Notice of Proposed Action
30-Day Opportunity to Comment
Over-Snow Vehicle Access in the Upper South Fork Boise River Area
Fairfield Ranger District - Sawtooth National Forest
Camas County, Idaho

Introduction and Proposed Action

The Fairfield Ranger District has been considering revisions to over-snow vehicle access into the Upper South Fork Boise River area for some time now. Scoping of a Proposed Action and alternatives were shared with the public in December 2010 and are again described below. An analysis and further decision of these proposed alternatives were put on hold in 2011 in order to not interfere with a winter recreation-wolverine study that was being done on the District 2011-2013. While the study is continuing elsewhere in Idaho, the Fairfield Ranger District now proposes to move forward with planning for this project and is preparing an Environmental Analysis. The Proposed Action (as described in Alternative 2, below) would:

1. open an over-snow motorized corridor through the existing closure area from Couch Summit to Fleck Summit
2. add new motorized restrictions in the South Fork Boise River headwaters area to minimize the disturbance effects to wintering mountain goats and wolverine denning
3. correct and change the Winter Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) class in the project area, from “Primitive” to “Semi-Primitive Motorized”

Purpose and Need

This proposal addresses the ‘Couch Summit to Fleck Summit’ over-snow vehicle corridor that currently only has limited access permitted for private landowners and their guests. (This is described in detail in the “Background” section below.) The needs for action are:

1. to continue to provide an effective over-snow vehicle travel management system through the Couch Summit to Fleck Summit corridor for winter access to private lands, but one that is easy for the public to understand and can be effectively managed
2. to accurately describe the existing winter ROS inventories within the project area
3. to provide public access through the Couch Summit to Fleck Summit closure area to open areas in the Upper South Fork Boise River Area
4. to provide wintering wildlife protection from over-snow vehicle disturbances
**Background**

The Upper South Fork Boise River area has had limited access by the public because of closures put in place to protect wintering wildlife. Since the introduction of snowmobiles in the late 1960’s, it became apparent that there was potential for conflicts in providing for effective winter elk habitat in areas used by snowmobiles. In the 1970’s, snowmobiling closures to protect wintering elk were put in place by the Forest Service and supported by Camas County. In 1989, a Forest Closure Order (#0414-00-009) closed the area, including the road corridor, from Couch Summit to Fleck Summit (Forest Roads 227 and 012) and the road corridor from Big Smoky to Featherville (Forest Road 227) to motorized use from December 1 to April 30. The areas within the Upper South Fork Boise River north of Fleck Summit remained open for snowmobiling use, but due to the closure of the road corridor, access of the area by the public is extremely difficult. This Closure Order was updated and replaced by Order #0414-00-013 in 2010.

Management of this winter wildlife closure is complicated by the fact that there are multiple parcels of private land in the Big Smoky, Little Smoky, and along the Upper and Lower South Fork Boise River drainages. The owners of these parcels are entitled to access through federal land for the “reasonable use” of their property by federal law known as the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). Access through the motorized winter wildlife closure for property owners is managed through a permit system that gives the landowners, and their guests, motorized access to their properties. In the 2012/2013 winter, 36 permits were issued with approximately 686 permittees and guests allowed through the closure area north of Couch Summit on over-snow vehicles.

The unintended effect of this closure and the landowner exemption is that the land owners in the Upper South Fork Boise River area and their guests, by virtue of their access permit, are the only persons who can legally access the winter backcountry travel areas in the Upper South Fork Boise River area through the closed road corridor. With the number of permits being issued, we need to evaluate whether the closure is meeting its objective.

In addition, the District receives requests from snowmobilers annually, to open a trail through the closure so the general public can have motorized access to the winter recreation opportunities in the Upper South Fork Boise River area. We will evaluate whether opening the corridor to the public will meet the intent of the existing closure, given the number of people currently using it.

Monitoring of elk in the wildlife closure area suggests that winter elk numbers and distribution are changing. More elk appear to be migrating to winter range south and west of the South Fork Boise River corridor than when the wildlife closure was first implemented.

These recent changes in how elk are using the area, the high number of landowners and their guests going through the closure, the need to improve the effectiveness of restrictions to protect wintering wildlife and the requests to consider allowing motorized access through the closure area, prompted this review of winter over-snow vehicle travel for this area.

Four alternatives (maps attached) were developed following a comprehensive review of:
• Comments, proposals and issues received from the public during scoping and public meetings.
• The history of the closure area.
• Current data on wildlife presence and use.
• Currently permitted heli-ski operation and its requirements.
• The number of landowners and guests traveling through the closure area.
• The complexities of administering the landowner permit system.

