

# North Idaho Working Group:

## Process overview and Recommendations for OSV Travel Management on the North Zone of the Idaho Panhandle National Forest

### Intro

The Idaho Panhandle National Forest (IPNF) will soon begin a process to complete a new management plan for over-snow motorized travel in the North Zone of the IPNF. The Forest's over-snow motorized travel plan will include considerations for post-den emergent grizzlies, a map that depicts closed and open areas, and an implementation plan that outlines any future on-the-ground activities and timelines. Monitoring, signage, and enforcement will happen after the decision. The purpose of convening members of the public was to develop a stakeholder-based recommendation that balances over-snow vehicle (OSV) travel, various forms of winter recreation, and the protection of forest resources and wildlife habitat. This process was an opportunity to bring together community members, known as the North Idaho Working Group (NIWG), to develop creative approaches and solutions before the NEPA process begins. This report reflects an overview of the process, areas of agreement within the NIWG, and narratives from the represented interest groups, including areas for further work and discussion.

### Process Overview

The North Idaho Working Group (NIWG) sought to provide a collaboratively created over-snow vehicle ("OSV") travel plan map and rationale based upon the Kaniksu OSV Travel Planning Summary draft updated April 6, 2018 for designating routes and areas as open and closed (including time of year closures) for all classes of motorized vehicles. The 2018 draft was replaced by the April 2022 Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project Preliminary Project Information. The NIWG strove to meet the multiple-use mandate for Forest Service managed lands and to make designations within the Minimization Criteria identified in the Travel Management Rule. The NIWG worked to strike a balance between winter recreation (motorized and non-motorized), impacts to forest resources, and impacts upon and betterments for wildlife on the Bonners Ferry, Sandpoint, and Priest Lake Ranger Districts in the Kaniksu National Forest in the Idaho Panhandle National Forests.

To accomplish these objectives, the recommendations of the NIWG include: (1) areas that would be closed to OSV travel yearlong; (2) areas that would be open to OSV travel yearlong; (3) areas where OSV travel would be limited to designated routes when grizzly bears are out of hibernation; and (4) a system of designated groomed and ungroomed routes.

### Working Group Structure and Participating Interests

**Members:** Group membership is made up of representatives from various interest groups (see full list below for stakeholder representation). A final recommendation to the Forest Service is contingent upon a consensus vote where each member has one vote.

**Process Committee:** Made up of balanced interest group representation, this group will work to ensure balanced interest representation exists throughout the larger NIWG. They will work with the facilitator to determine agendas, advise on process steps, and help move the process forward in a timely manner.

**Agency experts and State, Congressional, and legislative advisors:** Agency representatives played a critical and time-consuming role in the process. These specific roles include technical expertise and service, leveraging existing relationships with stakeholders, etc.

**Third-party facilitator:** Forest and stakeholder efforts contracted with external facilitators through the National Forest Foundation to organize meetings, work with committees, and coordinate with members and agency experts.

### ***Stakeholder Representation***

Below are the interest groups commonly represented throughout the collaborative process:

- Citizens at large
- Conservation
- Elected officials
- Business/Chamber of Commerce
- Mining
- Motorized recreation
- Non-motorized recreation
- Outfitters & Guides
- Private landowners (inholdings or adjacent)
- Timber
- Wildlife

### **Monthly Meeting Outcomes and Decisions**

Below is an outline of the events, decisions, and outcomes of the NIWG monthly meetings. All documents and meeting records are available upon request.

**December** - the group will meet monthly; there are categories of interest areas for membership; there will be a Process Committee who will represent a balance of interests from the full group; oversee a balanced and inclusive process, work with the NFF to develop agendas and process steps, and ensure broad public visibility; State agency representatives, Congressional staff, and state legislators will serve in an advisory role.

**January** - members approve Process Committee members; members approve the Code of Conduct; the Process Committee will revise the NIWG's Purpose and determine a starting point for maps; there will be an electronic repository of information on the NFF's website; there will be continued work to reach out to interested parties and solidify group membership.

