

## Groups want feds to manage snowmobiles

**On national forests, a lack of requirements harms skiers and other winter users, they say.**

*By Angus M. Thuermer Jr., Jackson Hole, Wyo.  
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A coalition of conservation groups is pushing to change U.S. Forest Service rules so the federal agency regulates snowmobiles on national forest lands in the same manner it treats other off-road vehicles.

The groups, including six with interests in Teton County, are circulating a petition and are scheduled to meet with federal officials to ask that snowmobiles no longer be exempt from rules that regulate off-road vehicles. Snowmobiles were excluded from a 2005 rule, a move that contradicts a 1972 presidential order, the groups contend.

As a result, national forests in snowbelt states and people who recreate there are being unfairly affected by snowmobiles, the groups say. The goal is not to eliminate snowmobiling, said Forrest McCarthy, public lands director with the Winter Wildlands Alliance in Jackson, but to control their use as envisioned by law to protect resources, skiers, snowshoers and hikers.

"Technology has changed," McCarthy said Tuesday. "Snowmobiles go places today nobody imagined they could go. People have concerns about wildlife, recreation. Today it is much more of an issue."

A snowmobile advocacy group is opposed to the effort said Greg Mumm, executive director of the Blue Ribbon Coalition in Pocatello, Idaho. Adequate regulations exist to govern snowmobiles, he said.

"This is just another effort on the part of extremists groups to take another bite at the apple to try and get closures, to exclude any kind of motorized use," he said in a telephone interview. "We just don't think it's necessary at all to even consider this."

McCarthy's group is one of the petitioners and he pointed to conflicts he said exist on Togwotee Pass between snowmobilers and backcountry skiers. There, skiers' powder stashes have been churned up by motorized riders and the ambiance disturbed by noisy engines, he said.

"Historically, it has been a backcountry ski destination long before snowmobiles ever arrived there," he said. "The ski community would like to have an accessible nonmotorized recreation area on Togwotee Pass."

Two areas the Togwotee Pass Backcountry Alliance has been advocating that snowmobiles be excluded from are Breccia and Two Ocean peaks, he said.

Snowmobiles and other over-snow vehicles "are indistinguishable from other classes of [off-road-vehicles] in terms of impacts," the petition states. Federal agencies have "a legal and ethical obligation to apply the same set of management standards to [over-snow vehicles] as to other classes of [off-road-vehicles] in order to protect and preserve America's National Forest System resources, including clean air and water, quiet, wildlife, soils, vegetation, and nonmotorized recreationists, from the substantial adverse impacts of [over-snow-vehicle] use."

Mumm rejected contentions in the 33-page petition.

Snowmobiles are entirely different from other off-road-vehicles in that they run on the snow, Mumm said; "They don't actually travel on the ground."

"We think they're being managed responsibly the way they are," he said. "The intent of the travel rule is to manage unmannered motorized recreation. Snowmobiles are well-managed already. This was looked at years ago, in 2005 and the years prior to that when they were developing the [off-road-vehicle] rule."

One example of existing regulation might be on the Bridger-Teton National Forest on Teton Pass, where snowmobiles are not allowed on the Old Pass Road or south of Highway 22, where skiers frequent. Nearby, however, on Edelweiss Bowl and on Mount Glory, also popular backcountry ski areas, snowmobiles are allowed on popular ski runs.

While some restrictions govern snowmobiling, no regulations require snowmobile management, the conservation groups contend. The petition requests that national forest managers be required to go through a process that brings forest users to the table to set standards for snowmobiling areas and designate where machines are appropriate or inappropriate.

McCarthy dismissed the notion that the petition is an attempt to ban snowmobiling or "lock out" citizens from public lands.

"Our opposition is trying to paint it that we're trying to close all national forests," he said. A winter travel plan would designate snowmobile trails, unrestricted "play areas," and closed areas.

"It is the same process we went through very successfully for the summer travel plan," McCarthy said. That summer plan governs where four-wheelers are allowed in the

Bridger-Teton. Among the suggestions contained in the petition are rules that would establish minimum snow depths for snowmobiling and "preserve quiet as a landscape characteristic."

Member organizations with local interests that are signatories of the petition include the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance, Sierra Club, Togwotee Pass Backcountry Alliance, Wyoming Conservation Voters, Wyoming Wilderness Association and Winter Wildlands Alliance.

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