

United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest Service



Flathead National
Forest

November 2006

Winter Motorized Recreation Plan



Record of Decision



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Flathead National Forest*

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. *Background*

The Flathead National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) was approved in 1986. Since that time, both motorized and non-motorized over-snow recreation use have increased and technology has changed. Some forest users have expressed concern for wildlife and other resources in light of increasing numbers of over-snow vehicles in the backcountry, or felt their opportunities for a winter recreation experience in a non-motorized setting were diminishing. Likewise, over-snow motorized vehicle recreationists have felt their traditional motorized use areas have been reduced over time by various closures to protect other resources.

In 1999, the Montana Wilderness Association brought litigation against the Flathead National Forest (NF) for allowing over-snow vehicles to occur in areas where the 1986 Forest Plan assigned a Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) classification of primitive and semi-primitive non-motorized recreation. Monitoring indicated about 5,300 acres in Management Area (MA) 2A were being used by over-snow motorized vehicle recreationists.

In response to this lawsuit, a Federal Magistrate recommended to the Federal District Judge that the Flathead NF be ordered to close all MA 2A to motorized use. These MA 2A areas include many popular over-snow vehicle play areas, as well as groomed over-snow vehicle trails. Concerned about changes to MA 2A areas they had been traditionally using, the Montana Snowmobile Association intervened. The parties to the lawsuit (plaintiff Montana Wilderness Association; defendant Flathead NF, and intervenor Montana Snowmobile Association) agreed to settle the case. A Settlement Agreement was accepted by all three parties that would leave most of the MA 2A areas open for over-snow motorized vehicles and close other areas. Some MA 2B lands, classified as open to motorized recreation in the Forest Plan, were closed to over-snow vehicles in the agreement. As part of the Settlement Agreement (Project Record Exhibit D-D 1), the parties created maps, and a temporary closure order for certain areas of the forest was issued (Project Record Exhibits D-D 2 through D-D 8). The court-approved Settlement

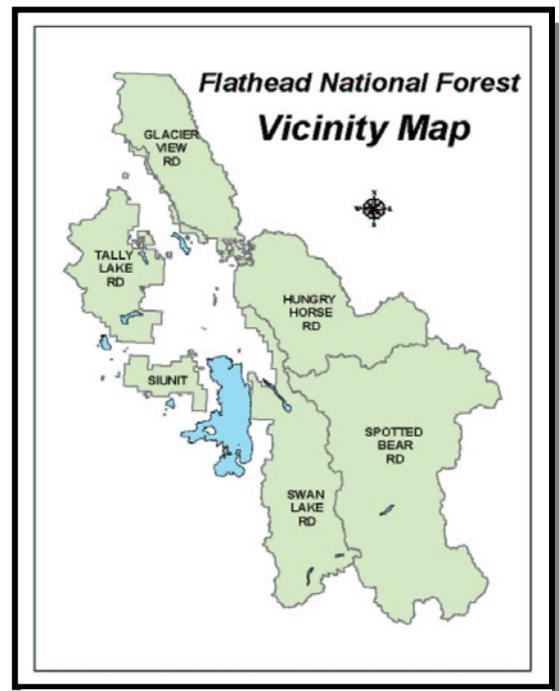


Figure 1 - Vicinity Map

Agreement included direction to prepare a Forest Plan amendment, in accordance with provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), to develop Forest-wide over-snow motorized recreation direction with the Settlement Agreement as one alternative.

In July 2002, the Flathead's Forest Supervisor released a Proposed Action for public input to amend the Flathead NF Forest-wide management area goals, objectives, and standards regarding winter recreation management. The Flathead NF issued a draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) in June 2003, and a final environmental impact statement (FEIS) in December 2003. Since 2003, the Flathead NF has been working on other high priority forest projects involving post-fire recovery projects, Forest Plan revision, as well as consulting with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on the effects of this selected alternative on Threatened and Endangered species.

The Flathead National Forest has also recently completed the public comment period on the Proposed Flathead National Forest Land Management Plan. Within the comments received in response to the Proposed Land Management Plan, many included discussion about winter motorized recreation and Amendment 24. The motorized over snow suitability determinations for the Proposed Land Management Plan are consistent with this decision.

B. Decision To Be Made

This Record of Decision (ROD) documents my selection of the Winter Motorized Recreation Plan for the Flathead NF. This decision establishes a plan for managing over-snow vehicle recreation and amends the Flathead NF Forest Plan accordingly. This decision addresses issues and conditions as outlined in the *Need for Action and Public Involvement sections* of this ROD and the previously released FEIS (December 2003).

With this ROD, I am deciding:

1. Where and when to allow over-snow motorized vehicle recreation activities on the Flathead NF.
2. What criteria will guide management of over-snow motorized vehicle access.
3. What monitoring requirements are needed to assure design criteria are implemented and effective.

I am the Responsible Official for this project. The scope of my decision is limited to the specific access management and related actions described in the Winter Motorized Recreation FEIS and this ROD.

C. Decision

I have decided to implement Alternative 6 (the Selected Alternative) from the FEIS with minor modifications. This decision is based on the information contained in the FEIS, the supporting information contained in the Project Record, and comments received through the scoping and public comment process. The FEIS describes the purpose and need that generated the Proposed Action; the issues identified by public and agency personnel; the alternatives developed to address issues; and the environmental, social, and economic effects associated with each alternative. A detailed description of the selected alternative can be found later in this document. As described earlier in the background, the selected alternative in this Record of Decision is consistent with the over-snow suitability determinations in the proposed Forest Plan.

II. OVERVIEW OF THE DECISION AREA

The Flathead NF is located in Flathead, Lake, Lincoln, Powell, Lewis and Clark, and Missoula Counties in northwest Montana. Please refer to the vicinity map on page 1. The Flathead NF encompasses more than 2.3 million acres, and includes nearly 1.1 million acres in the National Wilderness Preservation System, where motorized and mechanized use is prohibited.

The Flathead NF generally receives an abundance of snow at the higher elevations, providing winter recreation opportunities. Snowfields often persist into late spring. Winter and spring motorized recreation, mainly in the form of over-snow vehicles, has been enjoyed on the Flathead NF for many decades. The earliest registration of an over-snow vehicle (snowmobile) in Flathead County occurred in 1926, and the activity has been widespread and popular since the 1960s. Groomed trails have existed since 1977.

Several Threatened, Endangered, or Sensitive vertebrate species are known or suspected to occur on the Flathead NF. Four threatened or endangered wildlife species inhabit or travel through the Forest. The grizzly bear, gray wolf, bald eagle, and Canada lynx are found within the Decision Area. The threatened bull trout is found in several drainages.

III. THE NEED FOR ACTION

The Flathead NF Forest Plan provides overall direction for forest management. To achieve balanced use, the Forest Plan has a wide variety of goals and objectives. The Forest has been divided into different MAs, each with a different management emphasis and goals and standards. This ROD establishes a new motorized winter recreation management plan by amending the descriptions, goals or standards for seven of these MAs accordingly (Appendix A of this ROD).

The Purpose and Need for Action is to:

- Clarify management direction regarding over-snow motorized use;
- Meet the requirements of the Settlement Agreement resulting from a lawsuit challenging over-snow motorized use on the Flathead NF; and
- Determine over-snow recreation management direction related to motorized over-snow use.

The Selected Alternative responds to the purpose and need by:

- Establishing a Winter Motorized Recreation Management Plan that clarifies where, when, and under what conditions over-snow vehicles are allowable on the Flathead NF and amends the Forest Plan to be consistent with this Management Plan.

IV. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

A public involvement plan for this project was developed to ensure that potentially interested members of the public and other government agencies received timely information so they could participate in the planning process (Project Record Section B). In July 2002, a Notice of Intent to Prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (Project Record Exhibit B-8) was published in the Federal Register – this officially started the public involvement process. The *Daily Inter Lake*, *Hungry Horse News*, and *Whitefish Pilot* published numerous news articles regarding the proposal. Forest Supervisor Cathy Barbouletos mailed a letter to about 350 members of the public, government agencies, or groups potentially interested in motorized winter recreation and the associated Forest Plan amendment, requesting review and comments on the Proposed Action (Project Record Exhibit B-3). The project has been listed in the Quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions published in the *Daily Inter Lake* since the summer of 2002.

Nearly 500 letters, phone calls, and e-mails were received during this “scoping” process. These comments were used to determine significant issues that might lead to alternative proposals or focus the analysis of effects.



The DEIS was published and available for public comment on June 20, 2003. On July 14 and 15, an open house was held for the public to view the extensive array of maps for the Winter Motorized Recreation Plan and the associated Forest Plan amendment. During the 45-day public comment period, we received approximately 400 letters, e-mails, postcards, form letters, or phone calls from individuals, organizations, and agencies. All comments received were considered, and responses to the comments were included in the

FEIS. A list of agencies contacted or consulted throughout the entire public involvement process is in the “Agencies Consulted or Contacted” section of the FEIS.

Other government agencies were also contacted. Consultation with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) took place in Helena, Montana during the DEIS comment period. Planning documents were supplied to the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (MTFW&P). The USFWS was consulted not only through the formal biological assessment process, but also through informal communication. In addition, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) was consulted. Discussions with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes were conducted during quarterly meetings between tribal representatives and Flathead NF heritage resource specialists. These are documented in Project Record (Exhibit G-1).

Issues identified through the public scoping process, through contacts with other agencies, and from Forest Service personnel are presented below. The scoping process was used to ensure that all of the potentially significant environmental issues were identified. Refer to Project Record Section F for further information about the issue development process.

A. *Wildlife Security*

This issue stems from concerns that over-snow vehicle recreation could affect wildlife habitat. Concerns were expressed that continued over-snow vehicle use could disturb bears as they emerge from the den, particularly female grizzly bears with cubs. Disturbance during the winter months has the potential to affect wolverine, mountain goats, lynx, and large ungulates.



