Overview

For over 20 years a cross-country ski and showshoe trail system has been in place on National Forest System lands south of Interstate 90 at 4th of July Pass (please refer to the attached map). The trails are maintained for public use by Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation (IDPR) through their Park and Ski Program, and on a volunteer basis by the Panhandle Nordic Ski and Snowshoe Club.

The Panhandle Nordic Ski and Snowshoe Club (Club) asked that they be allowed to continue using the existing structures on the trail system and that a portion of Road 614 be closed to motorized uses after snow grooming operations have started to protect the groomed route and increase public safety.

The Decision

I have decided to implement the following activities:

- To issue a Special Use Permit to the Panhandle Nordic Ski Club for 10 years authorizing the continued use, maintenance and repairs of the following existing structures, which are owned and operated by the Club on National Forest lands: one wood-frame outhouse, two warming huts, one grooming equipment shelter, and one picnic shelter (see Figures 1-4). Temporary structures that facilitate winter operations may be installed by the Club in the fall, with prior agreement by the Forest Service, used during the winter, and removed in the spring. The Forest Service will retain ownership of and maintenance and repair responsibilities for the two concrete outhouses located at the trailhead parking area (see Figure 5).

- To continue an agreement with IDPR and the Club to cooperatively manage and maintain the nordic ski trails and snowshoe courses (refer to the attached map).

- To retain the existing Area A Closure Order to prohibit over-snow motorized vehicle use, except as needed for grooming of the permitted routes, to protect the groomed routes and provide for public safety (refer to the attached map).

- To implement a seasonal closure on that segment of Forest Road 614, from Rose Saddle to the winter parking area at Fourth of July Pass, prohibiting over-snow motorized vehicle use and wheeled motorized traffic when this route is being groomed for nordic skiing and snowshoe use. An inadvertent effect of this action is the seasonal closure of Forest Road 918 to motorized uses for the same period. Forest Road 918 is accessed from Road 614.

Grooming of Road 614 may commence, with prior agreement by the Forest Service, when snow conditions permit, but no earlier than December 15 and grooming will cease no later than March 31 each season. To facilitate this seasonal road closure, the Club will be permitted to install a gate on the north end of Road 614 in the vicinity of its junction with Forest Road 905 (refer to the attached map), and place signs and a barricade at Rose Saddle. The gate design will be approved by the Forest Service and will be posted with proper object safety markers. The closing/opening
of the gate and placement/removal of the barricade will be done with agreement by the Forest Service. Forest Road 918 and the referenced segment of Road 614 will be managed in accord with the District Motor Vehicle Use Map for the remainder of the year.

Figure 1. Wood-framed vault toilet and pavilion protecting it from heavy snow loads.

Figure 2. Two A-frame warming huts.

Figure 3. Grooming equipment shelter.

Figure 4. Picnic shelter.
Figure 5. Two concrete (CXT-type) outhouses at the parking area.

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment. It is within category 36 CFR 220.6(e)(3): Approval, modification, or continuation of minor special uses of NFS lands that require less than five contiguous acres of land.

Resource conditions that were considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS are discussed below. Information supporting the associated findings is provided in the project record. The mere presence of one or more of these resource conditions does not preclude use of a categorical exclusion (CE); the degree of the potential effect of a proposed action on these resource conditions determines whether extraordinary circumstances exist (36 CFR 220.6(b)).

**Federally-listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species:** No Threatened or Endangered wildlife, fish or plant species or their habitat are present in the project area, therefore there will be no effect to these species. The project activities would not impact any Sensitive wildlife, fish, or plant species or their habitat.

**Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds:** There are no floodplains, wetlands or municipal watersheds in the project area.

**Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas; inventoried roadless areas; and research natural areas:** The project area is not in or adjacent to any of these designated areas.

**American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites; archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas:** Because of the type of project and/or its location, the Forest Archaeologist has determined that no cultural resources or historic properties will be affected by this project. Any future discovery of heritage resource sites will be inventoried and protected if found to be of cultural significance. A decision will be made to avoid, protect or mitigate effects to these sites in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

It is also my determination that the implementation of these activities will not individually nor cumulatively have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment, and will result in no irreversible or irretrievable commitment of resources. Cumulative and secondary effects have been considered and there is no indication of significant adverse effects to the environment. My decision also
considered public concerns and environmental needs, and provides a public recreation opportunity that moves toward the goal described in the Forest Plan, “Provide for a variety of dispersed recreation opportunities.” Specifically the Plan objective is to coordinate recreation planning and operations with other federal, state, local and private recreation managers, and to continue and increase cooperative trail programs with organizations, clubs and other public agencies

Public Involvement

The public was notified of this proposal in a letter dated January 25, 2011, which described the existing conditions and the need for managing and enhancing nordic ski and snowshoe activities in the resource area. The scoping letter was mailed to over 30 individuals and organizations who had either indicated an interest in the 4th of July Cross-Country Ski and Snowshoe Area, represented other agencies, or were adjacent landowners. Legal notification was published in the newspaper of record (the Coeur d’Alene Press) on January 27, 2011. The proposal was also listed in the Forest Quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions, beginning with the July 2010 issue, and mailed to 70 individuals and organizations with expressed interest in Forest activities. During the scoping or analysis period, District personnel met with the Kootenai County Snowmobile Grooming Board; North Idaho ATV Club; Backcountry ATV Club; and the Manager of Red Horse Mountain Ranch. During the 30-day comment period, a total of 49 letters were received. Copies of all comments provided by the public and other agencies during scoping or the analysis are part of the project file.

