

Environmental group insists on snowmobile regulation

By Jeff DeLong • jdelong@rgj.com • September 21, 2010

Insisting peaceful winter sports are increasingly being disrupted by noisy snowmobiles, critics are asking the government to alter the way the machines are managed on national forest land.

Snowmobile groups say the petition filed by a coalition of 90 conservation and recreation groups is an attempt to unfairly restrict their sport with unnecessary regulations.

The dispute is the latest example of mounting conflicts between those favoring motorized play on public land and others who insist the practice is bothersome and environmentally damaging.

"We acknowledge that snowmobiles are a popular winter use and that they have their place," said Mark Menlove, executive director of Winter Wildlands Alliance, the Boise, Idaho-based group leading the effort.

"But the current 'anything goes' approach to winter management allows one user group to dominate the winter landscape at the expense of all others and it puts fragile winter ecosystems at risk," Menlove said.

The coalition petitioned U.S. Department of Agriculture Under Secretary Harris Sherman and U.S. Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell, asking that they close a "loophole" in a 2005 travel management rule that exempts over-snow vehicles from rules affecting off-highway vehicles.

The regulations designate roads and trails in forests where motorized vehicles are allowed and where they are prohibited. Snowmobile groups were quick to attack the proposal.

"This is just another effort by extremist groups trying to take another bite at the apple to close off areas for recreation," said Greg Mumm, executive director of the Blue Ribbon Coalition, also based in Boise. "It's unnecessary."

"It just kind of upsets me," said Incline Village resident Wayne Fischer, an officer of the organization Tahoe-Sierra Snowmobiling. "Why are they trying to force their concepts on everybody else? I'd call it a narrow-minded, 'we know what's best' attitude."

Snowmobiles are by nature far different from all-terrain vehicles, dirt bikes and other motorized vehicles, both Fischer and Mumm insist. While the latter generally travel on roads and trails, snowmobiles travel cross-country over snow and "don't damage the environment in the wintertime," Fischer said.

That's not really the case, argues Gail Ferrell, president of the Snowlands Network, a group among the petitioners.

The Reno resident, citing growing conflicts between snowmobiles, cross-country skiers and other human-powered winter sports enthusiasts, led an effort which prompted the Forest Service in 2001 to ban snowmobiles from much of the Tahoe Meadows, a popular winter play area between Reno and Lake Tahoe.

"It's absolutely necessary," Ferrell said. "Over-snow vehicles have significant impact on our national forests and they should be managed appropriately. They should be managed as are all other vehicles on federal land."

Forest Service representatives in Washington did not

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respond to requests for comment on the snowmobile petition.

But Genny Wilson, chief ranger for the Forest Service's Carson Ranger District, said the current practice of separately managing snowmobiles and off-highway vehicles appears to be functioning adequately.

Segregation of snowmobiles and quiet winter sports is the focus of management plans in effect at Tahoe Meadows as well as on a wider scale in Alpine County, Calif., south of Lake Tahoe, Wilson said. Alpine County has probably the highest concentration of snowmobile use within the ranger district, she said.

"It's actually been working quite well," Wilson said.

Currently, Wilson said, snowmobiles are regulated "on more of an area approach rather than designated routes."

The coalition seeking change argues that snowmobiles are currently regulated within different areas of national forests "entirely contingent upon a discretionary decision" at the local level and that a national set of regulations is needed.

Members insist snowmobiles produce many of the same problems as other motorized vehicles, including impacts on air and water quality, soil, wildlife and "the ecology of entire winter ecosystems."

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