B. *Recreation Access*

There is concern that over-snow vehicle access on a substantial amount of the Flathead NF would be lost to over-snow vehicle users with the Proposed Action. Traditional access near remote communities would also be reduced with the Proposed Action. Reduced opportunities for over-snow vehicle use during the spring use season were of particular concern to many of these users.

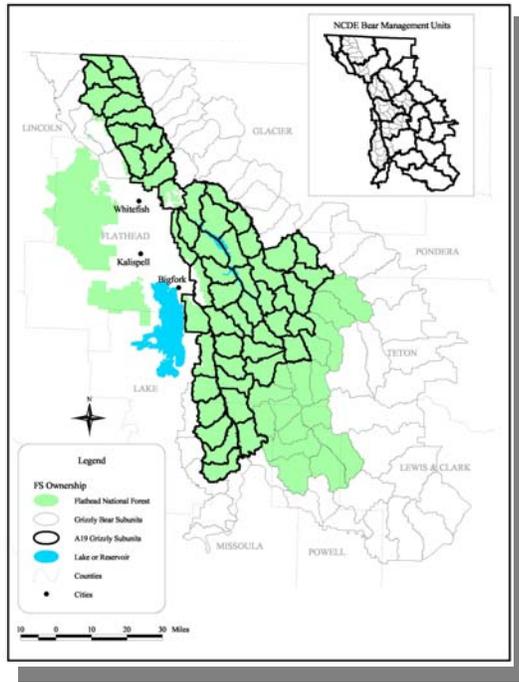
The summary of comments from the public and the responses from the Interdisciplinary Team are included in the FEIS. The complete documentation of public participation and media coverage is contained in Project Record Sections B, C, and D.

V. SUMMARY OF ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

I considered five "action alternatives" and the "No Action Alternative" in detail. These alternatives provide a range of management options that respond to the purpose and need in different ways relative to the issues identified. In addition, seven other alternatives were considered but not studied in detail (FEIS, pp. 2-6). The following discussion summarizes the alternatives considered in detail. Chapter 2 of the FEIS displays specific features common to all action alternatives. Appendix B of this ROD displays required monitoring practices. Chapters 1 and 2 of the FEIS contain a complete description of the alternatives.

Alternative 1, the No Action Alternative, proposes no changes to motorized winter recreation as it relates to the Forest Plan. Alternative 2, the Proposed Action, allows continued use of the majority of the area traditionally used by over-snow vehicles, but reduces the area open to over-snow vehicles. The other action alternatives have varying degrees of restrictions and seasonal use dates. Alternative 3 emphasizes community access. Alternative 4 emphasizes protecting wildlife habitat. Alternative 5 addresses MA and ROS designations. Alternative 6 was developed in response to comments on the DEIS and further addresses public concerns, while responding to the Purpose and Need. Each alternative clarifies where and when over-snow vehicle use is appropriate on the Flathead NF. These alternatives were designed to address the significant issues and represent a reasonable range of actions, while responding to the Purpose and Need for Action.

A. *Alternative 1 - The No Action Alternative*



Flathead NF Portion of NCDE

Current Forest Plan direction would remain in place with this alternative. Over-snow vehicle use would continue in all areas open to over-snow motorized use prior to the 2000 *Montana Wilderness Association v. Barbouletos* Settlement Agreement (Project Record Exhibit D-D 1).

B. *Alternative 2 - Proposed Action*

The Proposed Action reflects the Settlement Agreement between Montana Snowmobile Association, Montana Wilderness Association, and the Forest Service. In this alternative, some areas previously closed to over-snow vehicles would be opened, while other areas previously open under the Forest Plan would be closed. The season of over-snow vehicle use within the Flathead NF portion of the NCDE would run from November 15 through March 15.

C. *Alternative 3*

This alternative would allow access to traditional use areas on National Forest System (NFS) lands near remote rural communities. It also responds to the request from the public for spring over-snow vehicle opportunities, similar to what has occurred traditionally. The season of over-snow vehicle use within the Flathead NF portion of the NCDE would run from December 1 through April 30.

D. *Alternative 4*

This alternative responds to concerns about protection of key wildlife habitat. Over-snow vehicle use is allowed from December 1 through March 31. Over-snow vehicle access in wolverine, mountain goat, and lynx habitat is reduced, along with a minor reduction in use in grizzly bear denning habitat. The season of use within the Flathead NF portion of the NCDE is based upon local research on the average grizzly bear denning season in northwest Montana.

E. *Alternative 5*

This alternative responds to issues involving adherence to the ROS and existing MA direction. Alternative 5 reduces the number of acres available to over-snow vehicles in areas with traditional use, particularly in MA 2A -- a semi-primitive non-motorized designation. All areas of MA 2B designated as semi-primitive motorized would remain open to motorized use. The season of over-snow vehicle recreation use within the Flathead NF portion of the NCDE would be from November 15 to March 15.

F. *Alternative 6 - Preferred Alternative*

This alternative was developed in response to public and other agency comment and the results of the analysis in the DEIS. It seeks to balance the environmental impacts on resources while responding to the project's Purpose and Need. This was the FEIS Preferred Alternative.

In response to issues regarding community access, Alternative 6 allows for passage across NFS lands between several parcels of private land, particularly in the North Fork of the Flathead. It allows access on a specific portion of the Bond Creek Trail for the community of Swan Lake to reach the network of roads open to over-snow vehicle recreation, thereby providing a safer route for local residents than riding alongside the state highway. The over-snow vehicle recreation season would generally run from December 1 through March 31, with an extended season of use in four areas of the Flathead NF for spring over-snow vehicle use.

VI. DECISION

I have decided to implement Alternative 6 of the FEIS, with minor modifications, and will refer to it as the Selected Alternative. The description of the Selected Alternative is organized following the Decisions to Be Made framework, described on page 2 of this ROD.

A. *Where and When Will Over-Snow Motorized Vehicle Recreation Activities be Allowed on the Flathead National Forest?*

Establishment of a Winter Motorized Recreation Plan

The Flathead NF entered into a court approved Settlement Agreement (CV 99-142-M-DWM) (Project File Exhibit D-D 1) to prepare a winter motorized recreation plan and amend the Flathead NF Forest Plan accordingly to clarify its direction for over-snow motorized recreation. The Selected Alternative establishes a new Winter Motorized Recreation Plan and clarifies and amends existing Forest Plan direction accordingly (see Appendix A).

In complying with the Settlement Agreement, I believe it is also timely and appropriate to clarify Flathead NF direction for over-snow vehicle motorized recreation consistent with the recent agency policy for Travel Management (36 CFR Parts 212, 251, 261, and 295) (Project Record Exhibit O-63). This final rule (November 2005) does not require designation of those roads, trails, and areas that are open to over-snow vehicles. However, the process that the Flathead NF has followed in developing the Winter Motorized Recreation Plan is consistent with this new policy. Specifically, the requirements governing designation of NFS roads, NFS trails, and areas on NFS lands for use by over-snow vehicles as per §212.81 of the new Travel Management rule have been fully addressed.

More specifically, implementing the Selected Alternative will better protect the resources of our public lands by specifying and designating the timing and use of over-snow vehicles to specific routes and areas. The seasons of use and locations of allowable over-snow motorized recreation associated with implementing the Selected Alternative will also serve to increase the safety of all users, while minimizing conflicts among the various uses of the NFS lands.

Figures 2A through 2D, as well as the Forest Plan Direction maps labeled Figures WW1 through WW4, display the over-snow vehicle use areas and routes on the Flathead NF. These maps, combined with the prohibition at 36 CFR. §261.14¹, will provide authority to enforce the restrictions and prohibitions shown on the maps. The maps may appear slightly different from those depicted in the FEIS. These changes are primarily the result of including all existing restrictions that presently affect over-snow motorized vehicle recreation.

¹ 36 CFR 261.14 states the following in part “It is prohibited to possess or operate an over-snow vehicle on National Forest System lands in violation of a restriction or prohibition established pursuant to 36 CFR part 212, subpart C.

Over-snow motorized vehicle recreation is generally allowed from December 1 to March 31. As shown in the maps, extended spring use is allowed in the following four areas:

- Groomed routes in Canyon Creek until April 14;
- 3,100 acres at Sixmile until April 30;
- 17,500 acres in Challenge/Skyland area until May 14, and
- 31,800 acres in Lost Johnny area until May 31.

Roads open yearround to motorized use may accommodate over-snow vehicles as conditions allow, unless passable to conventional vehicles. Exceptions are:

- Trail Creek Road past Tuchuck Campground, and
- Whale Creek Road 318 west of the junction with Road 10832.

Over-snow vehicles would be prohibited on those two sections of road otherwise open yearround. These sections of road were restricted under terms of the Settlement Agreement and are being carried forward as part of the Selected Alternative to reflect the points of agreement in the Settlement Agreement.

For safety reasons the following road on the Tally Lake Ranger District is closed to snowmobile traffic year-round unless otherwise permitted or for performance of an official duty such as an organized rescue:

- Road 9790 (Taylor Creek) at the junction with the groomed Taylor Creek snowmobile trail to the permit boundary of Big Mountain.

This decision also includes additional restriction of motorized over-snow vehicles within and adjacent to the Big Mountain Ski Resort Area to improve protection of facilities and public safety. These measures are displayed on the decision map, Figure 2A.

It is important to note here that in order to be consistent with the recent agency policy for Travel Management (36 CFR Parts 212, 251, 261, and 295, November 2005) (Project File Exhibit O-63), the restrictions and prohibitions described in The Selected Alternative for snowmobiles now apply to over-snow vehicles. Over-snow vehicles are defined as a motor vehicle that is designed for use over the snow and runs on a track or tracks and/or a ski or skis, while in use over snow.

