

Conservationists: Americans and Yellowstone National Park Deserve Better

Regional and National Conservation Organizations Confident that Law, Science, and the Public's Desire for Access that Preserves the National Parks Will Prevail

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Bozeman, Montana—Regional and national conservation organizations today agreed that the fast-approaching winter season at Yellowstone National Park should go forward under the same rules that governed management of snowmobile and snowcoach access during the past three winters. That portion of the “Record of Decision” announced Tuesday by the National Park Service makes sense, they said, given that the Agency has once again made its decision on the eve of the winter season.

But conservationists expressed deep disappointment over the National Park Service’s decision to swing the gates of Yellowstone National Park open—beyond this winter season—to more, not fewer snowmobiles, despite the Agency’s own scientific conclusions that an increase in snowmobile use above the levels of the past three winters will lead to more noise, dirtier air and frequent disturbance of wildlife. That choice ignores the National Park Service’s overarching mandate to give highest priority to conservation of national park resources, the organizations said.

However, conservationists said they are confident that if Congress exercises its oversight function and/or the Courts review evidence that the National Park Service has circumvented its obligations to emphasize and ensure protection of national park resources, the decision will not stand beyond 2008. Today, the organizations announced they would seek a court review.

The conservation organizations are based in Bozeman, Livingston, Helena, Sheridan, Boise and Washington, D.C. and collectively have more than two million members. They are: Greater Yellowstone Coalition, National Parks Conservation Association, The Wilderness Society, Natural Resources Defense Council, Winter Wildlands Alliance, and Sierra Club.

“The past four seasons have shown that Yellowstone’s winter visitors are increasingly embracing modern snowcoaches and the health of the Park has improved because of it,” said Amy McNamara of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition. “The National Park Service’s decision makes a U-turn on that progress and will lead to unacceptable impacts in our first national park.”

The National Park Service disclosed in a study accompanying its decision that allowing 540 snowmobiles to enter Yellowstone each day will dramatically expand—to 63 square miles—the portion of the Park where visitors are expected to hear snowmobile noise during more than half of the visiting day. That would be a three-fold increase from the current portion of the Park—21 square miles—where noise intrudes on the visitor’s experience during at least half the day.

In that Final Environmental Impact Study accompanying its decision, the National Park Service notes that Congress established the National Park Service in 1916 in part due to a recognition that the American people “wanted places to go that were undisturbed and natural and which

offered a retreat from the rigors and stresses of everyday life.” The study also acknowledges that the noise resulting from snowmobiles is “concentrated to a large degree around travel corridors and park attractions and affect the areas most accessible by the vast majority of park visitors.”

“The quiet magic of Yellowstone in winter is like no place else on earth,” said Winter Wildlands Alliance Executive Director Mark Menlove. “It’s for that quiet, magical experience that skiers, snowshoers and winter hikers visit Yellowstone in winter. Unfortunately, the Park Service has chosen to degrade that experience by allowing noise levels that clearly exceed the park’s own standards.”

The decision announced by the Park Service Tuesday is also at odds with the top recommendation made by the Agency’s own scientists concerning protection of Yellowstone’s wildlife:

“After a three-year study, the Park’s own scientists recommended capping traffic at its-much reduced level to protect winter-stressed animals from being disturbed and harassed by too many vehicles. Instead of heeding its scientists, the Park Service has elected to double snowmobile use from those levels,” said Chris Mehl of The Wilderness Society.

The National Park Service’s study, accompanying its decision, also discloses that the choice of 540 snowmobiles per day will increase carbon monoxide, hydrocarbons and particulate pollution beyond levels monitored during the past several winters. The study found that all of these unhealthy gasses in oversnow vehicle exhaust could be dramatically reduced from recent levels if the National Park Service chose instead to emphasize snowcoach access and further reduce snowmobile use or phase it out completely.

“National Parks are supposed to receive the highest level of resource protection for the benefit of wildlife and future generations of visitors. The Park Service’s plan undermines this conservation commitment to the American public in its National Park System. This decision would set a dangerous and unacceptable precedent for the entire National Park System and that is why we will continue to work for a better decision,” said Tim Stevens of the National Parks Conservation Association.

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