

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIVERSE WINTER RECREATION.**

Snowmobilers and non-motorized winter recreationists differ on the amounts of National Forest they believe should be available to them. The Little Belt Mountains provide hundreds of miles of snowmobile trail for many central Montana residents, including approximately 200 miles of groomed trails. The majority of snowmobiling in north central Montana is concentrated here. Many cross-country skiers and snowshoers do not want to share the same settings with snowmobilers because of associated exhaust smells, noise, loss of solitude; and safety concerns with fast-moving vehicles. All are seeking settings that meet their specific recreation interests and needs. **There is also the potential future issue of ATV winter users seeking to use groomed snowmobile trails,** and whether that is a legitimate, safe use of these trails

### ***1. EXISTING CONDITION***

#### **a. Natural Characteristics**

Ninety-five percent of the analysis area is presently open to snowmobiling during the December to May snowmobile season. Only part of the terrain in the area is suitable for the activity. **ATV's with rubber tires are not presently allowed on groomed snowmobile trails. There are, however, opportunities for ATV use off-forest in areas that are not snow covered.** Just five percent of the area is non-motorized, restricting snowmobile use. An extensive groomed snowmobile trail system of about 200 miles exists for snowmobiles across the Little Belt Mountains. Grooming is accomplished by local snowmobile clubs, in cooperation with the Forest Service and with funding from Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks.

At Silvercrest near Kings Hill Pass, the Great Falls Ski Club maintains a groomed ski trail system approximately eight miles in length.

#### **b. Past Events and Conditions**

Snowmobile clubs have been responsible for grooming of trails for many years. The Great Falls cross-country ski club has also handled ski trail grooming. Parking for these kinds of activities has been centered at Kings Hill, and the facility has been expanded twice in the last 15 years.

**There is a special order for the Jefferson Division prohibiting the use of wheeled vehicles on groomed snowmobile trails in the winter. This includes ATV's, unless they are tracked. This restriction on ATV's is supported by a recent study entitled "Evaluation of ATV Use on Groomed Snowmobile Trails (International Association of Snowmobile Administrators, 2006). The analysis found the following concerns with ATV use on groomed trails:**

- **ATV's had serious difficulty (i.e. they got stuck) when they traveled off groomed trails. This occurred whenever they tried to turn around, or accidentally got off the compacted base. This problem, it was observed in the analysis, could cause ATV operators to hug the center of the groomed trail, creating safety issues with oncoming traffic.**
- **New, uncompacted snow on top of groomed trails changed the operational characteristics of ATV's, especially 2-wheel drive vehicles, making them more difficult to control.**
- **ATV's had a difficult time negotiating trails with deep and heavy moguling.**

- **ATV's struggled on steeper grades. An 8% grade on a groomed trail covered with newly drifted snow caused problems, as did an 19% grade that was on compacted snow.**
- **ATV's typically became stuck whenever they encountered long stretches of fresh, deep drifted snow on the trail. Wind drifting quickly changed the characteristics of the trail surface from compacted to uncompacted over a relatively short period of time, highlighting the importance of frequent, regular grooming.**

Lack of non-motorized winter recreation opportunities prompted work on the Forest between motorized and non-motorized winter recreation groups to identify several drainages where snowmobiling would be restricted and non-motorized winter recreation encouraged. This effort, known as the “Winter Resolution”, was adopted in part, temporarily, with the agreement that it would be considered in this travel planning effort. It is included as Winter Alternative 2.

