

**Decision Notice  
and  
Finding of No Significant Impact  
for  
Lincoln County Sno-Kats Trail Grooming  
Environmental Assessment**

**Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
Region 1  
490 N. Meridian Road  
Kalispell, MT 59901**

**September 19, 2007**

**Description of Proposed Action**

The Lincoln County Sno-Kats snowmobile club proposes to groom the snow trails identified on the Kootenai snow trails map that are designated as No. 1 (groomed regularly) or No. 2 (groomed occasionally). Specifically, the following forest roads would be groomed in compliance with the ~~KNF~~ Kootenai National Forest (KNF) travel plan from December 1 through April 1 of each year:

- Seventeen Mile Road 471, approximately 5 miles to junction of Roads 4881 and 600.
- Lower Quartz Creek Road 600, approximately 13 miles to Kootenai River Road.
- Quartz Creek/Ransom Creek Road 4654, approximately 6 miles to Skyline Trailhead.
- East Fork of Pipe Creek Road 336, 6 miles.
- Baldy Mountain Road 309/6783, over the top of Baldy Mountain and down to Road 4731 to make a loop. Dark Purcell Road 112/6783, approximately 12 miles to East Fork Bridge.
- Lawrence Mountain Road 250/255, approximately 7 miles.
- Big Creek Road 336, approximately 7 miles.
- Copeland/Drop Creek Road 7183, approximately 8 miles.
- Keeler Creek Road 473, approximately 15 miles to the KNF border.
- Pete Creek Road 338, approximately 17 miles.
- North Creek/Beetle Creek Road 748, approximately 10 miles.
- Spread Creek Road 435, approximately 13 miles to Idaho state line.

**Background**

The Lincoln County Sno-Kats (LCSK), a snowmobile club based in Libby, Montana, has groomed snowmobile trails on the Kootenai National Forest (KNF) since 1969. The club participates in the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) grooming program, which provides grooming equipment and operating funds through an annual grant application process. Grooming activities are conducted under a Challenge Cost Share Agreement between the KNF, FWP, and the LCSK. As a requirement of the FWP-sponsored

grooming program, clubs are required to comply with the Montana Environmental Protection Act (MEPA) by periodically completing an environmental assessment (EA). An EA must be completed any time a new segment of trail is added to the grooming schedule. If the trail system remains unchanged, a club must complete an EA every three years. FWP may request an EA at any time if the agency feels that important issues have arisen.

### **Alternatives**

The following are brief descriptions of the four alternatives that were developed in the EA:

- a. Retain existing trail system (preferred alternative) - Grooming would continue on existing routes listed above.
  
- b. No-action alternative - Trail grooming would no longer take place with funding from the FWP Snowmobile Program. Roads in the area would continue to be used by snowmobiles in accordance with the KNF travel plan.
  
- c. Groom existing trails historically done, and add new ones as permitted - This alternative requires additional resource information on new trails recommended for grooming. Without this information, threatened & endangered species may be adversely affected. Also, other wildlife and natural resources may be impacted. A new environmental assessment would be required to evaluate effects.
  
- d. Groom designated routes that have been groomed since 1969, with the exception of Keeler Creek Road - This alternative would eliminate this route from the groomed system. All remaining routes would be groomed.

### **Public Comment**

Public comment was solicited and accepted from June 26 through July 25, 2007. During that time frame, four sets of written comments were received. One set of comments was supportive of the preferred alternative, citing the recreational and economic benefits provided by groomed trails. Three sets of comments voiced a range of issues primarily related to the potential disturbance of mountain goat winter range and the operation of snowmobiles in areas designate in the KNF Travel Plan as nonmotorized. Many of these comments referred to incursions originating from the ungroomed Spar Lake Trail. This issue is one that may need to be explored in the KNF Forest Plan, but is not within the scope of this EA.

### **Issues**

#### **Inadequate Law Enforcement**

Three of the respondents felt that law enforcement activities have not been adequate in the past to prevent motorized trespass into nonmotorized areas on the KNF. They felt that USFS and FWP officers need to commit to a greater number of patrols as mitigation to prevent disturbance to wintering mountain goats.

USFS law enforcement officers have the authority to enforce travel restrictions on the KNF, but FWP officers do not. Due to budget constraints and the assignment-setting process for USFS officers, KNF staff are not able to commit to additional patrols above and beyond what they currently do. FWP officers can, however, provide information regarding forest travel restrictions, and FWP will work with Regional wardens and ex officio wardens to encourage additional patrols on the Keeler Creek Trail to provide travel information. FWP will continue to work with KNF staff during the renewal of the Challenge Cost Share Agreement to identify additional enforcement opportunities. Additionally, FWP will provide assistance to the KNF should they choose to apply for Recreational Trails Grant monies for the purpose of developing a "Snow Ranger" program like that on the Flathead National Forest for the purpose of providing travel information.

#### Maps Needed to Define Travel Restrictions

Some of the respondents felt that maps indicating travel restrictions should be improved and that the EA did not provide a plan as to who would produce and post them at trailheads. In recent seasons, the KNF have produced and posted maps at the Keeler Creek Trailhead. The KNF have indicated that they will continue to do so. The Lincoln County Snow-Kats Snowmobile Club (LCSK) will be responsible for ensuring the maps are posted at the Keeler Creek Trailhead by December 1, 2007.

