

# Winter Use Plan and EIS

## Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks

### John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Memorial Parkway



Newsletter – March 2007

#### **SAVE THE DATE**

NPS Meeting with Cooperating Agencies:

Friday, May 4, 2007

9 a.m. – 1 p.m. at the Shilo Inn

780 Lindsay Boulevard, Idaho Falls, Idaho

(208) 523-0088

The National Park Service (NPS) will meet with Cooperating Agencies to discuss the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS).

Public Meetings:

Wednesday, May 16, 2007 at the Cody Auditorium

1240 Beck Avenue, Cody, Wyoming

Thursday, May 17, 2007 at School District #62

411 North Geysler, West Yellowstone, Montana

The NPS will host these meetings as an opportunity to share information and engage with attendees. Additional details on the meeting times and locations will be made available in a news release prior to the events.

#### **HOW CAN I COMMENT ON THE WINTER USE PLAN?**

The DEIS and long-term plan for managing winter recreational use in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks and the John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Memorial Parkway is available for public review and comment from March 27 through May 31, 2007. Please review and comment on the document on-line through the NPS Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) website at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/>. Comments may also be mailed or hand-delivered to: Winter Use Planning Team, P.O. Box 168, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming 82190. Additional information regarding winter use in the parks is available on the winter use website at [www.nps.gov/yell/winteruse.htm](http://www.nps.gov/yell/winteruse.htm).

#### **WHAT KIND OF COMMENTS ARE USEFUL?**

Comments can be the most important contribution from citizens. Comments should be clear, concise, on-point and relevant to the analysis of the proposed action. Comments that are solution-oriented and provide specific examples will be more effective than those that simply support or oppose the proposed project.

Before commenting, understand: (1) what the agency's purpose and need is; (2) what decision is being made; (2) who is making the decision; (3) what issues the decision-maker is balancing; and (4) what the agency's National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) procedures require. In drafting comments, try to focus on the purpose and need of the analysis, the proposed alternatives, and the assessment of the environmental impacts of those alternatives.

Commenting is not a form of "voting" on an alternative. General comments that state an action will have "significant environmental effects" may also not help an agency make a better decision unless the relevant causes and environmental effects are explained.

Finally, remember that decision makers also receive other information and data such as operational and technical information related to implementing an action that they will have to balance in making a final decision.

#### **DOES THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE COMPLY WITH THE NEW NPS MANAGEMENT POLICIES?**

The parks are dedicated to implementing the NPS mission to preserve and protect the outstanding and significant park resources while providing for high quality visitor experiences. Park management remains committed to implementing what is best for the park resources, employees, and visitors,

**For more information, please visit:** [www.nps.gov/yell/winteruse.htm](http://www.nps.gov/yell/winteruse.htm)

You may also contact Yellowstone National Park at: (307) 344-2019.

and will continue to work with the neighboring communities to support winter use in the greater Yellowstone area.

The NPS Management Policies of 2006 require analysis of potential effects to determine whether actions would impair park resources. Managers must always seek ways to avoid, or minimize to the greatest degree practicable, adversely impacting park resources and values. Laws give managers discretion to allow impacts to park resources and values when necessary and appropriate to fulfill the purposes of the park, as long as the impact does not constitute impairment of the affected resources and values.

Virtually every form of human activity that takes place within a park has some degree of effect on park resources or values. That does not mean the impact is unacceptable or that a particular use must be disallowed.

The EIS of 2000 found that historic unlimited and unregulated winter use of two-stroke snowmobiles in the parks and snowplanes on Jackson Lake had an unacceptable impact on air and water quality, wildlife, and public health and safety. Guided, limited snowmobile access using cleaner, quieter machines has resulted in quieter conditions, cleaner air, fewer wildlife impacts, and much improved visitor safety and experiences.

All alternatives contained in the DEIS are in accordance with all applicable laws, regulations, rules, and the 2006 National Park Service Management Policies.

#### **WHY ARE YOU PROPOSING TO ELIMINATE MOTORIZED OVERSNOW TRAVEL OVER SYLVAN PASS IN YELLOWSTONE?**

The 2000 EIS, the 2003 SEIS, and the Temporary Winter Use EA of 2004 all acknowledged there is a considerable risk in operating an avalanche control program at Sylvan Pass. In fact, the 2000 EIS considered closing Sylvan Pass. The NPS used to allow motorized oversnow travel between Canyon and Tower Fall over Dunraven Pass in Yellowstone. Growing concerns over avalanche

danger prompted the park to close this road to snowmobiles in the 1980s.

Yellowstone has stepped up its commitment to visitor and employee safety in recent years in all facets of park operations. Outside agencies including the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (2001) and the State of Montana (2004) have looked at the risks of avalanche control efforts at Sylvan Pass.

