



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

1400 South 19th Avenue
Bozeman, MT 59718

September 5, 2008

To: Governor's Office, Mike Volesky, State Capitol, Room 204, P.O. Box 200801, Helena, MT 59620-0801
Environmental Quality Council, State Capitol, Room 106, P.O. Box 201704, Helena, MT 59620-1704
Dept. of Environmental Quality, Metcalf Building, P.O. Box 200901, Helena, MT 59620-0901
Dept. of Natural Resources & Conservation, P.O. Box 201601, Helena, MT 59620-1601
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks:

Director's Office	Parks Division	Lands Section	FWP Commissioners
Fisheries Division	Legal Unit	Wildlife Division	Design & Construction

MT Historical Society, State Historic Preservation Office, P.O. Box 201202, Helena, MT 59620-1202

MT State Parks Association, P.O. Box 699, Billings, MT 59103

MT State Library, 1515 E. Sixth Ave., P.O. Box 201800, Helena, MT 59620

James Jensen, Montana Environmental Information Center, P.O. Box 1184, Helena, MT 59624

Janet Ellis, Montana Audubon Council, P.O. Box 595, Helena, MT 59624

Gallatin County Commissioners, 311 W. Main, Bozeman, MT 59715

George Ochenski, P.O. Box 689, Helena, MT 59624

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

Montana Wildlife Federation, P.O. Box 1175, Helena, MT 59624

Wayne Hurst, P.O. Box 728, Libby, MT 59923

Jack Jones, 3014 Irene St., Butte, MT 59701

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The enclosed Decision Notice has been prepared for the Big Hole Snowmobile Club's groomed snowmobile trail system. This project proposes that FWP award a Montana State Snowmobile Program Grant to the Big Hole Snowmobile Club for the purpose of continuing grooming maintenance activities on the existing groomed trail system. Two public comments were received during a 30-day comment period ending April 30, 2008. It also may be obtained from FWP at the address provided above, or viewed on FWP's Internet website: <http://www.fwp.mt.gov>.

It is my decision to proceed with the proposed project with no changes to the Draft EA.

Questions regarding this Decision Notice should be mailed to:

Fish, Wildlife & Parks
C/O Ray Heagney
1400 S 19th Avenue
Bozeman, MT 59718
Or e-mailed to: rheagney@mt.gov

Sincerely,

Patrick J. Flowers
Region Three Supervisor
Attachment

DECISION NOTICE
BIG HOLE SNOWMOBILE GROOMING GRANT
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
September 5, 2008

PROPOSAL

The proposed action is for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to award the Big Hole Snowmobile Club a grant to continue grooming the existing trails and roads allowed for snowmobile use. FWP has maintained a trail grooming agreement with the Big Hole Snowmobile Club for several years.

Prior to any further granting of snowmobile trail grooming funds, FWP completed 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, influences the groomed trails 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 Environment Policy Act (MEPA). The Big Hole Snowmobile Club's grooming grant proposal and its 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 Big Hole Snowmobile Grant EA.

Public comments were solicited for 30 days from April 1, 2008 through April 30, 2008. Legal notices regarding the proposed action were printed in area newspapers and posted on the statewide electronic bulletin board. Approximately 50 notifications of the draft EA were mailed out to FWP's standard distribution list and interested parties.

No significant issues were generated during the EA review and/or public comment period to trigger further review.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

FWP received two emails with attached comments from Montana Wilderness Association and Sierra Club - Montana Chapter, Wild lands CPR, Friends of the Bitter Root, and Center for Biological Diversity during the comment period.

There were seven (7) principle issues. Outlined below are those issues with Fish, Wildlife & Parks response to each.

Issues:

1. Compliance with Montana Wilderness Study Act/Wilderness Characteristics.

Responses

- a. The Beaverhead Deerlodge National Forest conducted a Wilderness Characteristics Assessment of the West Pioneer Wilderness Study Area in 2001. Findings from this assessment found that “neither the wilderness character of the area nor the potential for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System has diminished since 1977, when looking at the WSA as a whole. Within the WSA, site-specific plusses and minuses have occurred, but overall the wilderness character as defined by the Wilderness Act has not diminished.”
- b. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is acting in accordance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) guidelines. MEPA applies to all state agency action, which in this instance is the allocation of state funding for snowmobile trail grooming operations. The purpose of the environmental assessment process is to examine both grooming projects and determine if significant impacts exist as a result of state funded grooming operations along those trail corridors as designated and authorized by the governing agency. Fish, Wildlife and Parks has relied on the professional expertise and opinion of those wildlife and fisheries biologists who provide review of the current grooming operation. These reviews were conducted under MEPA derived guidelines established for the snowmobile trail-grooming program. The result of this professional review found that no significant impacts would occur within the specified groomed routes and recommended that the project could continue.

