



**Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks**

1400 So. 19th
Bozeman, MT 59718

January 23, 2001

TO: Governor's Office, Todd O'Hair, Room 204, State Capitol, P.O.200801, Helena, MT 59620-0801
Environmental Quality Council, Capitol Building, Room 106, P.O Box 201704, Helena, MT 59620
Dept. Environmental Quality, Metcalf Building, P.O. Box 200901, Helena, MT 59620-0901
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

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

MT Historical Society, State Historic Preservation Office, POB 201202 Helena, MT 59620-1202
MT State Parks Association, P.O. Box 699, Billings, MT 59103
MT State Library, 1515 E. Sixth Ave., POB 201800, Helena, MT 59620
James Jensen, Montana Environmental Information Center, POB 1184, Helena, MT 59624
Janet Ellis, Montana Audubon Council, POB 595, Helena, MT 59624
George Ochenski, POB 689, Helena, MT 59624
Beaverhead County Commissioners, Courthouse, Dillon, MT 59725
Jerry DiMarco, P.O. Box 1571, Bozeman, MT 59771
Wildlife Federation, P.O. Box 1175, Helena, MT 59624
Wayne Hurst, P.O. Box 728, Libby, MT 59923
Glen Hockett, 745 Doane Road, Bozeman, MT 59715

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The enclosed decision notice has been prepared for the environmental assessment (EA) regarding the Dillon Beaverhead Sno-Riders Snowmobile Club. This EA evaluated a proposal for changes in a groomed snowmobile trails route.

Sincerely,

Patrick J. Flowers
Regional Supervisor

DECISION NOTICE
BEAVERHEAD SNO-RIDERS SNOWMOBILE TRAIL RELOCATION
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Region 3, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
January 23, 2001

PROPOSAL

The proposed action is for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to allow the Beaverhead Sno-Riders Snowmobile Club to relocate three portions of their existing groomed trail program, under the Montana Snowmobile Grant Program.

Prior to any further granting of snowmobile 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, influence the relocated groomed trail segments would have on the environment and presented reasonable measures to mitigate identified impacts.

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT PROCESS

FWP is required to assess impacts on the environment by the Montana Environment Policy Act (MEPA). The Beaverhead Sno-Riders Snowmobile Club grooming proposal and its impacts were documented by FWP in an EA to comply with MEPA. The Montana Snowmobile Grant PEIS was reviewed to determine the issues to be addressed in the draft Beaverhead Sno-Riders Snowmobile trail relocation proposal.

Public comments were solicited for 30 days from December 6, 2000 through 5 p.m., January 5, 2001. Legal notices regarding the proposed action were printed in area newspapers. Approximately 45 copies of the draft EA were mailed out to FWP's standard distribution list and interested parties.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

FWP received a total of three letters, thirty faxes, ten phone messages and four e-mails during the comment period. A summary of the comments follows.

Thirty faxes and four e-mails expressed support for the trail relocation. The general sentiment was that the new trail location would provide safer enjoyment of the groomed trail system.

Three written responses to the draft EA were received. The first comment, from the State Historical Preservation Office (SHPO), expressed that there are previously recorded historic cultural properties in the area of the trail re-route. SHPO's recommendation was to conduct a cultural resource inventory prior to project initiation in order to determine whether or not cultural sites are present and if they will be impacted. In response, FWP believes that because grooming takes place over the snow, there would be no disturbance of the ground or vegetation and therefore impacts to cultural resources are not expected.

The second written response was from the Montana Snowmobile Association. They support the relocation of the trails in an effort to eliminate hazardous sections and move those portions of the trail out of the wetlands.

The third written response, from the Montana Wilderness Association (MWA), expressed no objections to the trail relocation. However, they are concerned about the overall trail-grooming program, snowmobile use in a wilderness study area, and the authority by which motorized use is allowed in the West Pioneer Mountains.

