution levels are too high even with the reduced snowmobiling and cleaner machines.

The Park Service maintains the new plan would offer "a range of appropriate winter recreation opportunities that do not impair or irreparably harm park resources or values."

Plus, it allows parkside snowmobile rental businesses the chance to grow.

"It would also provide the potential for economic growth for communities serving winter visitors," the Park Service said Monday when announcing the new policy.

However, that growth, if it comes, might not be enough for all eight registered snowmobile rental operations in West Yellowstone, said Bill Howell, a partner in Yellowstone Arctic Yamaha and the Holiday Inn Sunspree Resort.

"It may not be economically feasible for some businesses to survive," Howell said Monday.

Snowmobile visitation to Yellowstone has been inching up in recent years and Howell said he's glad snowmobiles will still be allowed in the park but he's disappointed in the lower limits. He predicted that, within two or three years, the old limit of 400 machines a day would be met regularly.

With a cap of 300 sleds divided among eight concessionaires "it's going to be hard, economically, to make it work," he said.

Yellowstone spokesman Al Nash said the lower limits are part of a formula meant to ensure noise and pollution limits are met.

Another key part of that formula is requiring multi-passenger snowcoaches to have quieter engines and better emissions controls before the 2011-12 season.

Bill Wade, the chairman of the executive council of the retirees group, cited government reports saying that on testing days with an average of 316 snowmobiles in the park last winter, noise thresholds had been exceeded. At Old Faithful, vehicle noise could be heard during 68 percent of primary visiting hours, he said. At Madison Junction, they could be heard 59 percent of the time.

Nash said cutting snowmobile numbers and requiring quieter snowcoaches should address that problem.

“Our modeling shows we'll end up with lowered sound levels,” he said. “The reason we exceeded these can be attributed to the older snowcoaches. They were designed decades ago and they're louder than their modern counterparts.”

Other noise comes from grooming equipment and administrative machines, he said.

Other modeling shows the park will meet all Montana, Wyoming and federal air quality standards, he said.

“We have to meet all of the most stringent standards of the federal Clean Air Act,” he said.

The plan also calls for closing the park's east entrance to all motorized oversnow travel, mostly because of safety concerns for park employees managing avalanches there.

That entrance is the least used in the park, but a group in Cody, Wyo., has been fighting to keep it open.

For the upcoming winter, up to 720 sleds would be allowed. The new plan, if finalized by the Park Service Regional Director, would not be put in place until the winter of 2008-09.

This is the third time the Park Service has gone through the lengthy and expensive process of writing a winter use plan, at a cost Wade estimated at \$10 million. The earlier plans were held up in legal or political disputes.

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