**February** - the USFS and USFWS staff panel share information about winter travel planning; membership is finalized.

**March** - the larger group will be broken up into six interest area groups each with a lead representative; these groups will start drawing lines on maps to bring back to the full group for further discussion.

**April** - the NIWG reviews the maps from the interest area groups; the group works to determine a process for achieving consensus; the snowmobiling interests will combine all of the interest area group's maps to combine these into a proposal for discussion; there are ongoing efforts to compile maps and documents.

**May** - review of the interest area group maps continues; the USFS shares information on Bear Management Units and Lynx Analysis Units; the group determines a timeline and process for the final recommendation.

**June** - the group reviews a final map of the combined interest area group recommendations; the USFS reviews the NEPA process; there is a consensus vote on a shared map for the recommendation to the USFS that will include a dissenting opinion.

## Summary of North Idaho Working Group Recommendations

The recommendations of the NIWG include: (1) areas that would be closed to OSV travel yearlong; (2) areas that would be open to OSV travel yearlong; (3) areas where OSV travel would be limited to designated routes when grizzly bears are out of hibernation; and (4) a system of designated groomed and ungroomed routes. These areas are included in the [Kaniksu Winter Travel Plan Recommendations Map](#).

### Forest Plan Management Areas

The 2015 Forest Plan for the Idaho Panhandle National Forests closed Management Areas (MAs) 1a Wilderness, 1b Recommended Wilderness, and 4a Research Natural Area to OSV travel. MA 3 Special Area includes Botanical, Geological, Pioneer, Recreational, and Scenic Areas. Except for the Northwest Peaks Scenic Area, OSV travel is prohibited in Botanical, Geological, Scenic, and Pioneer Areas. Finally, OSV travel is limited to designated routes in the Priest River Experimental Forest (MA 4b). The NIWG did not propose any changes in Forest Plan direction beyond the scope of travel planning. Baseline planning began by considering the MAs closed to OSV travel.

### Yearlong OSV closures for wildlife

The NIWG overlaid geospatial models for winter caribou habitat, wolverine denning habitat, grizzly bear denning habitat, and lynx habitat designations. Areas with the most overlap were prioritized for yearlong closures. Idaho Fish and Game provided input on priority mountain goat winter ranges. While it is unnecessary to protect every acre of wildlife habitat, the group sought to provide secure areas for wildlife in the Selkirk, Cabinet, and Purcell Mountains so that areas closed to OSV travel for the benefit of wildlife are well distributed. The Forest Plan MAs that are closed to OSV travel encompass some (but not all) of the priority wildlife areas.

In the Selkirk Mountains, the highest priority area for wildlife includes the National Forest lands adjacent to the Canadian Border. This area ranked high for all species, and it is connected to adjacent habitat north of the international border. Generally speaking, this area includes Boundary Creek, Grass Creek, Blue Joe Creek, Upper Priest River, Hughes Fork, the IPNF portions of the Salmo-Priest Wilderness, and the Forest Plan recommended additions to the Salmo-Priest Wilderness. As depicted on the [Kaniksu Winter Travel Plan Recommendations consensus map](#), this area would be closed to OSV travel yearlong with the exception of a few designated routes that provide OSV access around the north end of Upper Priest Lake and to a seasonally open OSV area between the Continental Mine and Joe Peak.

The second area in the Selkirk Mountains includes the Selkirk Recommended Wilderness and adjacent acreage in the upper end of the West Fork of Smith Creek, the upper end of Smith Creek, Farnham Ridge, Trout Creek, and the upper end of Ball Creek. This area ranked high for all threatened and endangered species and includes mountain goat winter range identified by Idaho Fish and Game. With the exception of the Trout Creek Road, which is proposed as an ungroomed OSV route, the entire area would be closed to OSV travel.