I appreciate the opinions expressed by MWA, however they are outside the scope of this EA. The objective of the MEPA environmental review process for the requested route change by the Beaverhead Snow-riders snowmobile club was to determine whether the proposed trail relocation complied with MEPA, not NEPA. The Beaverhead Snow-riders snowmobile club has met those criteria found under the Montana Snowmobile Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement.

Following the review criteria prescribed in the Montana Snowmobile Grooming Grant Program PEIS, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Park completed an environmental assessment of the Beaverhead Sno-Riders groomed trail system in 1996. As part of that review, the assessment was required to consider whether "Development or improvements on federal lands had already satisfied NEPA."

The Forest District, previous to the 1996 MEPA review had designated the existing groomed trails as being categorically excluded from further NEPA review, based on the fact that it was an ongoing maintenance program. The Forest District's evaluation complies with NEPA under Section 31.1b of the USDA Forest Service Environmental Policy and Procedures Handbook criteria that says: "Categorically excluded from documentation in an EIS or EA unless scoping indicates extraordinary circumstances exist." The Forest Service District found that the existing roads or trails used for groomed snowmobile routes provided no evidence of significant change. The outcome of the 1996 MEPA review satisfied the Montana Snowmobile Grooming Grant Program PEIS.

The legitimacy of the grooming program in the West Pioneer mountains is founded on facts that snowmobiling has had a historic presence in the area for over three decades and that the Beaverhead National Forest Plan recognizes and allows snowmobiling as an appropriate recreational opportunity on federal lands under their administration.

According to the Beaverhead National Forest, Forest Plan, Management Area #8 (MA-8) the area in which the route changes are proposed, consists of areas to be managed in order to provide a wide array of dispersed recreation opportunities with high wildlife and fisheries values. Management goals for MA-8 promote a variety of primitive and semi-primitive motorized and nonmotorized dispersed recreation opportunities. It should be noted here that Forest Service plans are required to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

The groomed trail system as it existed and was reviewed in 1996 under the Montana Snowmobile Grooming Grant Program PEIS was considered a long established groomed trail system. That portion of the groomed trail that is in the wilderness study area had been long established and was not considered new. Under the PEIS, changes to a groomed trail system that include the development of new trails or facilities that are not already considered in an environmental review, would require an environmental assessment for the specific changes. This EA complies with the intent of the selected PEIS alternative.

As for the State of Montana funding grooming projects, Fish, Wildlife & Parks has a legal and statutory obligation to administer the snowmobile grooming grant program. In 1973 the Montana State Legislature passed 23-2-616, M.C.A, imposing a snowmobile registration fee and then in 1977 the legislature dedicated a percentage of the gas tax for the development, operation and maintenance of public snowmobile facilities and for promoting snowmobile safety.

FWP was only required by law to comply with MEPA as it related to the administration of state funding of the snowmobile grooming grant program. The Beaverhead National Forest was not required to be "lead joint agency" in the preparation of the 1996 environmental review. FWP, in its relationship with the USDA Forest Service, does not have administrative authority over federal lands or federal agencies.

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 groomed trail re-route.

After review of this proposal and the corresponding public input, it is my recommendation to authorize the Beaverhead Sno-Riders Snowmobile Club's trail re-route proposal and to utilize Montana Snowmobile Grant Program funds for this purpose. A state-grooming grant would guarantee a continued joint commitment of FWP, USFS, and Beaverhead Sno-Riders Snowmobile Club to promote ethical public land use. My decision is to accept the draft EA as the final EA and to implement Alternative Three.

Based on the analysis in the Environmental Assessment, I have determined that the process has satisfactorily complied with the Montana Environmental Policy Act. The proposed action poses no significant impact on the environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared.

The Final EA may be viewed at or obtained upon request from the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Region 3, Bozeman, Montana or e-mail: rheagney@montana.edu.



Patrick J. Flowers
Regional Supervisor
Bozeman, MT