

# **Environmental Assessment**

## **Tony Grove – Franklin Basin Winter Recreation**

### **Chapter 1 – Purpose and Need**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

This Environmental Assessment (EA) is intended to document the analysis of a proposal by the U.S. Forest Service to manage the mix of motorized and non-motorized winter recreation use in the Tony Grove/Franklin Basin area of the Logan Ranger District of the Wasatch-Cache National Forest. The analysis was conducted under the procedures of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended (NEPA). It has been prepared under agency policies and direction for implementing NEPA contained in Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 and Council on Environmental Quality Regulations (40 CFR 1500).

#### **1.2 Background and History**

Conflicts between motorized and non-motorized winter recreation uses have been a concern for a number of years. It appears the winter use conflict is not equally perceived by all users. From some motorized user's perspective, their use is not affected by the presence of the non-motorized user. However, many non-motorized users feel the quality of their experience is compromised by motorized use (e.g. sound, smell, and safety). Some feel that separating uses is the best way to address conflicts between users, while others feel this would only drive the polarized user groups further apart, diminishing the opportunity to resolve conflicts. Some motorized users feel separation of uses may result in higher densities of motorized users in the areas open to them. The Forest Service addressed these growing conflicts and concerns on the Logan Ranger District in the 2003 Revised Forest Plan and its accompanying environmental impact statement.

##### **1.2.1 Revised Forest Plan**

On March 19, 2003, Jack G. Troyer, Regional Forester for the Intermountain Region signed the Record of Decision (ROD) for the Revised Forest Plan for the Wasatch-Cache National Forest. He selected Alternative 7 as the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the Wasatch-Cache National Forest. The Revised Plan, as explained in the ROD (page 25), "provides for motorized use consistent with the growing demand and the nature of snow machine activity (i.e. long distances can be covered), while identifying areas where non-motorized users can enjoy winter recreational opportunities." The Revised Plan closed some areas to motorized use to reduce impacts to critical big game winter range. Some other areas were closed to motorized use to provide separation of uses for cross-country and backcountry skiing.

The ROD further stated: "Although the open and closed areas are shown on winter recreation maps in the Revised Plan, these are approximate lines and the actual

boundaries will be established in coordination with the State of Utah and local users to ensure that the areas are easily understood and will facilitate compliance. The actual boundaries will be displayed on Forest travel plans and where necessary posted on the ground.”

From the time of the decision revising the Forest Plan in March of 2003 through the Summer of 2006, people who were interested in winter recreation in Logan Canyon worked through several processes with the Forest Service to implement direction in the Revised Forest Plan. The Forest Plan generally depicted areas that were open and closed to winter motorized use in the Tony Grove/Franklin Basin area. The Forest Service met with the public to precisely define boundaries of these motorized and non-motorized winter areas and travel routes. However, the boundaries identified through this process were controversial because some people believed the final lines deviated too much from the areas depicted in the Revised Forest Plan, and therefore believed the boundaries were inconsistent with the Forest Plan. Accordingly, the Forest Service agreed to complete an environmental analysis to evaluate the proposed boundaries for the areas depicted in the Revised Forest Plan, and determine if the Revised Forest Plan would need to be amended for the boundaries that were to be established. The proposed action therefore includes establishment of the boundaries for the winter motorized area designations with the proposal to construct an over-the-snow connector trail in the Tony Grove/Franklin Basin area.

### **1.3 Proposed Action**

The Proposed Action (Alternative 1) defines a combination of motorized and non-motorized areas in the Tony Grove-Franklin Basin area and addresses the creation of a groomed snow trail (referred to as the “over-the-snow connector trail” in scoping) between the Tony Grove and Franklin Basin parking lots.

The project area is approximately 25,000 acres and is defined by the Mt. Naomi Wilderness boundary to the west, the Utah-Idaho state line to the north, Franklin Basin Road (FR 20006) and Highway 89 to the east, and generally Twin Creek road (to Bubble Springs) then northwest and west to the Wilderness boundary) to the south. Some alternatives alter the southern boundary slightly. The small difference is explained in the appropriate alternatives. See Appendix A for maps of the alternatives.