**Table III-30. Snowmobiling Acres Available by Mountain Range**

<b>Restrictions</b>	<b>WINTER ALT. 1</b>	<b>WINTER ALT. 2</b>	<b>WINTER ALT. 3</b>
<b>Snowmobiling Not Allowed During December to May Season</b>			
Castles	2,507 (4%)	8593 (12%)	22,330 (32%)
Crazies	0	31,431 (55%)	39,485 (69%)
Little Belts	44,623 (6%)	429,128 (54%)	268,708 (34%)
<b>Sub-Total</b>	<b>47,130 (5%)</b>	<b>469,152 (49%)</b>	<b>330,523 (36%)</b>
<b>Snowmobiling Allowed During December to May Season</b>			
Castles	67,113 (96%)	61,026 (88%)	47,289 (68%)
Crazies	57,610 (100%)	26,175 (45%)	18,120 (31%)
Little Belts	751,737 (94%)	367,237 (46%)	527,658 (66%)
<b>Sub-Total</b>	<b>876,460 (95%)</b>	<b>454,438 (51%)</b>	<b>593,067 (64%)</b>
<b>Grand Total Acreage</b>	<b>923,590</b>	<b>923,590</b>	<b>923,590</b>

**Table III-31.**

**Winter Snowmobiling Available in Little Belts by Selected Areas**

<b>AREA</b>	<b>WINTER ALT. 1</b>	<b>WINTER ALT. 2</b>	<b>WINTER ALT. 3</b>
<b>Middle Fork Judith WSA</b>	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Deep Creek</b>	Yes	No	Mix
<b>Tenderfoot Creek</b>	Yes	No	Mix
<b>Smith River</b>	Yes	No	No



## ***2. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES***

### **a. Alternative 1 - No Action Alternative**

#### ***1. Direct and Indirect Effects***

Table III-30 shows the amount of motorized and non-motorized acres available. Snowmobilers have an excellent groomed trail system available to them, with opportunities to travel long distances on a variety of trail alignments ranging from roads to trails.

With 95 percent of the area legally available to snowmobiling, non-snowmobilers may feel their needs are not adequately represented. There are no non-motorized opportunities in the Crazy Mountains, and just 2,507 acres in the Castles. 94% of the Little Belts are open to snowmobiling. Table III-31 describes some of these areas by alternative. Although all of the national forest area in question is available for non-motorized use, conflicts may occur as described in the issue statement.

There is a distinct lack of space available for non-motorized use. Multiple use of both non-motorized and motorized on the same acres eliminates most opportunities for solitude, including peace and quiet. Safety may be compromised when high speed snowmobiles mix with skiers and snowshoers, especially when ski trails intersect with snowmobile trails, or when both groups use the same trail, especially when trail alignment is circuitous.

#### ***2. Cumulative Effects***

Travel plan decisions on the Rocky Mountain Ranger District may affect snowmobilers using that part of the Forest. If opportunities there are reduced substantially, many snowmobilers there will look to the Little Belts for opportunities, even though travel distances for many will be greatly increased. Similarly, reduced snowmobiling opportunities on other forests through travel planning could cause more snowmobilers to use the Little Belts, including participants from Helena, Kalispell, and Billings.

## **b. Action Alternatives 2-3**

### ***1. Direct and Indirect Effects***

Table III-30 shows that Alternative 2 is 49 percent non-motorized while Alternative 3 is 36 percent non-motorized **during snowmobiling season**. In the Castles, both Alternatives 2 and 3 allow the mountain range to remain mostly motorized. In both alternatives, the Crazies are primarily non-motorized. In the Little Belts, most acres are non-motorized in Alternative 2 and motorized in Alternative 3. Table III-31 shows areas open to snowmobile by several geographic areas.

Alternative 3 adds about 20 miles of groomed snowmobile trail to the existing system.

### ***2. Cumulative Effects***

There are no identified cumulative effects associated with any of the action alternatives.

## **c. Effects Common To All Alternatives**

### ***1. Direct, Indirect, and Cumulative Effects***

All recognize the importance of existing snowmobile and cross-country groomed routes and do not affect them, although Alternative 3 adds about 20 more miles of groomed trail. None of the alternatives allows wheeled vehicle use on groomed snowmobile trails.

## **d. Effects Common To All Action Alternatives**

### ***1. Direct, Indirect, and Cumulative Effects***

None of the action alternatives reduce existing groomed snowmobile trail mileages. All provide, to widely varying degrees, opportunities for non-motorized winter recreation away from motorized winter settings. Groomed snowmobile trails and cross-country ski trails are not expected to change by alternative, although acres of motorized and non-motorized winter settings vary by alternative.

