

**Montana Department
of
Fish, Wildlife & Parks**



Region Three - Serving Southwestern Montana
1400 South 19th Avenue
Bozeman, MT 59715

May 28, 1996

TO: Environmental Quality Council, Capitol Building, Helena, MT 59620
Dept. of Health & Environmental Sciences, Director's Office
Dept. of Fish, Wildlife & Parks
 Director's Office
 Parks Division
 Fisheries Division
 Wildlife Division
 Regional Supervisor
 Lands Section
 Design and Construction
 Legal Unit

Montana Historical Society, State Historic Preservation Office, POB 201202, Helena, MT 59620-1202

Montana State Library, 1515 E. Sixth Ave., POB 201800, Helena, MT 59620-1800

Jim Jensen, Montana Environmental Information Center, POB 1184, Helena, MT 59624

Janet Ellis, Montana Audubon Council, POB 924, Helena, MT 59624

George Ochenski, POB 689, Helena, MT 59624

Gallatin County Commissioners, Gallatin County Courthouse, 311 W. Main, Room 301, Bozeman, MT 59715

Jerry DiMarco, P.O. Box 1571, Bozeman, MT 59771

Montana State Park Foundation, C/O Wayne Hirst, P.O. Box 728, Libby, MT 59923

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Attached is the decision notice for granting a categorical exclusion to the West Yellowstone groomed trail system.

Thank you for your interest.

Sincerely,

Stephen L. Lewis

Stephen L. Lewis
Regional Supervisor

**Montana Department
of
Fish, Wildlife & Parks**



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Decision Notice
for
West Yellowstone's Snowmobile Grant Program

The Montana Snowmobile Grant program was established through legislation in 1973, which directly provided a portion of the license decal fee for the grooming of trails in the state. With subsequent legislation the grant program now receives a portion of the state gas tax. Combined grants from these two funding sources are available to established clubs for the purpose of development, operation and maintenance of public snowmobile facilities, and to promote snowmobile safety. Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) was designated the administrative authority to manage these grant funds.

Fish, Wildlife and Parks completed a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) on the Montana Snowmobile Grant Program in September, 1993. The PEIS and Alternative Three was adopted and signed into policy, in November of 1993.

Alternative Three is the continuation of the current program with modifications. These modifications require an environmental review document be prepared by FWP for each grant application, unless projects are classified as categorical exclusions.

Grooming project sponsors had two options under the PEIS for categorical exclusion (CE) classification. Under the first option, grant proposals which are a continuation of an existing grooming program with no on-ground changes and that have previously satisfied MEPA reviews would qualify for a categorical exclusion.

Project sponsors could also categorically exclude existing grooming programs by satisfying the following six review criteria:

- ▶ Snowmobile trails on federal lands are already incorporated in U.S. Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management travel plans and Multi-Party Agreement has been signed.
- ▶ Snowmobile Project Agreement has been signed by sponsor and FWP.
- ▶ Fish, Wildlife and Parks wildlife clearance has been obtained.
- ▶ A project is on an existing roadway or previously ungroomed snowmobile trail.
- ▶ Development or improvement on federal lands has already satisfied NEPA.
- ▶ The trail is not in a wilderness study area or designated non-motorized area.

The compilation of the above documentation was the responsibility of the West Yellowstone grooming project sponsor. This documentation was then submitted to FWP for review and was determined by the Directors Office to meet the qualifications for a categorical exclusion. In accordance with the PEIS, the categorical exclusion documents were then available for a thirty-day public comment period pending final determination of the West Yellowstone grooming program status.

There were a total of twenty one individual, written comments received. Of the total, nineteen supported the granting of a categorical exclusion for the West Yellowstone grooming program. Three letters raised a number of concerns about snowmobiling and the grooming program in the West Yellowstone area. The concerns are discussed in greater detail below:

Concern 1. "The snowmobile program in West Yellowstone must be the subject of a full EIS, prepared jointly by the U.S. Forest Service and your department (FWP)."