### **1.4 Purpose and Need**

The Tony Grove/Franklin Basin area is a unique and popular winter recreation area for both motorized and non-motorized winter recreationists. There is a need to manage the mix of motorized and non-motorized uses in this area, so that both groups can use and enjoy the area. For non-motorized users, this includes reasonable access from plowed parking to ski-able terrain, and accessible terrain closed to motorized use so that noise, smell, and tracking of powder are reduced. For motorized users, this includes access to higher, unique terrain, and egress for emergency and mechanical breakdowns with access to parking areas. Area boundaries need to be easily understood to promote compliance.

Big game winter habitat west of the Logan Canyon Highway needs to provide relatively less disturbance for wildlife using the area.

## **1.5 Scoping**

Regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality require that Federal agencies involved in NEPA analyses include “an early and open process for determining the scope of issues to be addressed and for identifying the significant issues related to a proposed action” (40 CFR 1501.7). This “scoping” is intended to focus the analysis on the important issues associated with implementing a proposal and to set aside concerns that are unrelated or not central to the pending action.

The Logan District Ranger mailed two scoping letters, the first on November 1, 2005 to 133 individuals and organizations and the second on April 14, 2006 to 227 individuals and organizations. The District received 96 responses to the first scoping letter and 170 responses to the second. All of the letters, emails, and comments were reviewed and individual comments were placed in general issue categories by the interdisciplinary team. A complete listing of the individual comments and categories is available in the project record. From scoping responses, public input, and work done by the Forest’s resource specialists, the Forest Supervisor identified some preliminary issues.

## **1.6 Notice and Comment**

The preliminary EA and accompanying maps were posted on the Wasatch-Cache National Forest website on September 29, 2006. Notification of the availability of the preliminary EA for review and comment was sent by mail/email to 349 individuals and organizations that same day. A Legal Notice was posted in the Salt Lake Tribune (newspaper of record) on September 30, 2006, beginning the 30-day comment period. Nine individuals requested hardcopies, either in person or by mail.

The District received 582 letters commenting on the preliminary EA. A team of 12 permanent/seasonal Logan District personnel was called together to conduct content analysis on the comment letters. Each of the individual letters was read and coded by a member of the team.

Over 1900 individual comments were identified from the 582 letters received. The comments were then grouped into “summary statements”, combining similar comments. The NEPA requires we formally respond to comments, with one of five possible responses, which include, among other options, “adding or supplementing issues, and adding or modifying alternatives”. In response to the comments received on the preliminary EA, some issues have been added or modified from the issues in the preliminary EA and a number of alternatives have been added (see Section 1.6.1 Significant Issues and Chapter 2, Alternatives). Responses to comments and an explanation of the content analysis process are provided in Appendix B. Interested parties may review the original response letters on file at the Logan District Office.

### 1.6.1 Significant Issues

Several respondents voiced a concern that issues related to motorized winter recreation raised during scoping were not included in the preliminary EA. Other respondents expressed their concerns were not fully covered in the skier experience issue in the preliminary EA. Still others responded that their issues related to the effects of the winter recreation decision on their private land or private interests within the project area were not addressed in the EA. The following issue statements have been modified to include issues raised by both motorized and non-motorized winter recreationists during scoping and in response to the preliminary EA.

These issues have been determined to be significant to this analysis and were integral to the development of all the alternatives disclosed in Chapter 2. Issues were also used to disclose effects in Chapter 3.

#### 1.6.1.1 Motorized winter recreation experience

Many motorized users commented that they too had safety concerns, but they were not necessarily related to conflict and confrontations as described in the preliminary EA. Motorized users' safety concerns relate more to the need for flexibility in taking alternate routes back to the Tony Grove or Franklin Basin trailheads from the high country, as weather, snow, or avalanche conditions change for the worse. They also expressed the need for various egress corridors (routes) down from the high terrain for emergency and mechanical problems. Some also expressed desire for dispersal of motorized use, stating that closing areas to motorized use could lead to crowding in the remaining areas, causing safety concerns and detracting from the motorized recreation experience. The issue of "lost opportunities, as seemingly more and more areas are closed to motorized use" is covered under the discussion of cumulative effects (Chapter 3).