In the Purcell Mountains, a yearlong OSV closure is proposed in the area generally encompassed by the southern Buckhorn Ridge and Deer Creek Road. This area includes critical lynx habitat, wolverine denning habitat, and grizzly bear denning habitat. Designated routes would provide OSV access to the Solomon Lake area, but no off-route travel would be allowed.

In the Cabinet Mountains, the Scotchman Peaks Recommended Wilderness ranked highly for wolverine, mountain goat, and grizzly bear. This area is already closed to OSV travel yearlong under the Forest Plan. No additional acreage surrounding the recommended wilderness area in the Scotchman is proposed for yearlong closure.

A second closure in the Cabinet Mountains includes the area in Boulder Creek generally encompassing Iron, Boulder and Buck Mountains. This area ranked high for wolverine and grizzly bear. The existing OSV access up near the head of Boulder Creek on the old road toward Calder Mountain would be maintained.

### [Yearlong OSV closures for nonmotorized recreation](#)

The areas that would be closed yearlong to OSV travel for the benefit of wildlife would also provide nonmotorized winter recreation opportunities. For example, the West Fork Cabin is located in the West Fork of Smith Creek, which is closed to OSV travel yearlong under the NIWG proposal. Backcountry skiers would be able to travel by an OSV to the end of the trail and then ski into the West Fork Cabin and beyond, including West Fork Lake and West Fork Mountain. The surrounding area would be available to skiers without any perceived conflict with OSV use.

The Chipmunk Rapids and Hanna Flats Nordic trail systems would be closed yearlong to OSV travel in order to prevent user conflicts. The airstrip at Hanna Flats would remain open to OSV use.

The Mickinnick, Gold Hill and Mineral Point areas would also be closed to OSV use yearlong. These areas are used by snowshoers and fatbike users during the winter.

### [Areas open seasonally to off-route OSV travel](#)

In general, the remaining National Forest lands north of the Pend Oreille River, Clark Fork River and Lake Pend Oreille would be open to off-route OSV travel when grizzly bears are in hibernation (November 16<sup>th</sup> to March 31<sup>st</sup> in the Selkirks and December 1<sup>st</sup> to March 31<sup>st</sup> in the Purcell and Cabinet Mountains). OSV travel would be limited to the proposed system of designated routes displayed on the map outside of

those dates. This restriction is based upon core habitat requirements within Bear Management Units (BMUs). As BMUs meet standards, excess core would be evaluated to provide for yearlong open areas, as further described below.

On the Priest Lake Ranger District, the seasonally open lands include nearly everything between Priest River on the south end and Gold Creek and Hughes Fork on the north end. An extensive system of groomed and ungroomed routes exists in this area. OSV travel would be limited to these routes outside of the dates listed above.

On the Bonners Ferry Ranger District in the Selkirk Mountains, an area generally encompassing lower Smith Creek, Beaver Creek and Cow Creek would also be seasonally open to off-route OSV travel. The adjacent area between Joe Peak and the Continental Mine would also be seasonally open to off-route OSV travel while grizzly bears are in hibernation. This zone encompasses quality off-route OSV recreation opportunities in the area affected by the Trapper Peak Fire. It also provides a connection from the Kootenai River Valley side of the Selkirks over to the Priest Lake side.

Also on the Bonners Ferry Ranger District, most of Ball Creek, Myrtle Creek, Snow Creek, Caribou Creek, and the Roman Nose Lakes area would be seasonally open to off-route OSV travel except for the yearlong closure along the Selkirk Crest that includes the Selkirk Recommended Wilderness Area and the adjacent acreage identified on the map provided by the NIWG. A proposed designated system of routes in these drainages is also illustrated on the map.

In the Purcell Mountains in the Bonners Ferry Ranger District, with the exception of the proposed yearlong OSV closure between Deer Creek road and south Buckhorn Ridge, all other National Forest lands would be seasonally open to off-route OSV travel. Outside of the dates listed above, OSV travel would be limited to the proposed designated route depicted on the map provided by the NIWG.

