

### Feds cut number of sleds in park

By Cory Hatch, Jackson Hole, Wyo.  
Date: July 24, 2009

The Obama administration has announced a two-year plan that would cut the number of snowmobiles allowed in Yellowstone National Park from 720 to 318 a day.

The plan would require snowmobilers to hire guides and have the cleanest-running machines. It also would allow 78 snow coaches per day.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar made the announcement Thursday.

"The proposed rule would allow continued access to the park in winter while ensuring the protection of this national treasure and its wildlife while we develop a new, long-term plan for winter use in the park," he said in a statement.

The latest decision replaces a Wyoming district court judge's ruling that allowed 720 snowmobiles in Yellowstone just before the park opened last winter. At the time, Yellowstone officials were trying to complete a temporary plan that would have allowed 318 snowmobiles and 78 snow coaches a day. That effort was in response to a Washington, D.C., district court judge who threw out what was to be a permanent plan that allowed 540 snowmobiles a day.

Yellowstone spokesman Al Nash said the new interim rule would allow the park to go forward with motorized use in the park next winter in the face of two lawsuits regarding the 720-snowmobiles-a-day plan.

"If a challenge was successful — absent some action on our part like a new interim rule — there might be no motorized over-snow access this coming winter," he said.

Last winter, an average of 205 snowmobiles a day entered the park, with a peak day of 426 snowmobiles on Dec. 29. That's down from a three-year average of 266 snowmobiles a day and a peak of 557.

"Last year was a pretty low year," Nash said. "We think a certain amount of that was due to the economy ... and we started off with poor weather."

Nash said the Park Service needs two years to give park planners time to come up with a new winter-use plan. Nash did not say whether the effort will require more scientific analysis of the impacts associated with snowmobile use in the park.

The Wyoming congressional delegation issued a joint statement in which Sens. Mike Enzi and John Barrasso and Rep. Cynthia Lummis blasted the announcement.

Enzi said he would continue working for more snowmobiles. Barrasso called the announcement "an insult to our state and gateway communities." Lummis said the administration was throwing science and common sense out the window.

Advocacy groups on both sides of the issue expressed disappointment over the new plan.

Brian Hawthorne, public lands policy director for the pro-snowmobile group BlueRibbon Coalition, said snowmobilers are "indiscribably frustrated" with the process.

"It is the most managed recreation experience known to man," he said. "This battle seems to never end."

Hawthorne said the issue has gotten away from the original complaints about the snowmobiles' impact on bison when snowmobile use was unregulated in the park.

"Now the bison population is booming out of control," he said.

Doug Honnold, managing attorney of the Northern Rockies Earthjustice office, called the interim rule a "step in the right direction" but said Yellowstone should ultimately phase out snowmobiles in the park in favor of snow coaches. Earthjustice was representing the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society and the Winter Wildlands Alliance in a lawsuit against the plan for 720 snowmobiles a day in the park.

Craig Kenworthy, conservation director for the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, said the Park Service is "delaying making the right decision" by going to 318 snowmobiles a day for two years.

"Every study has shown that the best thing from an environmental standpoint is to go to snow coaches," he said.

Tim Stevens, Northern Rockies regional director for the National Parks Conservation Association, agreed that two years is too long for the interim plan.

"The Park Service has been working on this for over 10 years," he said. "They've got all the information that they need ... to complete this in one year."

Stevens said the group will be watching carefully as the Park Service formulates a permanent plan.

"We want to make sure that plan adheres to law and the Park Service's own policy," he said. "We want to make sure the Park Service pays attention to its own science."

The Park Service is opening a 45-day comment period for the interim plan. All public comments on the proposed rule must be received or postmarked by midnight Eastern time Sept. 8. The proposed rule and an electronic form to submit written comments are available at [www.regulations.gov/search/index.jsp](http://www.regulations.gov/search/index.jsp).