It is also important to note that amending the current plan with the selection of this winter motorized recreation plan is appropriate even while the current plan is being revised. The suitability of winter motorized recreation is an important decision that will be carried forward into the revised plan. The over-snow motorized vehicle suitability determinations in the Proposed Land Management Plan are consistent with this decision.

The Forest did receive many comments regarding winter motorized recreation during the comment period for the Proposed Land Management Plan. These comments were quite varied and ranged from requests for opening more areas for snowmobiling, to requests for closing more areas to snowmobiling. Numerous comments on the Proposed Forest Plan clearly mentioned this Winter Motorized Recreation Plan and the associated Forest Plan amendment.

After reviewing these comments along with the comments submitted in response to the DEIS for this project, it is very apparent that some individuals and organizations remain quite divided in their desires for winter recreation on the Flathead National Forest. In recognition of this conflict, this decision strives to strike a balance by offering an array of opportunities for both motorized and non-motorized winter recreation that received support from organizations representing both sides of these issues.

B. What criteria will guide management of over-snow motorized access?

This decision will guide winter motorized recreation on the Flathead NF. Management Area descriptions, goals, and standards have been amended as shown in Appendix A and where applicable on the maps. In addition to the changes in Forest Plan direction, the Selected Alternative includes the



requirement for signs to be installed at major over-snow vehicle trailheads and unloading sites. These signs will notify over-snow vehicle users of the requirement to fuel at least 100 feet from riparian areas, ask visitors to report any spills to the nearest Ranger Station, and ask users to reduce idling time of their over-snow vehicles so emissions will not be concentrated at the sites. It is my intent that the travel management

decisions contained in the Selected Alternative continue under the revised Forest Plan unless specifically modified by that decision.

C. What, if any, monitoring requirements are needed to assure design criteria are implemented and effective?

I have selected the same monitoring plan provided as Appendix C of the FEIS. It is incorporated as Appendix B of this ROD. These monitoring items will help determine compliance with the Selected Alternative design criteria, requirements, and objectives. It includes monitoring goals, objectives, and parameters to be monitored; where and when monitoring will occur; assigns responsibility; and outlines how the information will be evaluated. If corrective actions are deemed necessary, they will be identified and designed based on monitoring results and evaluation.

VII. RATIONALE FOR THE DECISION

By selecting the Selected Alternative, I wanted to ensure that reasonable opportunities for over-snow motorized access would continue on the Flathead NF. I also wanted to ensure that our responsibilities for managing and protecting our natural resources are accomplished. My response to the following four criteria is intended to assist in understanding the rationale for my selection.

A. Response to the Purpose and Need for Action

The Purpose and Need for Action are based on the direction to:

- Clarify the Forest Plan;
- Meet the requirements of the Settlement Agreement; and
- Determine the long-term winter recreation management direction related to over-snow vehicle use.

I believe that the Selected Alternative best responds to these needs. The areas and routes shown on the over-snow vehicle use maps (Figures 2A through 2D and Appendix WW maps) clarify where and when over-snow vehicle use is allowed on the Flathead NF. The preparation of the FEIS and issuing of this decision satisfy the requirements of the Settlement Agreement. I believe that the Selected Alternative represents the best long-term strategy for over-snow vehicle use and builds upon the Settlement Agreement by maintaining certain areas and routes for over-snow vehicle use while restricting such use in other areas.

While the Settlement Agreement did not bind my decision in any way, the fact that the Montana Snowmobile Association and the Montana Wilderness Association reached agreement on a winter use plan was an important consideration in making my decision. I believe the Selected Alternative represents the best long-term winter recreation management direction consistent with our multiple management responsibilities. More specifically, it authorizes the continuance of quality over-snow vehicle recreation while ensuring that this use is not significantly affecting important wildlife habitat and other natural resources.

Alternatives 2 through 5 have social or environmental effects that I consider unacceptable. See Section B below for more detail.

The Selected Alternative clarifies the Forest Plan. Based on my understanding of the existing situation and predicted effects, I have determined that implementation of the Selected Alternative is the best way to meet the terms of the Settlement Agreement and provide long-term over-snow vehicle recreation management direction.

B. The Relationship to Environmental Issues

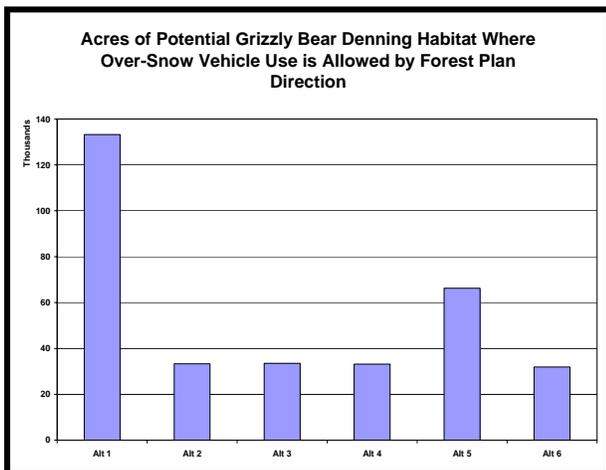
One of the primary reasons I selected the Selected Alternative for implementation is because it best responds to the issues outlined in Section IV - Public Involvement of this ROD, and responds to the Purpose and Need for the project. Table 1 shows in tabular form the numerical indicators of how well each alternative responds to a particular issue. Most issues had more than one indicator to determine the performance of the issue. Following Table 1, I discuss each of the issues and the meaning of the numerical indicators.

Table 1. Response of Alternatives to Issues						
Issue & Issue Indicators:	Alt 1 – No Action	Alt. 2 – Proposed Action	Alt. 3	Alt. 4	Alt. 5	Alt. 6 – Modified Selected
Wildlife Security						
• Percent of potential grizzly bear denning habitat where over-snow vehicle use is allowed by Forest Plan direction	24	8	8	8	16	8
• Acres of potential grizzly bear denning habitat where over-snow vehicle use is allowed	133,300	33,300	33,500	33,200	66,250	31,900
• Percent of potential wolverine habitat where over-snow vehicle use is allowed by Forest Plan direction	40	16	17	16	30	15
• Acres of potential wolverine habitat where over-snow vehicle use is allowed	75,900	31,000	31,600	30,700	56,700	29,300
• Percent of mountain goat winter habitat where over-snow vehicle use is allowed	23	6	3	3	13	1

Table 1. Response of Alternatives to Issues

Issue & Issue Indicators:	Alt 1 – No Action	Alt. 2 – Proposed Action	Alt. 3	Alt. 4	Alt. 5	Alt. 6 – Modified Selected
• Acres of mountain goat habitat where over-snow vehicle use is allowed	1,300	600	300	300	1,200	50
• Percent of suitable lynx habitat where over-snow vehicle use is allowed by Forest Plan direction	53	35	35	34	49	35
• Acres of suitable lynx habitat where over-snow vehicle use is allowed	920,700	608,300	613,600	591,900	840,700	608,400
Recreation Access						
• Acres available to over-snow vehicle use	1,142,000	784,400	793,600	763,500	1,035,600	787,100
• Season of use for over-snow vehicles within the Flathead portion of the NCDE	November 15 through March 15	November 15 through March 15	December 1 through April 30	December 1 through March 31	November 15 through March 15	December 1 through March 31; Extended spring use on 52,400 acres and approximately 46 miles of groomed routes

1. Wildlife Security



The Selected Alternative provides the best wildlife security of all alternatives and represents a significant improvement over the existing condition. Grizzly bear denning habitat would be protected by prohibiting over-snow vehicle use on 92 percent of the potential grizzly bear denning habitat on the Flathead NF. Under current Forest Plan direction, over-snow vehicle use was prohibited on 76 percent of potential grizzly bear denning habitat. This is a significant improvement for wildlife security.

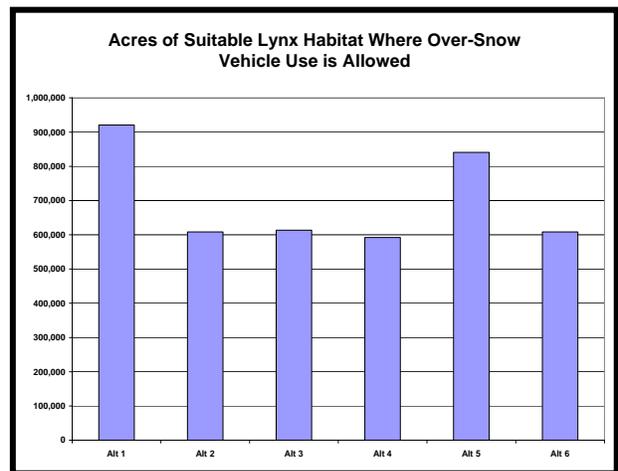
I am also aware that over-snow vehicle use has the potential to affect denning or emerging grizzly

bears on the 31,900 acres where it will be allowed that also contain potential grizzly bear denning habitat. In making my decision to implement the Selected Alternative, I sought to ensure that spring over-snow vehicle access in areas of denning habitat would not significantly affect grizzly bear habitat. The Selected Alternative ensures this by (1) reducing the time and space previously and currently available to over-snow vehicle users after April 1, (2) extended season dates will be restricted by closing areas open to use by certain dates or would be restricted by poor snow conditions, (3) during the spring, deteriorating snow conditions that trigger den emergence would also reduce over-snow vehicle numbers to a degree, reducing the probability of disturbance to grizzly bears by over-snow vehicles during this period, and (4) only a relatively small and distinct portion of the Forest NF will be open to spring over-snow vehicles, thus enforcement of over-snow vehicle use end dates will become more effective.