Similarly, the portion of the Cabinet Mountains on the Bonners Ferry Ranger District would be seasonally open to off-route travel when grizzly bears are in hibernation with the exception of the proposed yearlong closure surrounding Iron, Buck, and Boulder Mountains. Outside closure dates, OSV travel would be limited to designated routes.

On the Sandpoint Ranger District, with the exception of the Scotchman Peaks Recommended Wilderness Area, all of the lands in the Cabinet Mountains would be seasonally open to off-route OSV travel. Outside of the dates listed above, OSV travel would be limited to the designated routes depicted on the map.

Last but not least, the portion of the Sandpoint Ranger District in the Pack River would be seasonally open to off-route OSV travel when grizzly bears are in hibernation. The upper Pack River was an area of significant discussion by the NIWG. The area between the West Branch of the Pack River and Harrison Peak is currently closed to OSV travel as a result of a series of caribou closures dating back to 1992 and the 2007 caribou lawsuit injunction. This area is prized for its open bowls, which offer excellent areas for OSV recreation and for backcountry skiing and snowshoeing.

Additionally, the existing caribou closure was in effect in 2000 when the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction (NRLMD) was approved. Under the NRLMD, some of the NIWG members assert that areas that were closed to OSV travel at the time of approval are to remain closed based upon a lack of snow compaction; however, a closure area may be lifted if equivalent habitat is closed in the same Lynx Analysis Unit (LAU) or the neighboring LAU. Other NIWG members assert that snow compaction is

a frequent condition through the inland Pacific Northwest based upon weather conditions and that the Caribou closure being lifted should not result in automatic closure for lynx. The NIWG members found consensus for the area to be open seasonally, as further described below.

While the NIWG proposal would lift the caribou closure in the upper Pack River, the situation for lynx on the North Zone of the IPNF would be improved because closures are proposed in other Lynx Analysis Units which contained no closures at the time the NRLMD was approved. For example, the NIWG recommendations include closures in the Blue-Grass, Saddle-Cow, Trout, Deer-Skin, Boulder and Scotchman LAUs, which did not exist in 2000.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that some of these closures are in areas that are arguably more valuable to lynx than the Pack River, such as the Blue-Grass and Saddle-Cow LAUs where there are recently verified sightings of lynx, and the Deer-Skin LAU, which encompasses critical lynx habitat. The NIWG is prepared to work with the Forest Service to resolve any outstanding concerns regarding lynx management and the areas of Snow Lake, Bottleneck Lake north to Myrtle Creek Road, and upper Pack River.

Representatives of the backcountry skiing community submitted a proposal to the NIWG to have the Pack River Road open to OSV travel but the Harrison and Beehive Basins closed to OSV travel. This would have enabled backcountry skiers to use an OSV to reach the end of the road and then ski the bowls in these basins without using the same terrain as other OSV users. Ultimately, backcountry skiing representatives reached consensus in favor of the NIWG recommendations including OSV use depicted on the map because the overall proposal represents a compromise that seeks to balance OSV use, backcountry skiing, wildlife, and other interests.

### Areas open yearlong to off-route OSV travel

In general, the lands in the Sandpoint Ranger District south of the Pend Oreille and Clark Fork Rivers are open yearlong to off-route OSV travel with the exception of Gold Hill and Mineral Point, which are used by non-motorized recreationists all year. A system of groomed routes is also illustrated on the map provided by the NIWG in the general area between Lake Pend Oreille and the High Drive.

There are some low elevation parcels on the Bonners Ferry Ranger District near Stampede and Bond Lakes that would be open yearlong to OSV travel because they pose minimal risk to wildlife and the snow is usually gone by April 1<sup>st</sup>.

Restrictions on off-route OSV travel in grizzly bear habitat were another significant topic of discussion by the NIWG. In order to comply with Forest Plan and achieve grizzly bear recovery, the seasonal limitations on off-route OSV travel north of the Pend Oreille and Clark Fork Rivers and Lake Pend Oreille were accepted by consensus of the NIWG, with a dissenting opinion from one member. The objection was to wildlife management by an overall landscape-wide closure approach compared to adaptive management based on animal monitoring. See Appendix A for dissenting opinion.

