



# Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

2300 Lake Elmo Drive  
Billings, Montana 59105

March 31, 1997

To:

Environmental Quality Council  
Director's Office, Dept. of Environmental Quality  
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Director's Office  
Parks Division  
Fisheries Division  
Wildlife Division  
Regional Supervisors  
Lands Section  
Design & Construction  
Legal Unit

Montana Historical Society, State Preservation Office  
Janet Ellis, Montana Audubon Council  
Montana Wildlife Federation  
Montana State Library  
Montana Environmental Information Center

George Ochenski  
Wayne Hirst, Montana State Parks Foundation  
Frank Culver  
Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society  
Custer National Forest, Red Lodge Ranger Station  
Department of Transportation  
Midland Empire Snowgoers  
Greater Yellowstone Coalition  
Montana Wilderness Association  
Montana Wilderness Association, Eastern Wildlands  
Chapter  
Montana Wilderness Association, Madison/Gallatin  
Alliance Chapter  
Red Lodge Chamber of Commerce  
Carbon County Sheriff's Department

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Enclosed is the DECISION NOTICE for the Midland Empire Snowgoers ( Beartooth Highway ) Snowmobile Grant  
Environmental Assessment.

Thank you for your interest.

Sincerely,

Richard I. Ellis  
Regional Supervisor

*Carbon*

DECISION NOTICE  
MIDLAND EMPIRE SNOWGOERS (BEARTOOTH HIGHWAY) SNOWMOBILE GRANT  
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT  
April 1, 1997

PROPOSAL

The proposed action is for the Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) to award the Montana Department of Transportation funds to remove snow from a 3.4 mile section of Highway 212 South of Red Lodge from the lower gate at approximately milepost 49.7 to approximately mile post 53.1; and to the Midland Empire Snowgoers Snowmobile Club to monitor snowmobile activities and promote safe, responsible snowmobiling activities. In addition, the project would fund the erection and maintenance of signs warning users of hazards and extreme snowmobiling conditions, and delineating wilderness boundaries and wildlife winter range.

Prior to any further granting of snowmobile grooming funds, Fish, Wildlife and Parks prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) to address those issues outlined under the Montana Snowmobile Grant Program Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS). This assessment reviewed what, if any, impacts the snow removal project would have to the human and natural environment and presented reasonable measures to mitigate identified impacts.

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT PROCESS

FWP is required to assess impacts to the human and natural environment by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). The Beartooth Highway /Midland Empire Snowgoers Project impacts were documented by FWP in the EA to comply with MEPA. The Montana Snowmobile Grant PEIS was reviewed to determine the issues to be addressed in the draft EA.

EA DISTRIBUTION AND REVIEW

Public comments were solicited for 30 days from January 4, 1996 through February 9, 1996. Upon request, the comment period was subsequently extended to March 10, 1996. The EA notice was printed in local newspapers and posted on the State bulletin board. Approximately 25 copies of the draft EA were mailed out to FWP's standard distribution list and interested parties. Substantial inadequacies in the EA were identified during the EA review and the initial EA was retracted. On December 16, 1996 a revised EA was issued with the comment period extending to January 17, 1997.

The revised EA addressed numerous issues which were identified in the initial EA comment period. These issues included: Air Quality; Topography (including avalanche potential); Soils; Hydrology; Wildlife Winter Range; Vegetation; Socioeconomic concerns; Cultural resources; Safety; Wilderness encroachment; Law enforcement; and Aesthetic values.

During late December, 1996 and early January 1997, the Project area experienced unprecedented avalanche occurrences.

On February 20, 1997, personnel from the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (F.W.P.), the Department of Transportation (D.O.T.), and the U.S. Forest Service (U.S.F.S.) met to discuss the advisability of continuing a plowing project in support of snowmobiling on portions of the Beartooth Highway. All parties agreed that the Project should be terminated.

The D.O.T. agreed to continue to place and maintain signs at the lower gate warning of potential hazards.

The U.S.F.S. agreed to continue to place and maintain signs delineating the wilderness boundary.

#### DECISION NOTICE

After due consideration, it is my decision to accept the Draft EA with attached Decision Notice as the Final EA.

Due to public safety concerns and liability implications made obvious by extensive avalanche activity, it is my decision not to grant funds for the continuation of the Midland Empire Snowgoers (Beartooth Highway) Snowmobile Project.

The Final EA and attached Decision Notice may be viewed or obtained upon request from Fish, Wildlife and Parks at Region 5 headquarters, 2300 Lake Elmo Drive, Billings, MT 59105, (406-247-2940).

Richard I. Ellis

  
Regional Supervisor  
Billings, Montana