Issues:

2. Site-specific analysis is the responsibility of land management agency.

Responses

- a. Under the current proposed revision of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest Travel Plan, the West Pioneers continue to be open to winter motorized use. A summer closure is in place for the West Pioneers. Until the Travel Plan becomes finalized, FWP will continue to rely on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest decision to allow and authorize snowmobile trail grooming operations.
- b. Based on the 2001 West Pioneer Wilderness Study Area Wilderness Characteristics Assessment conducted by the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest regarding recreation, specifically groomed snowmobile trails in the West Pioneer Wilderness Study Area, “Marked and groomed snowmobile trails are not considered constructed features in the wilderness characteristic assessment as they mostly follow snow covered existing roads and trails.” The assessment also says that “The development is minimal and leaves the impression of a narrow trail meandering through the woods; not a major constructed feature.

While the overall amount of snowmobile use in the WSA has increased since 1977 the areas being used by snowmobiles in 1977 and at present remain essentially the same. To a large degree snowmobile riding in the WSA involves trail riding or playing in the parks and meadows. This use was occurring in 1977.

- c. Trail grooming is conducted largely for the safety and quality experience of snowmobilers and to delineate routes rather than to provide access that would otherwise not occur.

Issues:

3. Trail Map

Responses

- a. The trail map provided in the environmental review included those trails groomed by the Beaverhead Snowriders Club. An EA, previously prepared by the Beaverhead Snowriders Snowmobile Club, was published for those trails funded by the State and groomed by their club. This EA was forwarded to the Recreation Bureau of the Parks Division in the State Headquarters of Fish, Wildlife & Parks. The Beaverhead Snowriders Grooming project will be published along with their annual grant for public comment during mid summer 2008.

Issues:

4. Air impacts

Response

- a. Based on best available information, no air quality issues exist in the West Pioneer Mountains. We do not anticipate that continued grooming activity would impair the air quality of the West Pioneers.

Issues:

5. Fish/wildlife impacts

Responses

- a. Fish, Wildlife and Parks has relied on the professional expertise and opinion of those wildlife and fisheries biologists who provide review of the current grooming operation. These reviews were conducted under MEPA-derived guidelines established for the snowmobile trail-grooming program. The result of this professional review found that no significant impacts would occur within the specified groomed routes and recommended that the project could continue.
- b. The snowmobile trail grooming will occur on routes covered by the Ongoing

Project Consultation for lynx and is not likely to adversely affect the Canadian lynx or its habitat. The proposed action is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the wolf within the nonessential experimental population. Grooming may disrupt daily activities of wolverines along the snowmobile routes. However, individual wolverines should easily be able to avoid the routes until the grooming is completed. The impact to individual animals would not be sufficient to cause mortality. The trail grooming could increase trapper access and subsequently increase human-caused mortality to wolverines. However, the impact of trapping to wolverine populations is not directly related to the trail grooming. The event may impact individual wolverines but will not likely result in a trend toward federal listing or reduced viability for the population or species. The grooming will not impact other sensitive species.

- c. This review is of the ongoing grooming operations for an existing authorized trail route which was reviewed by both FWP and USDA found no significant impacts along these designated groomed routes.

Issues:

6. Noise

Response

- a. The grooming equipment used for maintaining the snowmobile trail system is used once or twice every two week, depending on snow conditions. The infrequent use of the grooming equipment has no significant impact to noise levels. Snowmobiles utilizing the groomed trail may vary in decibel output and are to be expected in areas open to winter motorized use.

Issues:

7. Land use

Responses

- a. Grooming activity operates under Challenge Cost share agreements with the U.S. Forest Service and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. This agreement is renewed every 5 years and will expire in 2013. This agreement will authorize the current grooming operations on the Forest system roads and trails. A financial and operating plan is prepared annually and attached to the Challenge Cost Share Agreement.
- b. Snowmobile travel off designated groomed trails is outside the scope of this trail grooming review. Several methods of over-the-snow travel exist, both motorized and non-motorized. This EA will not examine individual citizen preferences in winter recreation activities.

DECISION NOTICE

Utilizing the EA and public comment, a decision must be rendered by FWP which addresses the concerns and issues identified for this proposed action.

FWP's analysis supports preserving the existing Big Hole Snowmobile Club grooming program as outlined in the Challenge Cost Share Agreement and the EA. A tradition of public recreation has developed on the Big Hole groomed trail system over many years. A state grooming grant would guarantee a continued joint commitment of FWP, USFS, and the Big Hole Snowmobile Club to promote ethical public land use.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

After review of this proposal, it is my recommendation to accept the draft EA as final and to award the Big Hole Snowmobile Club a grant to continue grooming the existing trails and roads designated for snowmobile use.

The Final EA may be viewed on FWP's Internet website: <http://www.fwp.mt.gov> . or obtained upon request from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, at the Region 3 Headquarters in Bozeman (994-4042).

Patrick J. Flowers
Regional Supervisor
Bozeman, MT