Spring over-snow vehicle use impacts less than 2 percent of total spring bear habitat available on the Flathead NF. I considered these potential impacts while trying to continue to provide reasonable opportunities for quality spring over-snow vehicle use. I believe that the monitoring elements related to spring over-snow vehicle use, developed in consultation with USFWS, will ensure that the Flathead NF continues to evaluate the effect of spring over-snow vehicle use on spring bear habitat. The Forest Service is committed to taking protective measures if monitoring indicates a need for additional management direction.

I considered the recent information regarding the increasing grizzly bear population (Project File Exhibits R-29 and O-64) and agree with the USFWS that no appreciable impact on grizzly bear reproduction, or numbers, or distribution, can be detected from snowmobiling. I also believe that the selected monitoring requirements are sufficient to monitor the effects of continuing to allow over-snow vehicles on the Flathead NF.

A portion of the area in which snowmobiling will be allowed is within the NCDE and has been designated “Management Situation 1” (MS-1) where the needs of grizzly bears are given priority over other management considerations. The selected alternative considered and prioritized the needs of

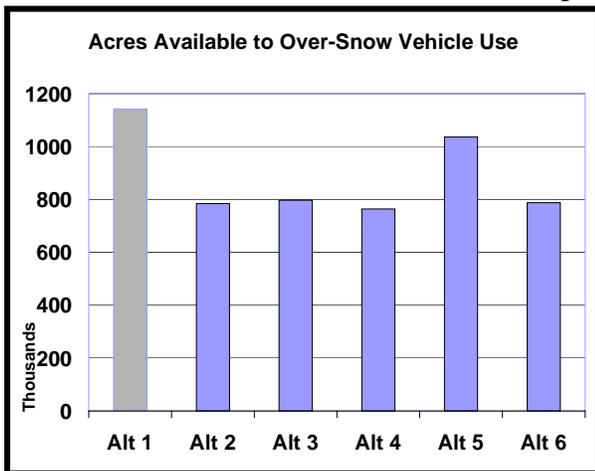


the grizzly bear by reducing the total area of MS-1 habitat in which over-snow vehicles are allowed.

The Selected Alternative impacts the least amount of potential wolverine and mountain goat habitat of all alternatives. Reducing potential effects to these species influenced my decision to choose the Selected Alternative.

Under the Selected Alternative, over-snow vehicle use will be allowed on 35 percent of the lynx habitat on the Flathead NF. Alternative 4 would allow over-snow vehicle access on 34 percent, while the other alternatives would allow over-snow vehicle use on more areas providing lynx habitat. In making my decision to implement the Selected Alternative, I reviewed the effects analysis for lynx as disclosed in the DEIS (Project Record Exhibit P-1), FEIS (Project Record Exhibit P-2), biological assessment (Project Record Exhibit D-D 10), biological opinion (Project Record Exhibit D-D 12), and Project Record. I also consulted with the USFWS regarding the effects of the Selected Alternative on this threatened species. I reviewed the recommendations contained in the Lynx Conservation Assessment and Strategy (LCAS) (Project Record Exhibit O-36) and Lynx Conservation Agreement (Project Record Exhibit O-28). I chose the Selected Alternative in part because it limits potential effects to lynx while allowing a reasonable level of quality winter motorized recreation opportunities for the public. Under the Selected Alternative, approximately 608,400 acres of suitable lynx habitat remain open for over-snow vehicles. Only a small portion of this area is expected to receive over snow motorized vehicle use. While Alternative 4 would potentially affect fewer acres of lynx habitat (~16,000 acres less than Alternative 6), it would have a slightly greater effect on grizzly bear denning habitat, wolverine habitat, mountain goat winter habitat, while providing about 14,000 fewer acres where over-snow vehicles would be allowed. The USFWS concurred with the finding of the biological assessment that implementation of the Selected Alternative is not likely to

adversely affect Canada lynx or their habitat.



Based upon my knowledge of the issues and review of the analysis, I have concluded that the Selected Alternative responds well to wildlife security issues. It incorporates most of the wildlife security features of Alternative 4 while providing more opportunities for the recreating public. The Selected Alternative provides a slightly better level of wildlife security protection than does Alternative 4 for those species analyzed, with the exception of Canada lynx as described in the previous paragraph. Public comment received

on the DEIS and FEIS expressed concern about access to NFS lands. I

find the restriction of 33.5 miles of road proposed in Alternative 4 unacceptable, given that the benefit is protection of only 1 percent more of lynx habitat. I also concur with the fisheries biologist's determination that the selected alternative will have no impact on Bull Trout (Project File Exhibit I-16).

2. Recreation access

The Selected Alternative balances the public's desire to access NFS lands while providing for appropriate wildlife security. It includes seasonal use restrictions that protect 98 percent of spring grizzly bear habitat in the Flathead NF portion of the NCDE, while allowing a limited amount of motorized use to occur in areas providing quality spring over-snow vehicle use opportunities. With the Selected Alternative, 91 percent of the areas that have been commonly used for motorized winter recreation will remain open for seasonal use.

Alternative 1 was not chosen because it does not meet the Purpose and Need for Action.

One of the reasons I decided not to select Alternative 2 was because it would provide limited over-snow vehicle opportunities during spring months. In addition, under Alternative 2 residents in the North Fork of the Flathead would not be allowed to use over-snow vehicles on NFS lands when traveling between private properties; nor would it allow use of a portion of the Bond Creek Trail to access the Lost Creek Road system.

I did not choose Alternative 3, in part, because spring over-snow vehicle use would be allowed throughout grizzly bear spring habitat within the Flathead NF portion of the NCDE. I believe that this alternative does not adequately consider the needs of grizzly bears.

I did not select Alternative 4 partially because of restrictions to public over-snow motorized access that I believe was excessive. It would result in the lowest amount of NFS lands available for over-snow motorized recreation, with an overall lower level of habitat security than the Selected Alternative.

I did not select Alternative 5 partially because it would prohibit over-snow vehicle use in many areas providing high quality winter motorized opportunities, these areas are very popular for local and out-of-town over-snow vehicle users alike, and receive substantial amounts of use.

I believe that the Selected Alternative provides sufficient areas across the Flathead NF in which users can continue to explore non-motorized as well as motorized recreation opportunities. The basis of the Settlement

Agreement ensured that important areas for non-motorized and motorized winter recreation were maintained.

3. *Relationship to Public, Agency, and Tribal Comments*

The Selected Alternative was developed specifically to respond to public, other agency, and Tribal comments received regarding the DEIS. Consultation with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes included regular meetings with Tribal representatives and Flathead NF heritage resource specialists. Findings from field inventories and background research were shared and input from the Tribes regarding the undertaking's impact to archaeological sites, traditional cultural properties, and reserved treaty rights were received. The Tribes expressed no concerns over the Plan's impact to their interests (Project Record Exhibit G-1).

Consultation with other government agencies included telephone conversations and field visits. Formal comments were received from the EPA after the issuance of the DEIS. The EPA made suggestions that have been incorporated into the FEIS and ROD, including their recommendation that signs be posted at trailheads and parking lots asking over-snow motorized recreationists not to idle their machines for extended periods of time in order to reduce potential localized effects to air quality. These trailheads will also include information as to where and when it is appropriate for over-snow motorized recreation opportunities.

I received many informal comments regarding the need to provide opportunities for NFS lands to support employment in rural communities. The Selected Alternative does not allow the greatest amount of access among the action alternatives. However, it does provide access on 91 percent of the area that has traditionally been used by over-snow vehicle users on the Flathead NF, while effectively managing for all resources in an environmentally and socially responsible manner that responds well to the Purpose and Need for Action.

I received many comments on a wide variety of topics from a diverse public. Where possible, these comments were used in the formulation of the Selected Alternative. Included in these is my decision to allow use on a specific portion of Bond Creek Trail. Without use of this section of trail, access to an entire network of roads (Lost Creek) that is open to over-snow vehicles will require trailering of over-snow vehicles from the Town of Swan Lake or riding alongside of Montana State Highway 83, which presents significant safety concerns. The Lost Creek area currently does not have the infrastructure to accommodate vehicles and trailers. Since Bond Creek Trail is bordered by private land in the lower section, it is the only route to reach Lost Creek from the Town of Swan Lake. Although

the forest area immediately adjacent to the trail is open to over-snow vehicles, heavy tree cover and other vegetation precludes use off of the trail corridor. The trail will be closed to over-snow motorized use beyond its junction with Forest Development Road No. 9507.

Some adjustments to routes near Teepee Lake were made based on input from the public. These adjustments will protect an area of winter ungulate use and facilitate safe local travel.

4. *Consequences of Taking No Action*

The No Action Alternative does not respond to the Purpose and Need for Action to clarify Forest Plan direction regarding over-snow motorized access. Under the No Action Alternative, over-snow motorized use would be allowed to continue in the locations and at the levels that occurred prior to the 1999 *Montana Wilderness Association vs. Barbouletos* litigation. Taking no action would continue the level of over-snow motorized use already occurring on this landscape. While this would allow the broadest range of opportunities for over-snow vehicle use, the confusing and contradictory direction regarding over-snow motorized recreation contained in the Forest Plan would continue. In 1988, this confusing and contradictory direction led the Associate Chief of the Forest Service to direct the Forest to clarify its Forest Plan direction regarding over-snow motorized use, and led to the 1999 litigation filed against the Flathead National Forest by the Montana Wilderness Association. It is crucial to bring Forest Plan direction on this issue up to date to provide clear, concise, and enforceable direction on where over-snow motorized use is and is not allowed.