Response: An EIS is not warranted due the fact that all groomed trails are on existing trails or roadways. These existing roads and trails have been previously reviewed and found to meet categorical exclusion guidelines under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The road and trail system around West Yellowstone was in existence prior to the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act.

The snowmobile grant program was subjected to a PEIS process which culminated in November of 1993.

Concern 2. "The FWP snowmobile program has never been in compliance with MEPA." "No site specific analysis of the program has ever been completed."

Response: With the completion of the Snowmobile PEIS in 1993, FWP complied with its statutory responsibility for the action of: Administration of state funds, as grants to grooming project sponsors for the maintenance of designated trail routes. Site specific analysis is the responsibility of the land management agency and the U.S. Forest Service has completed this analysis in the Gallatin Forest Plan and determined that existing roads and trails are categorically excluded.

Concern 3. "FWP's snowmobile program is radically altering the nature of West Yellowstone." "Significant increase in snowmobile use--causing increased conflicts with other people using these public lands."

Response: FWP administers the snowmobile grant program and is involved with enforcement and safety efforts. FWP maintains that trail grooming plays a minor role in any changes affecting West Yellowstone and that promotion activities by other entities are responsible for attracting winter time visitors to this community. Residents of West Yellowstone concerned about employment and economic improvement have supported "changes" to their community.

Conflicts are not an inherent incompatibility among different trail activities, but rather goal interference attributed to another's behavior. FWP works with individual Ranger Districts to coordinate trails routes in an effort to disperse users. The volume of visitors and the conflicts that occur during the winter months is again not a result of groomed trails, but the promotion of the area.

FWP works closely with local snowmobile clubs to promote ethics and appropriate behavior by snowmobilers and supports additional law enforcement cooperation between Forest Service officers, FWP wardens and Gallatin County Sheriff's deputies to curb conflicts, identify hazards and reduce accidents.

Concern 4. "The Categorical Exclusion provision of the PEIS was not designed to allow FWP to duck meaningful analysis of significant site-specific impacts of major projects."

Response: The PEIS was completed on Montana's Snowmobile Grant program and provided guidelines for new trails to comply with MEPA. As explained earlier the groomed trails are on existing trails and roads. The Gallatin National Forest integrated the West Yellowstone snowmobile trails into its Travel Plan, which were reviewed under NEPA. According to NEPA regulations, this project falls under Categories Established for which a Project or Case File and Decision Memo are Not Required (31.3), Subpart 31.1b, Categories Established by the Chief, section 4: ...grooming the surface of the trail. The proposal meets the above-mentioned criteria and therefore no further documentation is required.

Concern 5. "West Yellowstone snowmobile trail grooming does not meet PEIS standard for a CE."

Response: The West Yellowstone snowmobile trail grooming program dates to 1971, prior to MEPA passage. Under the PEIS, West Yellowstone could apply for a CE by either of two options. The second option provided under the PEIS was selected; that if the project is an existing program with no on-ground changes, the grooming sponsor may apply for categorical exclusion if the project satisfies the six review criteria mentioned earlier. The six review criteria have been satisfied.

Concern 6. "consider working as a key player with federal land managers in developing a comprehensive Winter Use Management Plan."

Response: To date FWP has neither been contacted or invited by the National Park Service to be a participant in the working group discussing development of a Winter Use Management Plan for the Yellowstone ecosystem. The Montana Snowmobile Grant Program PEIS does not preclude the land use planing responsibilities of the National Park Service or U.S. Forest Service.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks has conducted this CE review in an open forum to allow the participation by the public, concerned groups and government agencies, as was the development of the PEIS on the Montana Snowmobile Grant Program. After reviewing public comments and following the guidelines set forth in the PEIS it has been determined that the West Yellowstone grooming grant program has satisfactorily complied with and met the CE criteria and is hereby granted a categorical exclusion under the Montana Snowmobile Grant Program PEIS and MEPA.

Stephen L. Lewis

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Regional Supervisor