Alternatives (see Attached Maps)

Alternative 1
No Action. The No Action Alternative provides a baseline against which impacts of the various action alternatives can be measured and compared. This alternative would:

• Leave the current permit system in place. The general public would not have access through the closure to land that is open to motorized use in the Upper South Fork Boise River area.
• Not address the issue of the effectiveness of the existing closure between Couch and Fleck Summits nor the issue of public access into the open areas of the Upper South Fork Boise River.

Alternative 2 – Proposed Action
This alternative would open a motorized trail through the closure area from Couch Summit to Fleck Summit. This trail beginning at Couch Summit would follow Forest Road #094 north to the junction with Forest Road #227, continuing northwest along road #227 to the junction with Forest Road #012, continuing northwest along road #012 to Fleck Summit.

This would increase the use of over-snow vehicles in the area north of Fleck Summit. Therefore, new motorized restrictions would be put in place in the headwaters area to minimize disturbance to wintering mountain goats and wolverine denning. This alternative would:

• Eliminate the landowner permit system for Little Smoky Subdivision, Big Smoky Summer Homes and the Upper South Fork Subdivisions.
• Have potential for mixed effects on wildlife.
  ○ By increasing motorized use in the corridor, there would be potential increased disturbance of wintering elk. Most of the closure area would remain intact, so the increased disturbance would primarily be in areas within sight or sound of the open trail.
  ○ This alternative would add protection for wintering mountain goats and wolverine denning in a portion of the headwater area of the Upper South Fork of the Boise River drainage (this would mitigate effects of increased motorized use in this area for these species).
• Affect landowners by increasing public use around private properties and homes.
• Provide winter public access to a large portion of the Upper South Fork Boise River area.
Alternative 3
This alternative would retain the existing motorized closure, but would also close the entire headwaters of the Upper South Fork Boise River to motorized winter use, except for an outfitter and guide permit for heliskiing. This alternative would:

- Keep the permit system in place. Landowners and their guests would be able to access their property, but would no longer be able to use snowmobiles for recreation in the area that is currently open to motorized recreation north of Fleck Summit on National Forest System lands.
- Most likely reduce the number of trips in to the private parcels by landowners and their guests, thereby reducing disturbance to wintering elk, mountain goats and wolverine denning habitat.
- Provide both landowners and the public the same access to National Forest System lands.
- Offer the greatest protection for wintering mountain goats and wolverine denning habitat and maintain or improve current conditions for wintering elk.

Alternative 4
This alternative would open a motorized trail through the wildlife closure area from Couch Summit to Fleck Summit, but leave open all of the Upper South Fork Boise River Area. Unlike alternative 2, no additional wildlife closures would be imposed. This alternative would:

- Eliminate the landowner permit system for Little Smoky Subdivision, Big Smoky summer Homes and the Upper South Fork Subdivisions.
- Provide both landowners and the public the same access to National Forest System lands.
- Offer the least protection for wintering wildlife (increased motorized use within elk winter range, mountain goat winter habitat and wolverine denning habitat).
- Provide the most winter public access to the Upper South Fork Boise River area.

Under any of these alternatives or additional options developed, as we continue with the planning and analysis of this project, it is our intention to make a non-significant amendment to the Sawtooth Forest Plan – Winter Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) map. This change is necessary to accurately characterize the recreation experiences that are available in the planning area for this project, and corrects an apparent error in the mapping that is currently displayed on the Winter ROS map. The area is currently mapped as ‘Primitive’, which is described as, an area with very high probability of experiencing solitude; an unmodified natural environment; low interaction between users; little evidence of other people; access and travel is non-motorized on trails or cross-country; and no vegetative alterations. This description does not accurately reflect the current situation or the situation under any of the options for management described in this document. Through a non-significant Forest Plan Amendment, the Forest Supervisor would change the Winter ROS class in the project area to ‘Semi-Primitive Motorized’, which is described as an area with Moderate opportunity for solitude, predominately natural appearing environment; low concentration of users, but encounters are expected; vegetative alterations are small and not obvious to a casual user. This ROS class is a more accurate classification for the planning area, and is compatible with all of the options being considered. No other changes in ROS classes are anticipated with this project.
Issues to be Analyzed

Issue 1 – Wildlife
Over-snow vehicle travel within wintering habitat in the Upper South Fork Boise River drainage can cause displacement and/or disturbance of some wildlife species, potentially affecting winter survival, population levels, and/or reproduction (recruitment). The following species may be affected in the analysis area:

**Big Game Species**
- Rocky Mountain Elk (*Cervus canadensis*)
- Mountain Goat (*Oreamnos americanus*)

**Threatened Endangered & Sensitive Wildlife Species**
- Canada Lynx (*Lynx canadensis*)
- Wolverine (*Gulo gulo*)
- Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)
- Wolf (*Lupus canis*)

Issue 2 – Winter Recreation Opportunities
A range of desired winter recreation experience was expressed by many during scoping. While the proposed action is designed to improve the over-snow recreation experience by opening a corridor through a previously closed area, for some commenters, the proposed action did not go far enough. They wanted to see additional area open to over-snow vehicle travel. Other commenters wanted to further restrict over-snow vehicle travel. Many commenters stated that over-snow travel restrictions must also be predictable, fair, easy to implement, and easy to understand.

