



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

Sweet Grass County Commissioners, P.O. Box 888, Big Timber, MT 59711

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 Sweet Grass County Recreation Association Snowmobile Club's groomed snowmobile trail system. This project proposes that FWP award a Montana State Snowmobile Program Grant to the Sweet Grass County Recreation Association Snowmobile Club for the purpose of continuing grooming maintenance activities on the existing groomed trail system. One public comment was 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

DECISION NOTICE
SWEET GRASS COUNTY RECREATION ASSOCIATION
SNOWMOBILE GROOMING GRANT
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
September 5, 2008

PROPOSAL

The proposed action is for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to award the Sweet Grass County Recreation Association 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 Sweet Grass County Recreation Association 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 within those authorized over-the-snow travel corridors.

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 Sweet Grass County Recreation Association 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 Sweet Grass County Recreation Association 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 one email during the comment period. Montana Wilderness Association, on behalf of its membership, has the following concerns that apply to several EAs under consideration:

- Unexamined effects of grooming on USFS and BLM recommended wilderness, non-motorized management areas and wilderness study areas.
 - * Mountain goat winter ranges were to be classed as “avoidance” areas for snowmobile use but remain undefined and unprotected by FWP
 - * Wolverine winter denning habitat-likewise should be classed as avoidance area
 - * Conflicts with grizzly denning areas and spring emergence when sows and cubs are vulnerable to disturbance.
 - * Each MOU should be revised to incorporate specific commitments to educate and cultivate respect for area and seasonal limits set by U S Forest Service, BLM and Montana FWP.
 - * USFS and FWP should re-evaluate expenditure of state funds in areas that experience chronic winter snowmobile trespass into non-motorized areas.
 - * FWP should require annual winter monitoring reports from land managing agencies. (Monitoring over-snow vehicle use is a federal requirement.)
 - * In some cases FWP should consider relocating groomed trails to reduce trespass

Response:

- This groomed trail system does not involve USFS or BLM recommended wilderness, non-motorized management areas, or wilderness study areas.
- There has been no net increase in the number of miles groomed on NFS or BLM administered lands which are open for over-the-snow motorized recreation.
- Human activity, in any form, has the potential of influencing wildlife species in areas where trails exist. However, no scientific or observed recorded changes in wildlife behavior have occurred on groomed routes. Based on the professional opinions of FWP area Fisheries and Wildlife biologists, the main Boulder is important winter range for approximately 200 elk who winter primarily in the river bottom meadows and timber. Snowmobile trespass into the wilderness near Independence Peak may stress wintering bighorn sheep and create travel corridors for predators to access these sheep on winter range. The USFS continues to conduct wilderness trespass patrols and boundary signing. This effort has proven to be effective in reducing wilderness trespass.
- No damage to habitat is expected on critical seasonal wildlife habitats, fawning or calving areas, breeding, roosting, nesting, perching or hunting areas, riparian habitat, or Federally listed threatened, endangered, or sensitive species.
- FWP biologists concluded through their review of this grooming program that there would be no impacts and that snowmobile trail grooming can continue on those authorized and designated routes.
- The Challenge Cost Share (CCS) Agreement currently in use replaced the old MOU or Three Way agreements. The CCS specifically outlines each entity's responsibilities for grooming operations. The Montana Snowmobile Trail Grooming Grant program encourages that each grooming sponsor provide, through club meeting, reminders to their membership of the land use regulations and ethical riding practices.
- FWP continues to collaborate and assist the Forest Service in funding enforcement programs monitoring wilderness incursions by motorized vehicles. Funding is also directed towards hiring additional seasonal Forest Service staff to patrol public lands during the summer and winter.

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 Sweet Grass County Recreation Association Snowmobile Club grooming program as outlined in the Challenge Cost Share Agreement and the EA. A tradition of public recreation has developed on the Sweet Grass County Recreation Association groomed trail system over many years. A state-grooming grant would guarantee a continued joint commitment of FWP, USFS, and Sweet Grass County Recreation Association Snowmobile Club.

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 Sweet Grass County Recreation Association Snowmobile Club a grant to continue grooming the existing trails and roads designated for snowmobile use.

The Final EA may be or viewed on FWP's Internet website: <http://www.fwp.mt.gov>. or obtained upon request from the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Region 3 Headquarters, 1400 South 19th Avenue, Bozeman MT 59718-5496 (994-4042).

Patrick J. Flowers
Regional Supervisor
Bozeman, MT