The No Action Alternative would have far greater potential negative impacts on wildlife species than any of the other alternatives I considered. Under the No Action Alternative, over-snow vehicle use would be allowed on areas that contain 24 percent of all grizzly bear denning habitat on the Forest, 40 percent of the wolverine habitat, 23 percent of the mountain goat winter habitat, and 53 percent of the lynx habitat.

When I consider the level of public over-snow vehicle access opportunities provided and the wildlife impacts of the various alternatives, I find that the No Action Alternative is unacceptable. Potential impacts to wintering wildlife pose too great a risk, and the over-snow vehicle opportunities do not correspond well with use patterns. For these reasons, I have decided against implementing the No Action Alternative.

I have decided to implement an action alternative, specifically the Selected Alternative, since the above consequences are not acceptable to me.

VIII. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY LAW, REGULATION, AND AGENCY POLICY

My decision must be consistent with numerous laws, regulations, and agency directives. I have determined that my decision is consistent with all laws, regulations, and agency policy. The following summarizes findings required by major environmental laws.

A. *National Forest Management Act: Finding of Nonsignificant Amendment*

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) provides that Forest Plans "shall be amended in any manner whatsoever after final adoption and after public notice, and, if such amendment would result in a significant change in such plan, in accordance with subsections (e) and (f) of this section and public involvement comparable to that required by subsection (d) of this section" (16 U.S.C. 1604(f)(4)).

The Secretary of Agriculture's implementing regulation indicates the determination of significance is to be "[b]ased on an analysis of the objectives, guidelines and other contents of the Forest Plan" (36 CFR 219.10(f)). The Forest Service has issued guidance for determining what constitutes a "significant amendment" under NFMA. This guidance, in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.12 - Chapter 5.32, identifies four factors to be used when determining whether a proposed change to a Forest Plan is significant or not significant. These four factors are: timing; location and size; goals, objectives, and outputs; and management prescriptions. This Handbook guidance states that "[o]ther factors may also be considered, depending on the circumstances."

1. *Timing:*

The NFMA requires that Forest Plans be revised at least every 15 years. The Flathead Forest Plan has been in effect since 1986. Revision of the Forest Plan is ongoing and anticipated to be complete in 2007. As stated in the FSH 1909.12, Chapter 5.32: "the later the change, the less likely it is to be significant for the current Forest Plan." This Winter Motorized Recreation Plan and the associated Forest Plan amendment is a result of the need to meet the requirements of a court approved Settlement Agreement. It is also appropriate at any time to clarify our management direction about motorized use. This Winter Motorized Recreation Plan and the associated Forest Plan amendment will immediately serve to eliminate any confusion about over-snow motorized recreation on the Flathead NF. The timing does not indicate it constitutes a significant amendment.

2. *Location and Size*

The goals, objectives, and standards of this amendment apply Forest wide. The Forest Plan has a wide variety of goals and objectives to achieve a

balanced use. The Flathead NF has been divided into 48 MA designations, each with its own set of goals and standards. This amendment would alter descriptions, goals or standards for 7 of these MAs (Appendix A of this ROD), primarily MA 2A and MA 2B (unroaded lands suited for dispersed recreation).

3. *Goals, Objectives, and Outputs*

This amendment is intended to clarify Forest Plan management direction to eliminate any confusion about motorized use in MA 2A, meet the requirements of the Settlement Agreement, and establish a Motorized Winter Recreation Plan. The adoption of this Motorized Winter Recreation Plan does not substantially alter the goals of the Forest Plan. Management area descriptions, goals, and standards will be modified as shown in Appendix A, and where applicable on the maps in unbound Appendix WW.

In addition to these slight modifications of existing Forest-wide goals, this Winter Motorized Recreation Plan also clearly establishes the season of use for over-snow motorized recreation. With this plan, 91 percent of the areas that have been commonly used for motorized winter recreation will remain open for seasonal use. This plan will also include seasonal use restrictions that protect 98 percent of spring grizzly bear habitat in the Flathead NF portion of the NCDE.

4. *Management Prescriptions*

This Winter Motorized Recreation Plan and the associated Forest Plan amendment creates a mixture of non-motorized and motorized opportunities within a given MA and site specifically addresses the suitability of certain routes and areas for over-snow motorized recreation opportunities. This plan does not alter the determination of lands suitable for commercial timber production.

Based on a consideration of these four factors, and considering the Forest Plan in its entirety, I have determined that adoption of this Winter Motorized Recreation Plan and the associated amendment to the Flathead Forest Plan is not significant. This Forest Plan amendment clarifies Forest Plan goals and objectives to promote effective management of over-snow motorized recreation.

Land and resource management plans must be adaptable to new conditions and information. The ability to adjust Forest Plans within relatively short periods of time is essential to assure sound management and to meet the obligations of the NFMA and other environmental laws. The Forest Service will continue to evaluate the issues that affect how we manage our winter recreation programs. Revision of the Forest Plan is anticipated to be complete

within the next year. The Selected Alternative is consistent with the proposed over-snow suitability determinations in the proposed Forest Plan. Over-snow vehicle use is expected to continue under the revised Forest Plan as implemented under the Selected Alternative if the suitability determinations remain the same as currently depicted in the proposed Forest Plan revision.

B. National Forest Management Act: Provisions for Fish and Wildlife Habitat

Direction in the Flathead Forest Plan pertinent to conservation of wildlife species and management of their habitats is found throughout the wildlife section in Chapter 3 of the FEIS. Standards and goals related to species habitat were established under the Flathead Forest Plan as amended.

The Forest Plan contains an array of components that contribute to the wildlife habitat capability of the Flathead NF. Based upon a consideration of the following components of the Forest Plan, as amended, I conclude that adoption of this Winter Motorized Recreation Plan will provide for the diversity of native vertebrate species.

- The Flathead National Forest encompasses 2.3 million acres with nearly 1.1 million acres designated as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System, where motorized use is prohibited.
- Grizzly bear denning habitat would be protected by prohibiting over-snow vehicle use on areas that contain 92 percent of the potential grizzly bear denning habitat on the Forest. As anticipated in the Recovery Plan (Project Record Exhibit O-35), grizzly bears are expanding their range outside of the recovery zone. No negative impacts to the Flathead NF portion of the NCDE recovery zone grizzly bear population resulting from over-snow vehicle use can be discerned.
- The Selected Action protects the greatest amount of potential wolverine and mountain goat habitat of all alternatives.
- Under the Selected Alternative, over-snow vehicle use will be prohibited on 65 percent of the lynx habitat on the Flathead NF, the second highest amount of all alternatives.

My decision establishes additional design criteria and monitoring elements that reduce the risks to the viability and distribution of native vertebrate species. These additional elements include:

- Installation of signs at major over-snow vehicle trailheads and unloading sites. These signs will notify over-snow vehicle users of the requirement to fuel at least 100 feet from riparian areas, ask visitors to report any spills to the nearest Ranger Station, and ask users to reduce idling time of their over-snow vehicles so emissions will not be concentrated at the sites. These trailheads will also include information as to where and when it is appropriate for over-snow motorized recreation opportunities.

- A monitoring plan designed to determine trends in over-snow vehicle use and cross country skiing as well as to further define the relationship between winter recreation use and forest carnivores.

A document entitled “Flathead National Forest –Evaluation and Compliance with NFMA Requirements to Provide for Diversity of Animal Communities” (Project Record Exhibit O-66), as well as a document entitled “Flathead National Forest Winter Motorized Recreation Forest Plan Amendment: Effects at Forest and Regional Scales—Compatibility With NFMA Requirements for Maintaining Species Viability” (Project Record Exhibit O-50), as well as the analysis completed and disclosed in the FEIS further addresses the NFMA requirements for fish and wildlife.

Based upon a thorough consideration of these factors and the information in the FEIS, I conclude that the Selected Alternative provides adequate assurance that habitat will be provided in sufficient quantity, quality and distribution to provide for the diversity of plant and animal communities. This conclusion is further supported by the information disclosed in the FEIS, the biological assessment, biological evaluation, and biological opinion (Project Record Exhibits M-3, D-D 10, and D-D 12).

C. *Endangered Species Act*

The Flathead NF prepared a biological assessment on this proposed Winter Motorized Recreation Plan and the associated amendment to the Forest Plan (Project Record Exhibit D-D 10). This biological assessment evaluates in detail the potential effects of the proposed Winter Motorized Recreation Plan and the associated Forest Plan amendment on listed species and species proposed for listing. The biological assessment determined that the proposed amendment “*may affect-likely to adversely affect the threatened grizzly bear.*” It also determined that the proposed amendment would result in a “*may affect-not likely to adversely effect*” on endangered gray wolf and the threatened Canada lynx. It also made a “*no effect*” determination on the endangered peregrine falcon, the threatened water howellia, bull trout, and the threatened bald eagle.

The Forest Service requested that the USFWS review the biological assessment. In a letter dated March 3, 2006, the USFWS concurred with the determinations of the biological assessment, and issued a biological opinion to address potential impacts on grizzly bear (Project Record Exhibit D-D 12). The Flathead NF will adhere to the terms and conditions outlined in the March 3, 2006, biological opinion (Project Record Exhibit D D-12).

D. *NEPA - Environmentally Preferred Alternative*

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations implementing NEPA require that the ROD specify "the alternative or alternatives which were

considered to be environmentally preferable" [40 CFR 1505.2(b)]. This alternative has generally been interpreted to be the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in NEPA's Section 101 (CEQ's "Forty Most-Asked Questions," 46 Federal Register, 18026, March 23, 1981). Ordinarily, this means the alternative that causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment; it also means the alternative that best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources.

All of the action alternatives provide a greater degree of protection for wildlife habitat than the existing direction. However, as discussed on pages 6-18 of this ROD, the Selected Alternative provides the greatest overall protection of wildlife habitat and is therefore identified as the environmentally preferred alternative.

E. Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898)

The Selected Alternative was assessed to determine whether it would disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations, in accordance with Executive Order 12898. No impacts to minority or low-income populations were identified during scoping or effects assessment.

F. The Clean Water Act and State Water Quality Standards

Implementation of the Selected Alternative will not result in any discernible effects to water quality and will comply with the Clean Water Act.

G. The Clean Air Act

By participating in the Montana and Idaho Interstate Airshed Group, complying with the Memorandum of Understanding with the Montana Air Quality Bureau, and meeting the requirements of the State Implementation Plan and the Smoke Management Plan, the proposed activities will comply with the Forest Plan and the 1977 Clean Air Act.

H. National Historic Preservation Act, American Indian Religious Freedom Act, and Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act

Cultural resource overviews have been completed on all areas to be impacted by over-snow vehicle activities. No cultural resources are expected to be affected by this action. Section 106 compliance and consultation with the Montana State Historic Preservation Office (MtSHPO) for this project has been completed (Project Record Exhibit G-2).

I. Government-to-Government Relations

The Forest Service consulted with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes during the analysis process. The intent of this consultation has been to remain informed about Tribal concerns regarding the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA) and other Tribal issues. In addition, the Flathead, Kootenai, and Upper Pend O'reille Indian Tribes reserved rights under the Hellgate Treaty of 1855. These rights include the "right of taking fish at all usual and accustomed places, in common with citizens of the Territory, and of erecting temporary buildings for curing; together with the privilege of hunting, gathering roots and berries, and pasturing their horses and cattle upon open and unclaimed land." The federal government has trust responsibilities to Tribes under a government-to-government relationship to insure that the Tribes reserved rights are protected. Consultation with the tribes throughout project planning helps insure that these trust responsibilities are met.

J. Management of off-road vehicles

The Selected Alternative will provide for regulation, enforcement, and monitoring of off road vehicles in accordance with recent agency policy for Travel Management (36 CFR Parts 212, 251, 261, and 295, November 2005) (Project File Exhibit O-63).

IX. APPEAL PROVISIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.11. A written appeal must be submitted within 45 days following the publication date of the legal notice of this decision in the Daily InterLake newspaper, Kalispell, Montana. It is the responsibility of the appellant to ensure their appeal is received in a timely manner. The publication date of the legal notice of the decision in the newspaper of record is the *exclusive* means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Appellants should not rely on date or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Paper appeals must be submitted to:

USDA Forest Service, Northern Region	<i>or</i>	USDA Forest Service, Northern Region
ATTN: Appeal Deciding Officer		ATTN: Appeal Deciding Officer
P.O. Box 7669		200 East Broadway
Missoula, MT 59802		Missoula, MT 59807

Office hours: 7:30 to 4:00 p.m.

Electronic appeals must be submitted to:

appeals-northern-regional-office@fs.fed.us.

In electronic appeals, the subject line should contain the name of the project being appealed. An automated response will confirm your electronic appeal has been received. Electronic appeals must be submitted in MS Word, Word Perfect, or Rich Text Format (RTF).

Appeals must meet the content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14. Additional records in support of the environmental analysis are available for public review at the Flathead Forest Supervisor's Office, 1935 3rd Ave. E, Kalispell, MT 59901. For further information on this decision, contact Rob Carlin, Planning Staff Officer (406-758-5322).

If no appeal is received, implementation of this decision may occur on, but not before, five business days from the close of the appeal filing period. If an appeal is received, implementation may not occur for 15 days following the date of appeal disposition.

/s/ Cathy Barbouletos

November 17, 2006

CATHERINE BARBOULETOS

Forest Supervisor

Flathead National Forest

Date



APPENDIX A

I. Comparison of Existing Forest Plan Direction to Amended Forest Plan Direction Authorized by this Decision

Existing Forest Plan Direction ²	Amended Forest Plan Direction Under this Decision
Forest-Wide Recreation Standard	
³ Recreation Standards 1 – 13 (p. II-22) - No change	Add the following: 14. The over- the-snow motorized recreation maps located in Forest Plan Appendix WW as well as over snow motorized vehicle use maps Figures 2a-2d provide direction on where over-snow motorized use may and may not occur. The direction displayed on these maps supercedes any conflicting direction in the Forest Plan.
Management Areas 2- 2F	
<u>Description</u> (p. III-5) Management Area 2A (107,203 acres) consists of unroaded lands suited for dispersed recreation that meet the ROS classification of semi-primitive nonmotorized. This Management Area occurs throughout the Forest and includes the Whitefish Divide and several other alpine ridges. It also includes Glacier Slough on the Swan Lake Ranger District. Management Area 2B (118,079 acres) consists of unroaded lands suited for dispersed recreation that meet the ROS classification of semi-primitive motorized. This Management Area occurs throughout the Forest. It includes portions of high elevation lands of the Swan Range north of the Lion Creek drainage.	<u>Description</u> (p. III-5) Change to: Management Area 2A (107,203 acres) consists of unroaded lands suited for dispersed recreation that meet the ROS classification of semi-primitive nonmotorized. Portions of this Management Area where over -snow motorized recreation is allowed have an ROS of semi-primitive motorized during the period of time that motorized use is allowed (see Appendix WW as well as over-snow motorized vehicle use maps Figures 2A – 2D). This Management Area occurs throughout the Forest and includes the Whitefish Divide and several other alpine ridges. It also includes Glacier Slough on the Swan Lake Ranger District. Management Area 2B (118,079 acres) consists of unroaded lands suited for dispersed recreation that meet the ROS classification of semi-primitive motorized. Portions of this Management Area where over-snow motorized recreation is prohibited have an ROS of semi-primitive non-motorized during the period of time that motorized use is not allowed (see Appendix WW as well as over snow motorized vehicle use maps Figures 2A – 2D). This Management Area occurs throughout the Forest. It includes portions of high elevation lands of the Swan Range north of the Lion Creek drainage.
Management Areas 2 - 2F	
<u>Goals</u> (p. III-6) MA 2: Dispersed recreation opportunities will be managed to meet the primitive ROS classification.	<u>Goals</u> (p. III-6) Change to: MA 2: Dispersed recreation opportunities will be managed to meet the primitive nonmotorized ROS classification. Motorized vehicle use is not compatible with the goals of this management area, other than use on forest system roads.

² Management area descriptions, goals, and standards are extracts from the Flathead National Forest Forest Plan. Please refer to the Forest Plan for a complete listing of Management Area goals and standards.

³ Changes are in italics.

Existing Forest Plan Direction²	Amended Forest Plan Direction Under this Decision
<p>MA 2A: Dispersed recreation opportunities will be managed to meet the semi-primitive nonmotorized ROS classification.</p> <p>MA 2B. Dispersed recreation opportunities will be managed to meet the semi-primitive motorized ROS classification.</p>	<p>MA 2A: Other than areas where over-snow motorized use is specifically allowed by the Forest Plan, dispersed recreation opportunities will be managed to meet the semi-primitive nonmotorized ROS classification. Portions of this Management Area identified in Appendix WW as open for over- the-snow motorized use will be managed to meet the semi-primitive motorized ROS classification during the time period that motorized use is allowed.</p> <p>MA 2B. Dispersed recreation opportunities will be managed to meet the semi-primitive motorized ROS classification, except where over-snow motorized use is prohibited as described in Appendix WW.</p>
<p>Standards (p. III-7)</p> <p>Recreation</p> <p>MA 2. No change.</p> <p>MA 2A: 1. Maintain trails for nonmotorized use.</p> <p>MA 2B. 2. While providing motorized access opportunities, some trails will be maintained for nonmotorized use. Permit but do not encourage motorized use of trails.</p>	<p>Standards (p. III-7)</p> <p>Recreation</p> <p>Add the following:</p> <p>MA 2: 5. Motorized access is not allowed off of existing forest system roads.</p> <p>Change to:</p> <p>MA 2A: 1. Maintain hiking trails for nonmotorized use.</p> <p>Add:</p> <p>MA 2A: 4. Over-snow motorized use is allowed in those portions of this Management Area depicted as open to over-snow motorized use in Appendix WW. Over-snow motorized use is prohibited in all other portions of this Management Area.</p> <p>MA 2B. 2. While providing motorized access opportunities, some trails will be maintained for nonmotorized use. Permit but do not encourage motorized use of trails. See maps in Appendix WW as well as Figures 2A-2D for areas where over-snow motorized access is not allowed. All portions of the trail within MA 2B to Bond and Trinkus Lakes on the Swan Lake District is closed to over-snow motorized use.</p>
Management Area 11 - 11C	
<p>Standards (p. III-46 & III-49)</p> <p>Recreation</p> <p>MA 11, 11A, 11C. 5. Nonmotorized recreation opportunities are provided in accordance with Recreation Opportunity Spectrum classification of the areas.</p>	<p>Standards (p. III-46 & III-49)</p> <p>Recreation</p> <p>Change to:</p> <p>MA 11, 11A, 11C: Nonmotorized recreation opportunities are provided in accordance with Recreation Opportunity Spectrum classification of the areas. Over-snow motorized use is allowed in those portions of these Management Areas depicted as open to motorized use in Appendix WW as well as over snow motorized vehicle use maps Figures 2A – 2D.</p>
<p>Facilities – Roads</p> <p>MA 11: 1. Local roads may be constructed for habitat improvement purposes and will be closed to motorized public use except to allow snowmobile access during the winter.</p> <p>MA 11A. 1. Local roads constructed for habitat improvement purposes will be closed year round to motorized public use.</p>	<p>Facilities – Roads</p> <p>Change to:</p> <p>MA11: 1. Local roads may be constructed for habitat improvement purposes and motorized public use will be restricted yearlong unless over-snow motorized use is expressly allowed in Appendix WW as well as over snow motorized vehicle use maps Figures 2A-2D.</p> <p>MA 11A. 1. Local roads constructed for habitat improvement purposes will be closed year round to motorized public use unless over-snow motorized use is expressly allowed in Appendix WW as well as over snow motorized vehicle use maps Figures 2A-2D.</p>