Decisions to be Made
Given the purpose and need, the Responsible Official will decide the following:

Fairfield District Ranger:
- Whether or not to approve implementation of the proposed action, or an alternative to the proposed action.
- What mitigation measures and monitoring requirement to apply to the decision.
- If the significance of the impacts determine whether or not an Environmental Impact Statement should be prepared.

Sawtooth Forest Supervisor:
- Whether or not to implement a non-significant amendment to the Forest Plan by changing the ROS from “primitive” to semi-primitive motorized” in the analysis area
Change from 36 CFR 215 Appeal Rule to 36 CFR 218 Pre-decisional Objection Rule

Since scoping efforts on proposed changes for this project was conducted, there has been a change to how the Forest Service handles appeals for such analyses. On March 27, 2013, a final rule revising 36 CFR Part 218 was published in the Federal Register and became effective on that date. The new rule replaces the previous appeal rule defined in 36 CFR 215, and expands the use of the pre-decisional objection process. The new rule provides the public an opportunity to comment and express concerns on projects before decisions are made, rather than after. The Forest Service believes this aligns with our collaborative approach to Forest management and increases the likelihood of resolving those concerns, resulting in better, more informed decisions.

The new 36 CFR 218 rule provides the public an opportunity to seek higher level review of unresolved concerns before the project decision has been signed, rather than having to appeal a signed decision. Individuals and entities who have submitted specific written comments at this stage will be eligible to object. Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted written comments specific to the proposed project or activity unless the objection concerns an issue that arose after the opportunities for comment. Comments received during this public review of the proposed changes to over-snow vehicle access into the Upper South Fork Boise River will be considered. An Environmental Assessment and draft Decision Notice will be released for a 45 day review and Objection period in the spring of 2014. For more information on 36 CFR 218, see the Federal Register, Volume 78, No. 59, March 27, 2013.

How to Comment and Timeframe

Individuals and organizations wishing to be eligible to object must meet the information requirements of 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and B. It is the responsibility of persons providing comments to submit them by the close of the comment period. Only those who submit timely and specific written comments regarding the proposed project during a public comment period established by the responsible official are eligible to file an objection under §218.

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, and electronic comments concerning this action will be accepted for 30 calendar days following the publication of this notice in the Times-News newspaper based in Twin Falls, Idaho. The publication date in the newspaper of record (Times-News) is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period for this analysis. Those wishing to comment should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. The regulations prohibit extending the length of the comment period.

Written comments must be submitted to: Mike Dettori, District Ranger, Fairfield Ranger District, 102 First Street east, P.O. Box 189, Fairfield, ID 83327, FAX number (208) 764-3211. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8 am to 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc) to comments-intermtn-sawtooth-fairfield@fs.fed.us. In cases where no identifiable name is attached to a comment, a verification of identity will be required for objection eligibility. If using an electronic message, a scanned signature is one way to provide verification. For objection eligibility each individual or representative from each entity submitting timely and specific written comments regarding the proposed project must either sign the comments or verify identity upon request.
If you previously commented on this project, we have your comment on file and there is no need to resubmit your comments, as they are considered part of the record. As per 36 CFR 218.2, if you “submitted written comments specific to the proposed project or activity during scoping or other opportunity for public comment”, you are eligible to object. However, if you want to provide new or additional comments, we welcome the comments.

All comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection.

**Timeframe for the Planning Process**

We anticipate being able to complete the analysis this spring with the formal Objection Period to tentatively occur in May 2014. As we proceed through the analysis, we will post documents on the Sawtooth National Forest webpage at:

http://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/sawtooth/landmanagement/projects

On the left hand side of the web page under the heading “Land and Resources Management”, click on “Projects” and scroll down until you see the ‘Over-Snow Vehicle Access in the Upper South Fork Boise River Area’ project.

Please contact Steve Frost, Recreation Program Manager, at (208) 764-3478 with questions you may have regarding the project. Thank you for your time and interest in the management of this special area.

Sincerely,

/s/ MIKE DETTORI
District Ranger

Attachment – Maps
Fairfield Winter Travel Plan
Fairfield Ranger District
Alternatives 1 & 2
December 17, 2013
Fairfield Winter Travel Plan
Fairfield Ranger District
Alternatives 3 & 4
December 17, 2013