#### Details Needed on Education Plan

One respondent felt that the EA did not provide any details on plans for education of users regarding wildlife habitat. The LCSK will be responsible for posting information that is provided to them by KNF or FWP wildlife biologists regarding concerns they may have that are germane to a groomed trail segment. For example, a grizzly bear that dens in proximity to a groomed trail may prompt a state or federal biologist to request special signing. The LCSK will seek assistance from the requesting agency to develop signing and will have the responsibility of posting signs as quickly as is feasible.

#### Snowmobiling Activities Need to be Monitored for Travel Restriction Violations

Some respondents indicated that the EA did not provide a specific plan to monitor for travel restriction violations. The underlying concern from three of the four comment submittals was a concern that snowmobilers are entering an area restricted to snowmobiling by the KNF Travel Plan to the south of the groomed Keeler Creek Trail on the Three Rivers Ranger District of the KNF. Primarily the concern is that snowmobiles enter from the ungroomed Spar Lakes trail system, but there is some concern as well that riders may be entering from the groomed Keeler Creek Trail. Incursions from the Spar Lake Trail are not within the scope of this EA; it is intended to assess the groomed system. However, incursions from the Keeler Creek system are within the scope, and FWP feels that monitoring is required during the next three seasons (through spring of 2010) to determine the point of origin for snowmobiles that enter the restricted area near Savage Peak on the KNF. FWP will cost share a minimum of one flight annually for monitoring of the Savage Peak area during the grooming season. Flights will be utilized to determine if incursions take place and where they originate. Ideally, flights will occur two to three times per season, depending on cost. Additionally, FWP will seek monitoring information from KNF and FWP staff or NGO staff in the event that they collect incursion

information during the grooming season. This monitoring effort will be important in determining impacts during the next MEPA process that LCSK conducts on the Keeler Creek Trail.

#### Disturbance of Wintering Mountain Goats

Two of the respondents commented that wintering mountain goats would be adversely affected by illegal snowmobile traffic from the Keeler Creek Trail and the ungroomed Spar Lake designated riding area. In addition, FWP Wildlife Biologist Jerry Brown expressed concern for impacts to wintering mountain goats in the Savage Peak area from snowmobiles. He states that he believes most of this disturbance originates from the ungroomed Spar Lake area, but that he is aware of some incursion from the Keeler Creek Trail. Mr. Brown is also concerned about potential disturbance to goats in drainage heads to the south of the Keeler Creek Trail, specifically, Cliff, Briar, Cheer, and Drift Creeks, as well as the Twin and Drift Peaks areas. There is limited information regarding the origins of snowmobile traffic into these areas. Over-flights and other monitoring information gathered annually will be used to determine if Keeler Creek Trail is contributing to the disturbance of wintering mountain goats. Impacts to wintering mountain goats from the groomed Keeler Creek Trail could affect the allocation of grooming funds for this trail in the future.

#### KNF Snow Trails Map Causes Snowmobile Intrusions

Some respondents commented that the Kootenai snow trails map shows an ungroomed snowmobile route in the Spar Lake area that results in illegal snowmobile incursions into the Savage Peak area. This comment is not within the scope of this EA since the LCSK do not propose any grooming activity. FWP does contribute to the printing of the Kootenai snow trails map, but not the content. If monitoring provides evidence that incursions are a direct result of the Spar Lake Trail, FWP may suggest that this route not be shown.

#### Accumulation of Unburned Gasoline onto Snow May Have a Negative Effect on the Aquatic and Human Environment

One respondent commented that unburned snowmobile fuel that is deposited on the snow could result in surface water contamination, thus posing a risk to humans, and fish and wildlife. Montana Department of Environmental Quality staff indicated that a recent study in Yellowstone National Park shows that most snowmobile emissions stay close to the trail (within 10 m), and select emissions outgassed as the snowpack melted. USGS tested snowmelt for NH<sub>3</sub>, sulfates, and hydrocarbons, but the dilution was very great, even with 750 snowmobiles per day on the trail for approximately 80 days. The study did show that impacts would be greater in dry years; however, so would snowmobiling pressure.

#### Conifer Regeneration is Affected by Snowmobiling

One respondent commented that snowmobiles damage conifer leaders that protrude through the snow, resulting in reduced regeneration. The KNF staff has indicated that the impact to conifer regeneration on the KNF from snowmobiling is negligible.

**Finding of no significant impact (FONSI)**

Based on analysis in the EA, I find Alternative A to be the preferred alternative, with the additional mitigations detailed in this decision notice. I have evaluated the EA and applicable laws, regulations, and policies and have determined that this action will not have a significant impact on the human or physical environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

The final EA may be viewed at or obtained from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Region 1, in Kalispell. Please direct requests to the Region One Parks Division Office at 490 North Meridian Road, Kalispell, MT 59901.

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James R. Satterfield, Jr., Ph. D.  
Regional Supervisor

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Date