Those who supported the proposal predominantly did so based on:

- Winter recreation experience
- Safety
- Protection of groomed routes and/or structures
- Wildlife security
- Maintenance of routes and/or structures
- Road damage/erosion concerns

Those who did not support the proposal predominantly did so based on:

- Limited ATV access, especially in winter
- Need for multiple uses
- Traditional ATV/snowmobile use
- Access in general

These issues were analyzed by the District’s interdisciplinary planning team (IDT) and my decision reflects appropriate modifications where warranted. One of the more focal concerns is the seasonal closure of a segment of Road 614. Road 614 is an open motorized route with no current seasonal restrictions, except those imposed by nature due to snow. It is not groomed as a snowmobile route in winter, therefore snowmobile use on this route has been minimal. Traditionally, motorized winter use, including snowmobile groomed trails, have been focused on areas north of Interstate 90. However, some who commented on the proposed seasonal closure stated that they use Road 614 for early and late-winter ATV trips to Harrison and Carlin Bay (by also using county roads). Others indicated that Roads 614 and 918 were among the few places to ride ATVs in the winter months given their moderate elevation. Red Horse Mountain Ranch has occasionally used Road 614 to take clients via snowmobile to the groomed snowmobile trail system.

The Club has groomed a portion of Road 614 for skate skiing for the last several years when snow depths allowed. However, the Club raised concern that motorized over snow uses have damaged the groomed route, impairing their use for nordic/skate skiing, and creating potential user safety conflicts. Ironically, it may be the grooming that is facilitating some of the winter motorized use. While direct observation
would indicate winter motorized use on this route is still limited, even one set of wheeled tracks can impair the routes nordic use and require extensive effort to re-groom.

In assessing this situation, District personnel and I considered a number of factors.

The 4th of July Cross Country Ski and Snowshoe area is one of only two groomed nordic skiing venues within the immediate vicinity (25 miles) of Coeur d’Alene and adjacent communities, and its winter use is typically limited to a 3-4 month period each year. The nature of the activity requires routes with connectivity to one another and which generally form loops. The identified segment of Road 614 provides access to loop systems and is the most suitable route, given grade and width, for skate skiing.

We considered the possibilities of making this segment of Road 614 a shared-use route for both motorized and non-motorized users, or finding an alternate route. The grooming and use of this segment of Road 614 for skate skiing requires most of the available road surface. It was not deemed practical or safe to accommodate both motorized and non-motorized uses in this case. An alternate route for skate skiing was explored in consultation with the Club, but none was available within a reasonable distance of the trail system.

We also considered alternate routes for motorized traffic. There are several other motorized routes that tie into the unrestricted portion of Road 614, including Road 439 from the Burma Road (County), Road 539 from Killarney Lake, and Road 438 from Highway 97. These also provide through routes to Harrison. Since none of these routes are plowed or groomed for snowmobile use (similar to Road 614), it is recognized that winter use by ATVs or four-wheel drive vehicles presents varying challenges. However, consideration for early and late winter riding opportunities could be accommodated by the timing of the seasonal closure.

In addition to these routes, there are a couple other “mid-elevation” motorized routes close to Coeur d’Alene, such as the Canfield ATV trail and Forest Road 499 (Blue Creek) that are not restricted except for seasonal conditions. The groomed snowmobile trail system also has entry points at Hayden Creek, Fernan Saddle and the north side of 4th of July Pass. In addition to snowmobiles, ATV’s may use these groomed routes as long as they acquire the appropriate snowmobile registration and grooming stickers. And unlike the nordic skiing and snowshoeing activities, a variety of wheeled motorized route opportunities are available in the other seasons of the year, road conditions permitting.

Lastly, Red Horse Mountain Ranch agreed to trailer their snow machines to the snowmobile parking area at Fourth of July Summit precluding their need to use Road 614.

After weighing these varying interests, my decision is to place a seasonal motorized closure on a portion of Road 614 to provide for its value in the nordic venue and reduce user conflict. Limiting the closure period to “when the route is being groomed” and establishing the “no earlier than” and “no later than” dates for the closure still allows the affected road segment to be used for some early and late winter wheeled and/or over snow motorized use, road conditions permitting.

**Compliance With Forest Policy And Legal Mandates**

Numerous laws, regulations, and agency directives require that my decision be consistent with their provisions. I have considered the proposed activities based on Forest Plan goals and objectives, as well as the resource standards established in the Forest Plan. All activities authorized by this decision are in full compliance with Forest Plan goals, objectives and standards and other applicable law (see project file).
Appeal Rights And Implementation

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to CFR 215.8 (a)(4). Implementation of the elements of this decision may begin immediately. I have been delegated the authority and am the Responsible Official for this decision.

If you have questions regarding this project, please contact Project Leader Mike Leverick at 208-769-3013 or by email (mleverick@fs.fed.us) or Andy Boggs, District Trails Manager, at 208-769-3038 or by email (aboggs@fs.fed.us).

RANDALL G. SWICK
District Ranger
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Idaho Panhandle National Forests

Date
11/30/2011