

Selkirk Mountain Range

Winter Travel Plan

Proposed Action

What is the current situation regarding winter travel in the Selkirk Mountain Range?

Road and trail systems in the Selkirk Mountain Range developed over many decades based on a variety of demands. Over time users adopted these systems and the surrounding areas for winter recreation. The 1987 Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) for the Idaho Panhandle National Forests (IPNF) authorized this evolving winter use. The 1987 Forest Plan made the majority of public lands available for winter travel and directed that a wide variety of recreation opportunities be made available. Since the 1987 Forest Plan was completed, many changes have occurred regarding winter motorized travel. Wildlife management issues and specifically, listed threatened and endangered species have created the need to modify areas and routes open to winter motorized travel. Another significant change from 1987 is the advancement in snowmobile technology that allows users to access more territory than ever before.

In March 2004, the IPNF completed a Situation Summary and Management Strategy for caribou and winter recreation. The strategy incorporated the current travel plan and included components of education, enforcement, and monitoring, along with recommendations to incorporate wildlife habitat management strategies into the Forest Plan revision process. This revision process would be used to update the winter travel plan, determine suitability of areas and routes for motorized winter travel, and prescribe appropriate restrictions. However, with the change in Planning Rules in 2005, such an analysis would not be compatible with the Forest Plan revision process. A separate site-specific analysis and decision for motorized winter recreation travel in caribou habitat is needed.

Why does the current winter travel plan need to be revised?

The current winter travel plan needs to be revised to better integrate the social and economic aspects of winter recreation uses with the needs of wildlife and other natural resources in the Selkirk Mountain Range. This need for integration is driven by a variety of changes in conditions, including:

- Steady increases in population have resulted in an increased demand for winter recreation opportunities.
- Shifting economic dependence of local communities has increased their reliance on the recreation and tourism market, particularly winter recreation.

- Growing winter recreation use and technological advancements in recreational equipment allow users to more easily access backcountry areas and sensitive wildlife habitat.
- Wildlife habitat provided by the Selkirk Mountains has become increasingly important for the recovery and protection of threatened, endangered and sensitive species.
- Court direction relating to winter recreation use within the woodland caribou recovery area requires a timely response.
- Information regarding habitat needs for threatened, endangered, and sensitive wildlife species has changed.

Because of the complexity associated with these changes, analysis of the Selkirk Mountain Winter Travel Plan will be documented in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

What is the current plan for motorized winter travel in the Selkirk Mountain Range?

The 2004 Visitor and Travel Map displays restrictions on roads, trails, and areas based on travel management decisions. The 2004 Visitor and Travel Map requirements reflect changes in land use and species management direction that have occurred over many years. Numerous separate decisions have incrementally resulted in these current-day restrictions which affect winter motorized travel. Although recent court actions have resulted in additional restrictions to winter motorized travel, for the purposes of this analysis, travel routes and areas displayed on the 2004 Visitor and Travel Map will be used as the “no action” alternative.

The 2004 Visitor and Travel Map for the Kaniksu National Forest portion of the IPNF depict the travel restrictions that comprise current restrictions in place on the Kaniksu portion of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests. The 2004 Visitor and Travel Map is available at the Ranger District offices and the Forest Headquarters in Coeur d’Alene. Additional information about the Selkirk Mountain Range Winter Travel Plan can be found on the IPNF website at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/ipnf>.

What is our proposed starting point for motorized winter travel in the Selkirk Mountain Range?

The proposed starting point described below is intended to aid in development of a range of alternatives to consider in the analysis. The starting point incorporates existing travel restrictions from the 2004 travel plan as well as additional restrictions developed from more recent analysis and land use decisions. Various management tools are used to

designate areas and routes of travel, and applicable restrictions on types of use for each route or area. These tools define the areas and routes available for travel as shown on the attached starting point map. The management tools used includes:

- Winter long area restrictions
- Seasonal area restrictions
 - Designated routes within restricted areas (i.e. no off-route travel)
 - Unrestricted travel areas

These same tools will be used in alternative development. We are also considering whether conditional provisions may be an appropriate tool. For example, where restrictions could be imposed or relaxed based on changing conditions or information. Alternative development will also be guided by recent rulings from the U.S. District Court.

The starting point proposal is shown on the attached map. Specifically, this proposal would provide large areas where winter motorized travel would be unrestricted. In some areas, winter motorized travel would be entirely prohibited for resource protection. These fully restricted areas include places such as the Salmo-Priest Wilderness, Long Canyon, parts of the Selkirk Crest, numerous Research Natural Areas and other special interest areas, and areas designated through the 1987 Forest Plan and subsequent project level decisions. The Priest River Experimental Forest and the Continental/Silver Mountain area adjacent to the Canadian border would allow winter motorized travel only on designated routes. Some areas would have seasonal restrictions, such as Hughes Meadow with restrictions beginning on March 15th, and the Trapper Burn, where restrictions would start on April 1st of each year. All other National Forest Lands within the planning area would be open to winter motorized use. Please see the attached map for specific area restrictions and designated routes contained in our proposed starting point.

How does the proposed starting point compare to the 2004 Visitor and Travel Map?

The following table provides a comparison of features between the Proposed Starting Point and the 2004 travel plan.