Existing Forest Plan Direction ²	Amended Forest Plan Direction Under this Decision
Management Area 15 - 15E	
<p><u>Standards</u> (p. III-74)</p> <p>Facilities</p> <p>MA 15: No change.</p> <p>MA 15C: To allow white-tailed deer optimum dispersal and use of summer range, apply motorized road access restrictions to local roads; however, snowmobile use is permitted.</p>	<p><u>Standards</u> (p. III-74)</p> <p>Facilities</p> <p>Add the following.</p> <p>MA 15. The Bond Creek Trail is closed to over-snow motorized use except for the portion shown in Appendix WW as well as over snow motorized vehicle use maps Figures 2A-2D.</p> <p>Change to:</p> <p>MA 15C: To allow white-tailed deer optimum dispersal and use of summer range, apply motorized road access restrictions to local roads; however, over-snow vehicle use is permitted if allowed in Appendix WW as well as over snow motorized vehicle use maps Figures 2A-2D.</p>

II. Appendix WW Maps

Figures WW-1 through WW-4 from this ROD would be added to the Forest Plan. Figures WW-1 through WW-4 contain maps from the final Selected Alternative showing where over-snow motorized use is programmatically allowed and prohibited across the Forest.

III. Modifications to Wording in Appendix TT

The following modifications to Appendix TT of the Forest Plan are included with the implementation of the Selected Alternative and would be included in the amended Forest Plan. These modifications are similar to the modifications of the Forest Plan direction in that they are necessary to clarify Forest Plan management direction to reduce the confusion about over-snow motorized use across the Flathead NF.

Table A-2. Changes to Appendix TT Wording	
Existing Forest Plan	Selected Alternative
<p>Non-Denning Season Definition: The non-denning season is defined as that period from March 16 to November 15.</p>	<p>Non-Denning Season Definition: The non-denning season is defined as that period from April 1 through November 30.</p>
<p>RESTRICTED ROAD Definition: A road on which motorized vehicle use is restricted during the entire non-denning period. The road requires physical obstruction and motorized vehicle use in the non-denning period is legally restricted by order.</p>	<p>RESTRICTED ROAD Definition: A road on which motorized vehicle use is restricted during the entire non-denning period, with the exception of snowmobile use, which is allowed on some restricted roads. They include roads in Canyon Creek until April 15, roads in Sixmile until April 30, roads in Skyland Challenge until May 15, and roads in Lost Johnny until May 31. The road requires physical obstruction, and motorized vehicle use during prohibited periods is legally restricted by order.</p>
<p>RESTRICTED ROAD Use of Restricted Roads in Calculations: All restricted roads will be included in calculating total motorized access route density. Seasonally restricted roads, that are open during the non-denning period, will be considered open for the purpose of calculating open road density.</p>	<p>RESTRICTED ROAD Use of Restricted Roads in Calculations: All restricted roads will be included in calculating total motorized access route density. Seasonally restricted roads, that are open during the non-denning period, will be considered open for the purpose of calculating open road density. An exception is roads that are open for snowmobile use, where all other motorized use is restricted during the non-denning season. These roads will be considered closed</p>

Table A-2. Changes to Appendix TT Wording	
Existing Forest Plan	Selected Alternative
	for the purpose of calculating open road density. They include roads in Canyon Creek until April 15, roads in Sixmile until April 30, roads in Skyland Challenge until May 15, and roads in Lost Johnny until May 31.
<p>RECLAIMED ROAD Definition: A reclaimed road has been treated in such a manner so as to no longer function as a road or trail and has a legal closure order until reclamation treatment is effective.</p>	<p>RECLAIMED ROAD Definition: A reclaimed road has been treated in such a manner so as to no longer function as a road or trail during the non-denning season and has a legal closure order until reclamation treatment is effective. An exception is snowmobile use until April 15 in Canyon Creek, April 30 in Sixmile, May 15 in Skyland Challenge, and May 31 in Lost Johnny. See maps in Appendix WW.</p>
<p>RECLAIMED ROAD Administrative Use: Administrative use of reclaimed roads may not occur.</p>	<p>RECLAIMED ROAD Administrative Use: Administrative use of reclaimed roads may not occur during the non-denning season, other than over-snow vehicle use, which can occur during the period of time when public over-snow vehicle use is allowed.</p>
<p>RECLAIMED ROAD Closure Device: (b) The first portion of the road (typically 200 to 600 feet) will be treated in such a manner so as to preclude its use as a motorized or non-motorized travel way. This will include: (1) making the road junction area unattractive as a travelway, and (2) treating the remainder of the first portion to make awareness of the road improbable and preclude motorized or non-motorized use.</p>	<p>RECLAIMED ROAD Closure Device (b) The first portion of the road (typically 200 to 600 feet) will be treated in such a manner so as to preclude its use as a motorized or non-motorized travel way during the non-denning season This will include: (1) making the road junction area unattractive as a travel way, and (2) treating the remainder of the first portion to make awareness of the road less likely and minimize the likelihood of motorized or non-motorized use, other than over-snow vehicle use, where and when that use is allowable. (See Appendix WW and Figures 2A though 2D).</p>
<p>RECLAIMED ROAD Closure Device: (c) Treat the road, other than the first portion, in a way that will discourage its use as a motorized or non-motorized travelway.</p>	<p>RECLAIMED ROAD Closure Device (c) Treat the road, other than the first portion, in a way that will discourage its use as a motorized or non-motorized travel way, other than over-snow vehicle use, where and when that use is allowable (See Appendix WW and Figures 2A though 2D).</p>
<p>RECLAIMED ROAD Use of Reclaimed Roads in Calculations: Reclaimed roads that fully satisfy the definition of a reclaimed road will not be included in calculations of open motorized access density, total motorized access density, or security core area. Roads that have been treated, but that do not yet fully satisfy the definition of a reclaimed road will be included in calculations for total motorized access route density. These roads will not be included in calculations for open motorized access route density. These roads will not be included in calculations for open motorized access route density, or security core area if use is low-intensity and non-motorized.</p>	<p>RECLAIMED ROAD Use of Reclaimed Roads in Calculations: Reclaimed roads that fully satisfy the definition of a reclaimed road will not be included in calculations of open motorized access density, total motorized access density, or security core area. Roads that have been treated, but that do not yet fully satisfy the definition of a reclaimed road will be included in calculations for total motorized access route density. These roads will not be included in calculations for open motorized access route density. These roads will not be included in calculations for open motorized access route density, or security core area if use is low-intensity and non-motorized, or if motorized use is limited to snowmobile use during the non-denning season, or until April 15 in Canyon Creek, April 30 in Sixmile, May 15 in Skyland Challenge or May 31 in Lost Johnny as described in Amendment 24 and shown in Appendix WW and Figures 2A though 2D.</p>

Table A-2. Changes to Appendix TT Wording	
Existing Forest Plan	Selected Alternative
<p>SECURITY CORE AREA Definition: An area is at least 0.3 miles from open roads and high-intensity, non-motorized trails. Restricted roads may occur within the security core area, provided they have substantial immobile closure devices and legal closure orders during the non-denning period.</p>	<p>SECURITY CORE AREA Definition: An area is at least 0.3 miles from open roads and high-intensity, non-motorized trails. Restricted roads may occur within the security core area, provided they have substantial immobile closure devices and legal closure orders during the non-denning season. An exception is snowmobile use, which is allowed in the areas defined by Amendment 24: Canyon Creek until April 15; Sixmile until April 30; Skyland Challenge until May 15; Lost Johnny until May 31. See Appendix WW and Figures 2A though 2D.</p>
<p>SECURITY CORE AREA Restricted Roads in Security Core Areas: Restricted roads may occur within security core areas, but they may not receive motorized use during the non-denning period.</p>	<p>SECURITY CORE AREA Restricted Roads in Security Core Areas: Restricted roads may occur within security core areas, but they may not receive motorized use during the non-denning period, with the exception of snowmobile use, which is allowed in the areas defined by Amendment 24: Canyon Creek until April 15; Sixmile until April 30; Skyland Challenge until May 15; Lost Johnny until May 31.</p>
<p>SECURITY CORE AREA Vegetation Management Within Security Core Areas: Vegetation management may occur within security core areas so long as the objective and criteria for security core areas continue to be met. Access use levels must be met during the non-denning period, and requires that many planned activities, and all motorized activities, occur during the denning period. Exceptions to established criteria require reconsultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.</p>	<p>SECURITY CORE AREA Vegetation Management Within Security Core Areas: Vegetation management may occur within security core areas so long as the objective and criteria for security core areas continue to be met. Access use levels must be met during the non-denning period, and requires that many planned activities, and all motorized activities, occur during the denning season, with the exception of snowmobile use, which is allowed in the areas defined by Amendment 24: Canyon Creek until April 15; Sixmile until April 30; Skyland Challenge until May 15; Lost Johnny until May 31.as shown in Appendix WW and Figures 2A though 2D. Other exceptions to established criteria require reconsultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.</p>



APPENDIX B

MONITORING REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MOTORIZED WINTER RECREATION PLAN

I. INTRODUCTION

Over-snow vehicle use on the Flathead NF has increased significantly in the past 10 years. Over-snow vehicle counts at the Canyon Creek Snowpark increased from a seasonal average of 5000 from 1990 to 1995 to 13,000 per season from 1995 to 2001; an increase of 160 percent.

With increased use and popularity of the area comes a dilemma:

How can we ensure that the Flathead NF resources are protected and that quality visitor experiences are provided?