During this recent winter use planning effort, the NPS conducted new evaluations on a variety of options to manage avalanches and improve safety. The preferred alternative would close Sylvan Pass to all motorized oversnow travel due to unacceptable risks to visitor and employee safety in this lightly traveled corridor.

The East Entrance road crosses 20 avalanche paths through Sylvan Pass. Rangers must travel through four uncontrolled avalanche zones just to reach the howitzer, which has been used for avalanche control. Sometimes the munitions used for avalanche control don't go off, leaving hazardous unexploded ordnance which can later reach the road corridor where they pose a threat to visitors and park employees. For these reasons the park began to use helicopters for avalanche control starting in the winter of 2004-2005, and switched completely to the use of helicopters for avalanche control this past winter.

Yellowstone has been conducting avalanche control operations at Sylvan Pass since 1973. Ranger Bob Mahn lost his life in a 1994 snowmobile accident while on patrol assessing the avalanche danger on the pass. Over the years, there have been several instances when park employees or visitors had close calls with avalanches.

While safety is of paramount concern, the NPS also acknowledges the expense of avalanche control and the limited use of Sylvan Pass. It costs about \$180,000 a season to reduce the avalanche danger through use of explosives dropped by helicopter and the artillery shells fired by a howitzer. Even during historic use, the peak

number of people who traveled through Sylvan Pass was less than 4,440 people during the entire 2001-2002 winter season. That's about the same number of individuals that travel through Sylvan Pass on one single peak day during the summer.

Highly trained, experienced NPS professionals run a state-of-the-art avalanche control program at Sylvan Pass. This program has been very safe and successful, but the bottom line is that avalanche control over Sylvan Pass is dangerous, expensive, and serves a very small number of visitors.

The preferred alternative does call for keeping the East Entrance open, grooming the first six miles of the road for use by skiers and those on snowshoes, and envisions a shuttle to take them up the road to where they can ski or snowshoe outside the avalanche zone or back to the East Entrance. Other alternatives in the DEIS do consider keeping Sylvan Pass open to motorized oversnow travel.

#### **WHY DO YOU PREFER 100-PERCENT COMMERCIAL GUIDING IN YELLOWSTONE?**

Frankly, because it works. Mandatory guiding under the temporary plan addressed most of the concerns regarding the impacts of historic, unregulated winter use. For example:

- Safety has been greatly enhanced. There are fewer intoxicated or underage operators and fewer speeding violations. Arrests decreased 93% and moving violations decreased 84% by 2005-2006 due to commercial guiding (after accounting for changing visitation numbers).
- The parks are much cleaner and quieter, due to Best Available Technology (BAT) machines, group size, and behavior. Guiding helps ensure that only BAT snowmobiles are used.
- Closures and signage are reduced since guides know the rules. This saves ranger time and reduces visitor frustration.
- Guides address minor issues, allowing more efficient use of park staff.
- Adverse wildlife encounters and habituated wildlife problems are reduced.

#### **WHAT ABOUT NEXT WINTER?**

The NPS plans to complete the EIS process and issue new regulations prior to the start of the 2007-2008 winter season. The final regulations may allow a transition period during the first winter of operations for portions of the temporary plan to remain in effect.

<b>TIMELINE</b>	
Draft EIS released for a 60-day public comment period.....	March 2007
Proposed regulation released for a 60-day public comment period.....	April 2007
Final EIS .....	Fall 2007
Record of Decision .....	Fall 2007

#### **HOW DOES THE RECORD OF DECISION GET IMPLEMENTED?**

The Record of Decision is implemented through a separate rulemaking process; because of time constraints, this process is on a somewhat parallel track to the EIS planning process. A proposed rule to implement the Record of Decision will be published in the *Federal Register* and released for public review in a separate review process in the near future.

#### **WHAT IF NPS ISN'T ABLE TO COMPLETE AND IMPLEMENT A RECORD OF DECISION AND ASSOCIATED RULE BEFORE THE START OF THE 2007-2008 WINTER SEASON?**

The Temporary Winter Use Plans and rules that were in place for the last three winter seasons have expired. Without a new plan and new rule, the use of snowmobiles and snowcoaches would be prohibited this coming winter.

**For more information, please visit:** [www.nps.gov/yell/winteruse.htm](http://www.nps.gov/yell/winteruse.htm)

You may also contact Yellowstone National Park at: (307) 344-2019.

UNITED STATES  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
P.O. BOX 168  
YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK  
WYOMING, 82190  
OFFICIAL BUSINESS  
PENALTY FOR PRIVATE USE \$300

PRST STD  
AUTO  
U.S. POSTAGE PAID  
YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, WY  
PERMIT NO. G-83