Winter Travel Plan Feature	2004 Visitor and Travel Map	Proposed Starting Point
Miles of designated routes	14	46
Acres of existing restrictions	90,028	90,028
Acres of seasonal restrictions	645	13,639
Acres of restricted areas with designated routes	6,230	40,404

The remaining acres within this area (more than 400,000) have no restriction to winter motorized travel but a good portion of these acres are inaccessible to winter motorized use because of terrain or vegetation.

Will the analysis address non-motorized winter travel?

Our initial scoping has not revealed a basis for restricting non-motorized winter travel or differentiating vehicle types that might be used for travel within the planning area. Therefore the scope of the analysis will be limited to motorized winter travel.

What area will be included in this analysis?

In our previous scoping letter of April 2006, we stated the analysis would include all National Forest Lands on the three northern ranger districts. The scope of the planning area has been narrowed to the Selkirk Mountain Range within the boundaries of the IPNF. The geographic area for this travel plan is now defined as the National Forest System lands on the INPF that are bounded by US Highway 2 to the south, the Pend Oreille Divide to the west, the international border with Canada to the north, and US Highway 95 to the east.

How will public input be considered in this process?

Opportunities for public input have started and will continue. We sent an initial scoping letter dated April 3 2006, and received over 200 letters in response. Concerns from those letters were developed into issues which are listed below. Further input will be used to develop additional issues, and all of the issues will be considered in the development of the Draft EIS.

Your involvement is important. Once the significant issues and alternatives to be considered have been determined, an environmental analysis will be conducted to evaluate the potential benefits and effects of alternative management strategies. That analysis will be prepared using an interdisciplinary approach. Those findings will be documented in the Selkirk Mountain Range Winter Travel Plan Draft EIS which will be provided to interested members of the public, other agencies, and organizations for additional review and commenting. After hearing from the public and finishing all of the analysis, a Final EIS and Record of Decision (ROD) will be issued. The decision will update the current travel plan by identifying unrestricted or restricted areas or routes for motorized winter travel. The decision will be limited to where, when, and how winter motorized travel occurs. It will not include authorization of new improvements.

We will be available during this comment period to visit with groups or interested parties. We will also be scheduling public meetings in the communities of Bonners Ferry, Sandpoint, and Priest Lake. If you wish to be notified of future comment periods and public meetings, please identify that in your response.

What is the timeline for this process?

Our expected timeline for this process is:

Scoping comment period	Underway
Draft EIS available	Summer 2007
Final EIS/ROD available	Fall 2007
Decision implemented	Late Winter 2008

What issues have already been identified?

Our external and internal scoping identified a number of issues relating to winter motorized travel use. We feel the following are issues key to our analysis.

Human Dimension

As local and regional populations have increased, the demand for winter motorized recreation opportunities have grown. Users have expectations that the Forest Service is a key provider in meeting that demand.

Winter tourism plays an important role in North Idaho communities. Local economies have shifted away from natural resource commodity extraction while both employment and economic dependency have increased in the recreation and tourism sectors.

Wildlife

Habitat needs for woodland caribou need to be analyzed to ensure species recovery. Travel corridors and quality winter habitat utilized by woodland caribou should be protected.

Alternatives developed for the travel plan need to be consistent with guidelines established in the Lynx Conservation Assessment and Strategy and will consider the Draft Northern Rockies Lynx Amendment.

Grizzly bear emergence periods are important since winter motorized travel often overlaps with denning.

Other wildlife species such as sensitive species and big game winter range can also be affected by winter motorized travel. An evaluation is needed to determine whether winter recreation use may be having adverse effects on those resources.

How do I provide comments on this proposal?

We can best use your comments if we receive them by April 13, 2007. The more specific your comments are, the more helpful they will be. The proposal described above will serve as only a starting point for the development of a range of reasonable alternatives that respond to our purpose and need. Your comments on both geographic areas of interest and issues of concern, as well as the management tools to use for the travel plan are important. We do anticipate developing a range of alternatives for analysis in response to your comments.

When submitting comments, please include your name, address, telephone number, and the organization you represent (if any); the subject title (i.e. Selkirk Mountain Range Winter Travel Plan) on which the comment is being submitted; and facts and reasons specific to this proposal or alternatives for us to consider.

Please send written comments to the attention of Greg Hetzler, Sandpoint Ranger District, 1500 Highway 2, Suite 110, Sandpoint, ID 83864. Comments can also be submitted electronically in MSWord or RTF format to comments-northern-idpanhandle-sandpoint@fs.fed.us; faxed to the Sandpoint office at (208) 265-6670; or hand-delivered during office hours Monday through Friday between 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m.

In order to stay on the mailing list for the Selkirk Mountain Range Winter Travel Plan please return the attached form, submit written comments, or contact Greg Hetzler directly. Please contact us electronically or use the attached form to update your contact information. Where practical we encourage use of electronic means to improve our efficiency.

As further information is developed for public review it will be posted on our web page at <http://www.fs.fed.us/ipnf/kaniksu/wintertravelplan/>. If you have any questions during this comment period or wish to discuss the travel plan, please contact Greg Hetzler, Project Leader, at (208) 263-5111.