

**News from Winter Wildlands Alliance...**

## **Yellowstone: the Good, the Bad and the Political**

Yellowstone National Park will open its gates to winter visitors on December 20. In the 90 days that follow, the ambiance of the world's first national park will bear little resemblance to the noisy, exhaust-filled and stressful conditions that prevailed in the Park's winter season most of the past 30 years. An increasingly diverse array of skiers, snowshoers, seniors, wildlife enthusiasts, and families with young children will come to experience the park and learn about Yellowstone's geysers, mud pots, and wildlife.

A dramatic transition toward greater health and natural conditions in Yellowstone is now well underway – and the underlying reason is clear: for three consecutive winters, an increasing percentage of visitors have been choosing to forgo the disruptive snowmobile access that once accounted for most winter visits to Yellowstone. Instead, more visitors have been choosing snowcoaches, the means of access repeatedly identified by the National Park Service (NPS) and the Environmental Protection Agency as being dramatically better for protecting air quality, visitor and employee health, wildlife, and natural quiet.

### **Xanterra's new service for skiers:**

And there's even better news for cross country skiers. In response to increased demand from skiers, this winter Xanterra, the Park concessionaire, will operate a new Old Faithful "express run" snowcoach service out of West Yellowstone. The express run will make fewer stops than standard tours, getting visitors to Old Faithful much sooner so that they can have roughly four hours to ski, snowshoe or walk in the geyser basin and on other nearby trails. For those not inclined to ski or snowshoe on their own, Xanterra plans to offer a free walking tour in the geyser basin.

The express run will also offer the option of skier drops. On the way in, skiers can choose to get off at the "seven mile bridge," halfway to Madison Junction, or at Madison Junction itself, which would be a 14-mile ski back to the West Entrance. Alternatively, skiers can make the quick trip to Old Faithful, spend approximately four hours exploring there, catch the return ride and request a drop-off on the way back to West Yellowstone to ski out of the Park.

### **Yellowstone's improving air quality (and the primary reason!):**

The National Park Service recently disclosed that Yellowstone's air quality has improved dramatically in the past few winters. By itself, this fact is no surprise to anyone who's seen and smelled the difference. The curtain of exhaust that once veiled the Park's scenery and that chronically irritated visitors' eyes and lungs has largely lifted. Anyone traveling through the Park can appreciate the significant improvement. But an additional Park Service conclusion is more important. NPS has

disclosed that the primary factor causing Yellowstone's winter air to become cleaner and healthier is the markedly reduced number of snowmobiles. The number of snowmobiles entering the Park each day has been about 250 per day since 2003. (NPS has been allowing up to 720 snowmobiles per day on a temporary basis, but since 2003 visitor interest in snowmobiling has remained well below that number.)

With the opportunity to monitor emissions from individual machines as well as pollution levels accumulating in Yellowstone's air, NPS has made a key determination: while newer, four-stroke snowmobile models are less polluting than older two-stroke models, they are still enormously polluting compared to automobiles. Further, the biggest factor in Yellowstone's improving air quality is not this change in snowmobile technology. Rather, it is the fact that the number of polluting snowmobiles in the Park has declined dramatically. Because of this fact, NPS says an increase in snowmobile numbers would bring dirtier air back to Yellowstone unless the snowmobile industry were to make further reductions in the emissions of newer machines – and according to the snowmobile industry, no further reductions in emissions are planned.

### **Continuing problems with snowmobile noise:**

NPS recently disclosed that its monitoring of noise in Yellowstone last winter turned up problems – again – with the loudness of new four-stroke snowmobiles operating in the Park and with the percentage of time that visitors are hearing snowmobiles as they visit various attractions. The worst problems were again at Old Faithful and Madison, two places where most of Yellowstone's winter visitors go. NPS has found in each of the past three winters that an average of only 250 four-stroke snowmobiles a day is generating noise, both in decibels and duration, that exceeds the Park's standards for natural quiet. In addition, modeling of winter use alternatives for a new environmental impact statement has found that if Yellowstone allowed a higher number of snowmobiles, as many as 720 per day, visitors would hear snowmobile noise more than half of their visit at many of the Park's most popular attractions.

### **Political wrenching:**

Despite the above conclusions, Sen. Conrad Burns of Montana has attached a rider to the Senate's Interior Appropriations Bill that would allow the number of snowmobiles currently entering Yellowstone (roughly 250 per day) to nearly triple to 720 per day. Based on the Park Service's latest findings, Burns' rider would bring a U-turn in the Park's improving air quality and would add to the problem of snowmobile noise which is already chronic with a smaller number of snowmobiles in the Park. Worse yet, Burns' rider would lock in the higher number of snowmobiles for up to three years and block the courts from serving as a check and balance if a judge found that the Park Service was not living up to its legal responsibilities to protect Yellowstone.

### **Yet another environmental impact statement:**

Modeling reports for a third environmental impact statement (the fourth study overall in eight years concerning winter use in Yellowstone) are already being completed and are available on NPS' website. These reports are verifying what previous studies determined: that snowmobiles have a much greater negative impact on the park and visitor experience – and that snowcoaches can provide access to visitors with significantly less air pollution and noise. As for a draft EIS that lays out the latest alternatives and their impacts, which the public can comment upon, look for that sometime this winter.