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## Judge Rejects Plan for More Snowmobiles at National Parks

By [JIM ROBBINS](#)

HELENA, Mont. — A federal judge ruled Monday that the Bush administration's plan to allow more than 500 snowmobiles a day into Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks was not in keeping with the [National Park Service's](#) responsibility to protect the parks.

The judge, [Emmet G. Sullivan](#) of Federal District Court in Washington, said park planners had failed to reconcile their mission to protect the parks' environment with the increase in air pollution, the disturbance to wildlife and the impact on visitors that the snowmobiles would bring.

"The plan clearly elevates use over conservation of park resources and values," Judge Sullivan wrote in his 63-page ruling.

The order vacates the plan, which would have authorized 540 snowmobiles a day into the parks, and orders the park service to prepare another. Environmentalists, who have long argued that the park service ignored science to reach the decision to allow so many snowmobiles into the park, were delighted.

"There have been four studies and \$10 million spent, and every study shows the best way to get people in the park and protect it is through snow coach access, not snowmobiles," said Chris Mehl, a spokesman for the Wilderness Society in Bozeman, Mont., one of the parties to the lawsuit. "This upholds the promise and possibility of Yellowstone."

Environmentalists favor access to the park in winter only by snow coach, which is a van or bus on large skis or treads. They say these vehicles have a far less adverse impact on the environment.

Others who filed suit were the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, the National Parks Conservation Association, the Winter Wildlands Alliance, and the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#).

Those who sought more snowmobile access were disappointed. "We are not surprised," said Ed Klim, president of the International

Snowmobile Manufacturers Association in Haslett, Mich. “Judge Sullivan has ruled on this issue before and in this manner.”

“This is not the end of the issue,” Mr. Klim added. “We will be successful in our appeal.”

The ruling throws the coming winter season in the parks into some confusion. Al Nash, a spokesman for Yellowstone, said officials there were still reading the document and could not comment on what it meant for this year’s snowmobile season. “We’ll open as scheduled on Dec. 15 for the winter,” Mr. Nash said. “But we don’t know yet how the judge’s decision will impact this.”

Environmentalists are encouraging park officials to keep the number of snowmobiles around 260 a day for the coming season — the average number that have used the parks for the past five years — and eventually to phase them out.

Whether snowmobiles should be allowed at all in Yellowstone, the nation’s oldest national park — and if so how many — is the most contentious issue facing the National Park Service, based on the volume of public comments during the planning process.

Environmentalists claim that the great appeal of Yellowstone in winter is its solitude, and that studies show that noise, even from the quieter, cleaner snowmobiles now in use violates Yellowstone’s standards. They say exhaust from the machines pollutes the park, and that snowmobiles stress wildlife already under duress because of snow and cold temperatures.

But snowmobilers say the newest generation of machines is far cleaner and quieter, and they note that riders must be accompanied by a guide, reducing the possibility of contact with wildlife.

A separate hearing on snowmobiles is being heard in federal court in Cheyenne, Wyo., in a different lawsuit brought by the State of Wyoming and Park County, which borders Yellowstone.

Among other things, the plaintiffs want the court to increase the number of snowmobiles the park service plan allows to 720 a day.

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