However, in an effort to provide some opportunities for yearlong off-route OSV travel in this landscape, the group looked at grizzly bear management units (BMUs) that have more core habitat than required by the Forest Plan. It was agreed that there is some flexibility to provide small yearlong OSV opportunities in these BMUs. Two year-long off-route OSV areas were identified at Roman Nose and Moose Lake, which are respectively located in the Myrtle and North Lightning BMUs. Each of these BMUs has more core habitat than is required by the Forest Plan. When all of the BMUs in the Selkirks are up to standard,

then the Roman Nose area may be opened to yearlong-off-route OSV travel. Similarly, when all of the BMUs in the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem are up to standard, then the Moose Lake area may be opened to yearlong off-route OSV travel. In addition, if Grizzly Bear recovery is reached, additional yearlong off-route opportunities may be identified.

## Conclusion

Through this collaborative process of discussion, information sharing, and compromise, the North Idaho Working Group reached a consensus recommendation for the Forest Service regarding over-snow vehicle travel management planning on the North Zone of the Idaho Panhandle National Forest. The product delivered here represents input from a diverse array of interests but does not encapsulate the perspectives of all users and stakeholders on the Forest. The Working Group enjoyed the process of working across interest areas and with various federal, state, and local agencies and government officials, and the group looks forward to continuing with this dialogue throughout the NEPA process.

## Appendices

Appendix A: Dissenting Opinion on the Consensus Map

Appendix B: Links to maps and data layers

## Appendix A

### NORTH IDAHO WORKING GROUP FOR IPNF WINTER TRAVEL PLAN

#### *DISSENTING OPINION OF THE COLLABORATIVE PROPOSAL*

*BY: CHUCK ROADY*

I respectfully differ in my opinion and recommendation from that of record on 6/21/22 of the NIWG Collaborative in their proposal to the Idaho Panhandle NF (IPNF) Winter Travel Plan. I believe a proactive wildlife management proposal, an “Adaptive Management Approach”, would be more representative & preferred by the majority of the winter users of the IPNF. Instead of moving forward with the complete closures of all identified areas in the Caribou critical habitat and the April 1<sup>st</sup> closures for Grizzly Bear den emergence “carte blanche”, this dissenting opinion recommends to monitor these areas for the concerned activity and / or presence of the species using an ‘if’/ ‘then’ scenario. “If” presence is confirmed and appropriate action is necessary, “then” close the respective areas to motorized winter recreational use. There are other regions in both the US and Canada where this adaptive management approach has been successfully implemented to the benefit of the respective endangered species and winter recreation users. This monitoring can be accomplished by multiple methods such as retaining a conflict management specialist during the winter to be in charge of critical habitat and den emergence areas, frequent surveillance flights, drone flights, and encouraging the self-reporting of animal presence by winter users themselves. There are already several federal and State flight contracts in place for monitoring bears and other respective needs.

I would certainly think this more positive proposal would be an excellent opportunity to present a workable solution to the court in the effort to lift the injunction on the Caribou while providing a proactive alternative to help protect grizzly bears emerging from their dens. The monitoring and adaptive closures have dual benefits for Canada lynx and wolverine if they are detected in these areas.

I believe this proposal could result in a more positive attitude by the general citizens of our local north Idaho communities towards the recovery efforts of endangered species.

Respectfully submitted,

Chuck Roady

June 22, 2022

## Appendix B

Please find links to the North Idaho Working Group maps and data layers below:

[Final consensus map](#)

[Conservation interest group maps](#)

[Motorized recreation interest group maps](#)

[Non-motorized recreation interest group maps](#)

[State agencies maps](#)

[First attempt at a consensus map](#)

[Data layers](#)

[Stakeholder submitted data](#)