Reliable information on winter use will be important for updating management and travel plans. The Flathead NF will monitor winter use on the Flathead NF to help ensure compliance with the Forest Plan provisions and travel management decisions regarding motorized and non-motorized winter use. Weather conditions permitting, such monitoring shall consist of at least four monitoring flights and at least six visits per season to verify over-snow vehicle use. Monitoring and contacts with over-snow vehicle users and over-snow vehicle use groups will determine compliance with the Forest Plan and Flathead Winter Recreation Agreement and associated amendment. The Flathead Winter Recreation Agreement also requires the Flathead NF to work cooperatively with other signatories to the agreement, including the Montana Wilderness Association, and the Montana Snowmobile Association. Monitoring will be conducted to the extent that the budget of the Flathead NF and other cooperators allows. In addition, 36 CFR 295.5 requires monitoring of the effects of off road vehicle use on NFS lands and resources.

II. Issues

Monitoring of winter use can help address the following questions:

- When, where, and to what extent is winter use occurring throughout the Flathead?
- Will restrictions in over-snow vehicle use result in changes in over-snow vehicle use on the Flathead (i.e. move from one area of the Forest to another)?
- How will winter recreation use be distributed on the Flathead NF?
- Do areas of conflict exist between motorized and non-motorized recreationists? If so, where are areas of recreation conflict between motorized and non-motorized recreationists?
- Are education, maps, handouts, and public contacts helping the public to understand where to use over-snow vehicles?

- Is the capacity and function of trailheads adequate to safely accommodate existing and future use?
- How does winter use affect wildlife? (Trends to be developed.) Where does winter recreation use overlap key wildlife habitat?

III. Monitoring Plan

The Flathead NF agreed to develop a monitoring plan as a result of being party to the Flathead Winter Recreation Agreement of December 2001. This monitoring plan will cover all areas of the Flathead Forest where winter use occurs. The intent of the monitoring plan is to:

- Collect existing use data and determine the level of accuracy and whether it can be used as part of the baseline data.
- Identify points where data is currently being collected including who is collecting the data, and methodology.
- Map data using GIS and update maps annually.

A. *Monitoring Objectives*

1. Establish a baseline of winter recreation use to help determine overall trends and to determine if use changes. Monitoring will include the number and types of user. The objectives are to quantify use at selected trailheads to establish a baseline of winter use and to develop a less intensive monitoring method to index general winter use levels.
2. Determine the geographic extent of winter use, develop maps of concentrated and dispersed over-snow vehicle use, front country and backcountry skiing and other uses.
3. Determine the geographic extent of winter use, develop partnerships with State and others to effectively collect data and monitor use.
4. Visit with winter recreation users, inform, and discuss maps and areas open to over-snow vehicles, avalanche conditions, advisory number, and local classes on winter survival.

B. *Monitoring Design*

1. Trends in Over-Snow Vehicle Use/Cross Country Skiing

- a. Population – Winter recreation use (snowmobiles, skiers, others) on NFS lands from December 1 through late Spring. Additional informal monitoring outside these dates may occur by district personnel depending upon funding.
- b. Where – Key trailheads where use data will be collected. Trailheads may be the best indicator of overall use patterns resulting from changes in Forest Service management and will provide useful baseline data for the Flathead NF.

- c. The Forest Service may choose to monitor some remote, lesser used trailheads to help determine if use is shifting away from more developed areas.

Table B-1. Proposed Monitoring Sites		
Unit	Location	Comments
Ground-Based Monitoring		
GVRD North Fork	Canyon Creek	
	Fiberglass Hill	
	Big Mountain Ski Area	
	Big Creek	
	Hay Creek	
	Whale Creek	
	Trail Creek	
	Frozen Lake Road	
MT DNRC	Upper Whitefish Lake Parking Lot	Possibly in partnership with DNRC
	Olney Parking Lot	Possibly in partnership with DNRC
HHRD	Skyland Parking Lot	
	Summit Parking Lot	
	Desert Mtn Parking Lot	
	Hungry Horse Dam Parking Lot	
Swan Lake RD	Porcupine Parking Lot	
	Soup Creek Parking Lot	
	Crane Mountain	
	Sixmile	
Tally Lake RD	Brush Divide	
Aerial Flight Monitoring		
GVRD North Fork	Whitefish Divide	Aerial flights will encompass the entire forest. Locations listed to the left are site-specific points for monitoring
	Moose Creek	
	Whale Creek	
	Trail Creek	
	Frozen Lake	
Spotted Bear RD	Eastside Reservoir	
	Spotted Bear River	
	Bunker Creek	
Hungry Horse RD	Skyland Area	
	Dickey Creek	
	Paola Creek	
	Jewel Basin	
Swan Lake RD	Porcupine	
	Soup Creek	
	Mission Mountains	
	Sixmile	
Tally Lake RD	Brush Divide	
	Le Beau Area	

C. Methodology

1. Trail Counters, Aerial Flights, Onsite Visits

Trail counters are a relatively simple means of measuring use. To increase the accuracy and reliability of the data, a weekly reading of the counters will be done. To further increase accuracy of the counts, weekly field visits will be conducted making public contacts. At a minimum, four aerial flights will be done to verify compliance with the Forest Plan and Flathead Winter Recreation Agreement provisions regarding allowed winter use.

2. Trailhead Vehicle Counts

Vehicle counts at key trailheads may provide a relative measure of use over time. Trailhead counts should be conducted on a set schedule with counts segregated by weekdays and weekends.

3. Outfitter Data

Outfitter/guide actual winter use statistics also can serve as a useful benchmark for measuring trends and changes in use. The forests will compile actual winter use records for past five years and update the information annually.

D. Geographic Extent of Winter Use

Develop maps to reflect areas of concentrated use, areas of dispersed use, and additional trails. Local knowledge, ground surveys and aerial surveys are appropriate tools.

Stratify the forest to focus on areas where use is likely to occur and where potential wildlife conflicts are likely.

Forest will be responsible for maintaining up-to-date winter use maps by November 1 and will provide an annual monitoring report. Base maps include:

1. Areas closed to over-snow vehicle use (wilderness or travel plan closures);
2. Areas of concentrated over snow motorized use;
3. Areas of dispersed over snow motorized use;
4. Groomed over-snow vehicle trails;
5. Ungroomed over-snow vehicle routes;
6. Areas of concentrated non-motorized use;
7. Areas of dispersed non-motorized use.

E. Wildlife Monitoring

Key areas to focus where conflicts between winter recreation use and wildlife may occur were derived in part by:

1. Scientific literature on species' life history, distributions, habitat selection, and responses to human activities.
2. Site-specific information on wildlife species in the area including completed and on going studies.

As winter recreation use data is collected and refined we will be in a better position to determine if conflicts exist. Future studies, existing studies, and continued monitoring may better define the relationship between winter recreation use and forest carnivores.

F. Proposed Monitoring Budget

Table B-2. Proposed Monitoring Budget	
Item	Cost
Snow Ranger Position: Seasonal full-time	\$22,820
Snow Cat Rental	5,300
Gas and Maintenance	2,000
Over flights	3,900
Data analysis	500
GIS Map Compilation/Updates	1,205
Signage (Wilderness Boundaries and Agreement Boundaries)	1,750
Trail counters	3,500
Printing (forms, literature for public distribution, etc.)	10,000
Other	

G. Monitoring Activities

- Setting up and calibrating trail counters;
- Monitoring data on weekly basis for 110 days;
- Validation or double counting on a monthly basis;
- Monitoring flights including observer;
- Collecting data/documenting recreation use conflicts;
- Annual compilation of data, update maps.

H. Summary of Existing Data That May be Useful for Current Effort

Winter use data has been collected at trailheads around the forest. Existing data for the sample sites is summarized below:

Table B-3. Summary of Existing Data												
Unit	Location	93/94	94/95	95/96	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00	00/01	01/02	02/03	
GV	Canyon Creek	7801	9457	8748	9108	6911	5431	6997	6202	5784	3023	
HH	Skyland	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	4950	5620	4582	5957	1491	
HH	Pike Cr.	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	1651	2060	1146	1940	N/A	
HH	Hungry Horse Dam	N/A	963									
HH	Eastside Reservoir Road	N/A	118									
GV	Hay Creek	N/A	281									
GV	Trail Creek	N/A	69									
TL	Whitefish Lake Parking Lot	N/A	517									

Counters at Canyon Creek have been maintained intermittently in the past by the Flathead Snowmobile Club. Counter numbers do not seem to reflect the increased use witnessed at the Canyon Creek Snowpark. This is likely due to lack of regular maintenance of the counter wire. If too much snow accumulates on top of the wire, it will no longer register passes and must be reconfigured. Also, wires have at times been found to be cut or dismantled. The counter at Skyland is maintained and monitored by the Cutbank Snowgoers Club.

Numbers are low for 2002/2003, presumably due to the late arrival of snow.

I. Annual Monitoring Report

The Forest Monitoring Coordinator is responsible for compiling annual winter use monitoring data for the Flathead NF. Prior to November 1 annually, the Forest Service shall prepare a monitoring report containing an assessment of monitoring and enforcement of the winter use provisions of the Flathead Forest Plan and travel management decisions. The report will identify successes and problem areas identified through the monitoring process and will describe the public outreach, monitoring and enforcement steps the Forest Service has taken in the previous year with regard to winter use. This report shall be considered informational in nature only and does not preclude the Forest Service from presenting additional information in the event of administrative proceedings or litigation involving relevant issues.

Prior to December 1 annually, the Forest Service shall meet with interested parties, including Montana Wilderness Association and Montana Snowmobile Association, to discuss any problem areas identified through monitoring where violations of winter use restrictions are occurring, and to discuss what steps will be taken to address these problem areas.