**Issue Statement: Implementation of the proposed action or the alternatives may affect the motorized winter recreation experience.**

Indicators used to compare alternatives:

- Safety and Egress
  - Amount of flexibility within an alternative, to take alternate routes coming out of the higher terrain (to adjust to changing weather, snow, or avalanche conditions)
  - Relative accommodation for emergency and mechanical egress to trailheads
- Dispersal/Crowding
  - Relative amount of area open to motorized use within the project area
  - Availability of parking at trailheads

### **1.6.1.2 Non-motorized winter recreation experience:**

Many non-motorized users (including skiers, snowshoers, dog-sledders, and others) commented that winter motorized and non-motorized uses are incompatible and give rise to conflicts or confrontations when the two activities are done in the same area. To some, smelling exhaust fumes and hearing engine noise detract from the experience of skiing in an undisturbed, wild setting. Snowmobiles leave tracks through fresh snow, reducing skiers' opportunities to ski untracked powder. Many expressed the desire for a safe, quality non-motorized experience, with variety of terrain for all levels of skiers, including families, within a reasonable distance of parking areas.

**Issue Statement: Implementation of the proposed action or the alternatives may affect the non-motorized winter recreation experience.**

Indicators used to compare alternatives:

- Safety (collisions and confrontations)
  - Amount of area with separation-of-use
- Reasonable access from parking areas
  - Relative accessibility to a variety of terrain from parking areas
- Air quality/Smell of exhaust
  - Compliance or non-compliance with Clean Air Act air quality standards at the Tony Grove and Franklin Basin parking areas
  - A qualitative comparison of exhaust fumes detected by skiers (the smell of exhaust as it affects the non-motorized experience)
- Noise
  - Noise and the relative effect on the winter non-motorized experience
- Untracked powder
  - Areas of powder untracked by snowmobiles available to skiers

### **1.6.1.3 Manageability and Enforceability**

Concern was expressed that boundaries need to be easily understood and clearly visible. Having clearly defined boundaries helps recreationists find and stay within appropriate areas and helps to decrease unintentional trespass. This in turn, may decrease the potential for conflict.

Enforceability of boundaries and closures is affected by such parameters as distance from the trailheads, difficulty in accessing interior and distant boundaries and corridors, and information necessary to implement (such as signage and/or poles).

**Issues Statements:**

**To what relative degree are the boundaries within the proposed action or the alternatives clearly recognizable and easily understood?**

**To what relative degree of effort is the proposed action or the alternatives implemented and administered?**

Indicators used to compare alternatives:

- Manageability
  - Relative ease of understanding boundaries
- Enforceability
  - Relative effort involved in implementing and enforcing the alternatives

**1.6.1.4 Private Land/Private Interests**

Some respondents expressed a concern that private property (such as adjacent private land or private yurts) and/or private interests (such as skier and snowmobile outfitter and guide operations under Special Use Permits with the Forest Service) may be negatively affected by the management activities included in the proposed action and/or other alternatives. Some respondents felt there was no need for accommodation of these private land/interests.

The Forest Plan gives the following guideline for addressing issues related to Land Ownership (Forest Plan, page 4-53), “Where there is an assertion that there is a nonfederal property interest, such as a right-of-way under RS 2477, an in-holding, or other such interest (including easements) that may be impacted by Forest Service management activities, the Forest Service will evaluate the assertion and give due consideration to any valid existing property right that may exist” (G80). The Forest Service must consider the effects of its management actions on adjacent private land and private interests.

**Issue Statement: Private land and/or private interests may be affected by the proposed action or the alternatives.**

Indicator used to compare alternatives:

- The relative degree to which private property/interests would be affected. Private interests include: 1) private in-holding with a private yurt located on it, 2) private landowners adjacent to NFS desiring motorized access, 3) outfitter and guide permittee providing motorized use, 4) outfitter and guide permittee providing non-motorized use and overnight yurt stays, and 5) use of USU yurt just south of the project area.

### 1.6.1.5 Water Quality/Riparian/Wetlands/Aquatics

Some respondents stated the snow trail may impact the aquatic ecosystem by introducing sediment, oil, and gas from the groomer into streams. Blading of shrubs and soil along portions of the snow trail to allow for grooming may result in increased erosion. Sediment may reach the Logan River and may negatively impact individual Bonneville cutthroat trout. Snow compaction and trail maintenance in other portions of the trail may affect wetlands vegetation.

