

THE ASPEN TIMES

Don't open the door to all snowmobiles

An Aspen Times Editorial
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With regard to the long-awaited U.S. Forest Service decision about powder skiing on the backside of Aspen Mountain, let's be clear about exactly what's at stake.

Nobody, including the Forest Service, is proposing that snowmobilers be banned from Richmond Ridge road, Little Annie Road or Midnight Mine Road. Those county rights of way, whether snow-covered or not, are and will always be open to motorized travel.

What's at issue is whether snowmobilers may leave these roadways and use their machines to lap-ski in places like McFarlane Gulch, where the Aspen Skiing Co. uses its snowcats to do the same thing for commercial Powder Tours customers. The nonprofit group Powder to the People has strenuously argued for "equal motorized access" to the same places where the Skico's Powder Tours operate. But the Skico holds a lease from the Forest Service and Powder to the People does not.

We can't help wondering what all the fuss is about. Powderhounds are allowed to use their snowmobiles on any designated, snow-covered road. Nobody is stopping them from parking their snowmobiles on Richmond Hill Road, Express Creek Road or any other county road and skiing from there, using climbing skins and human power.

Basically, what Powder to the People wants is to use the Skico's "over-the-snow roads" — the snowcat-plowed routes that branch from Richmond Ridge road — for their own purposes. Nothing wrong with that, and the Skico has in the past been willing to go along with a "gentleman's agreement" along these lines. But too many snowmobile-skiers (not necessarily Powder to the People) are ignoring the rules and taking their increasingly powerful machines wherever they please on the backside, including privately owned land.

And there is something wrong with that.

So, while Powder to the People makes a principled argument, the group is arguably opening the door to motorized abuses on lands both public and private.

It's true that public lands belong to all Americans and should not be "locked up" for an exclusive, high-dollar commercial use like Powder Tours. But it's also true that snowmobiles are as much a nuisance on Richmond Ridge as they are a convenience, especially when their drivers apparently feel entitled to go wherever they want. And these disputed areas on the backside will remain open to skiers who don't require snowmobiles to take them everywhere they want to go.

Perhaps it's time for the Forest Service to scale back motorized uses on the backside of Aspen Mountain — if only slightly. It might do the snowmobile skiers some good to leave the machines on the road and do the rest of the work themselves.