

## Snowmobile opponents flood Park Service with form letters

By [SCOTT McMILLION](#) Chronicle Staff Writer

Opponents of snowmobiling in Yellowstone National Park have won another round in the ongoing war of the electronic postcard.

The National Park Service recently finished analyzing public comment on its proposal to continue allowing up to 720 snowmobiles to tour the park daily, if they are guided and meet emission and noise standards.

A total of 122,190 people commented on the plan. Of them, 116,910 were form letters, most of them e-mails or documents filled out on Web sites and forwarded to the Park Service.

Just 5,280 people wrote individual letters.

Nearly 90,000 of those who forwarded comments wanted snowcoaches to be the only motorized recreational transportation in the park. Most of them filed form letters.

Environmental groups routinely ask followers to comment on issues, and produce form letters for them to sign.

"Four Park Service studies - at a cost of \$10 million - have shown that Yellowstone would be significantly cleaner, quieter, less hectic and healthier if snowmobile use was phased out," said one form letter sent by 53,000 people.

"There is no good reason to allow more snowmobiles in Yellowstone National Park," said another letter filed by 27,160 people.

Opponents greatly outnumbered the people who wanted to keep snowmobiles in the park: 3,244 said they wanted increased access; and 193 said they liked the Park Service proposal for up to 720 sleds a day.

However, the issue was not up for a vote.

"It's not valid to compare this to a statistically valid public opinion survey or a democratic election," said park spokesman Al Nash, who also noted that all of the writers were "self selected."

The Park Service has been struggling since 1990 over whether and how many snowmobiles to allow in the park. There have been abundant studies and a few lawsuits over the issue, including some that are unresolved.

Nash said the comments in the latest period are similar to the ones received in the past.

"This is, I think, fairly consistent with the number of comments we've received in the past and how the comments have broken out," he said.

Tim Stevens, of the National Parks Conservation Association, agreed the comment process is not a vote, but pointed out that others have been critical of the park's winter-use plans. They include seven former Park Service directors and the Environmental Protection Agency.

"It's all pointing to the same message," Stevens said. "That the direction the Park Service is heading is unacceptable."

The comments came from all over the country, plus several foreign nations.

"People literally, from around the world, care about what happens in this park," Nash said.

The Park Service plans to make a final decision on winter use before the park opens for the season in December.