**Issue Statement: Water quality/riparian/wetlands/aquatics may be negatively affected by the proposed action or the alternatives.**

Indicator used to compare alternatives:

- The relative degree to which water quality/riparian/wetlands/aquatics would be affected by the proposed action or any of the alternatives

### 1.6.1.6 Scenery

Some respondents are concerned about meeting the guidelines for scenery management (Scenery Integrity Objectives) set in the Forest Plan. They are concerned it may be visible from the highway and other locations and affect the scenic integrity of the landscape.

**Issue Statement: The proposal or alternatives may affect the scenic integrity of the landscape.**

Indicator used to compare alternatives:

- The relative degree to which scenery management meets guidelines

### 1.6.1.7 Wildlife

The snow trail passes through an area designated as crucial moose winter range by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR). Concern was raised that unrestricted snowmobile traffic in designated areas could impact moose populations. Others felt there would be little impact to wintering moose in this area.

In addition, concerns were raised about effects to other wildlife species, such as the Canada lynx and wolverine. Some respondents were also concerned about the effects to the wildlife corridor.

**Issue Statement: Wildlife/habitat may be negatively affected by implementation of the proposed action or the alternatives.**

Indicator used to compare alternatives:

- The relative degree to which wildlife would be affected by the proposed action or any of the alternatives

### **1.6.1.8 Unauthorized OHV Use of the Snow Trail**

Off-highway vehicles (OHV's) may try to use the snow trail during the summer.

This issue will be addressed through mitigation. Barriers will be placed as needed on the trail during the summer months to prevent use by OHV's. The effectiveness of barriers will be monitored periodically.

### **1.6.2 Issues Eliminated from Further Study**

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) NEPA regulations explain in Sec. 1501.7 "...identify and eliminate from detailed study the issues which are not significant or which have been covered by prior environmental review (Sec. 1506.3)..."

The following non-significant issues were identified as those: 1) outside the scope of the proposed action; 2) already decided by law, regulation, Forest Plan, or other higher level decision; 3) not relevant to the decision to be made; or 4) conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence.

- Increase the capacity of trailhead

This suggestion is outside the scope of the proposed action. The proposed action includes deciding areas to be managed as non-motorized and motorized opportunities rather than deciding how many people can park and where.

- Geographic areas outside the project area such as terrain on the eastside of Highway 89 or Green Canyon

The proposed action is specific to the Tony Grove – Franklin Basin area because of the strong sense of place associated to it by both motorized and non-motorized users. Consideration of areas elsewhere on the Logan Ranger District in determining the mix of recreation opportunities is outside the scope of the proposed action. A broader forest-wide analysis of winter recreation was conducted during Forest Plan revision; Tony Grove – Franklin Basin is the single area where further analysis is needed.

- Several comments suggested a permit system for trailhead parking should be initiated. Others suggested skiers should pay for trailhead grooming and maintenance just as snowmobilers pay through their vehicle registration.

This suggestion is outside the scope of the proposed action. The proposed action includes deciding areas to be managed as non-motorized and motorized opportunities

rather than deciding if parking should be operated under a permit system and if so who should be charged.

- Funding levels for law enforcement

While budgets are always limited, some funding is spent each year on law enforcement. Funding levels are determined through Congressional appropriation and are outside the scope of the proposed action. We'll spend allocated dollars in the most practical way as possible.

- Compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act

Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 no person with a disability can be denied participation in a Federal program that is available to all other people solely because of his or her disability. In conformance with Section 504 wheelchairs are welcome on all NFS lands that are open to foot travel and are specifically exempted from the definition of motor vehicle in 36 CFR 212.1 even if they are battery powered. There is no legal requirement to allow people with disabilities to use OHVs or other motor vehicles on roads, trails and areas closed to motor vehicle use because such an exemption could fundamentally alter the nature of the Forest Service's travel management program (7 CFR 15e.103). Reasonable restrictions on motor vehicle use applied consistently to everyone are not discriminatory.

- After-market exhaust systems are noisy and should not be allowed.

Utah State laws govern the registration and operation of snowmobiles. This suggestion is outside the scope of Forest Service authority.