



Forest Service  
Idaho Panhandle National Forests



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# DRAFT Preliminary Info

an introduction to

# KANIKSU



for the greatest good

# over-snow vehicle TRAVEL PLANNING

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## Kaniksu OSV Travel Planning Summary

Updated 4/6/2018

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*Snow provokes responses that reach right back to childhood. ~ Andy Goldsworthy*

## **Introduction**

This document contains preliminary information the Idaho Panhandle National Forest (IPNF) is considering for designating a system of routes and areas for over-snow vehicle use on the Kaniksu portion of the IPNF. Information provided in this document should be considered preliminary and is subject to change as the IPNF works through information gathering, planning, and analysis of environmental consequences for OSV travel on the Kaniksu portion of the IPNF.

The Kaniksu OSV Project Area, consisting of the three northern ranger districts of the IPNF, offers some of the most sought after over-snow vehicle recreational opportunities in Idaho. The area is also important to several animals listed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service as Threatened and Endangered Species. Of particular interest, portions of the Selkirk Mountains have served as habitat for woodland caribou, and many parts of the Kaniksu provide habitat for grizzly bears.

## **What is over-snow vehicle (OSV) travel planning?**

The Travel Management Rule requires local Forest Service managers to designate which National Forest System roads, trails, and areas are available for over-snow vehicle use. If appropriate, the Forest Service may designate routes and areas by class of vehicle and time of year.

At the end of the OSV travel planning process a decision will be documented in a record of decision. After the decision is signed the over-snow vehicle use map (OSVUM) will be available at no charge. When the OSVUM is available, over-snow vehicle travel will not be allowed off designated routes and areas.

## **What is an over-snow vehicle?**

A motor vehicle that is designed for use over snow and that runs on a track and/or a ski or skis, while in use over snow.

## **What are the classes of over-snow vehicles?**

The Forest Service defines classes of vehicles as:

- Snow Coach/Snow Cat: Motorized over-snow vehicles greater than 50" in width that are designed for multi-passenger use, that runs on a track or track and/or ski(s)
- Other OSV > 50": Other over-snow vehicles greater than 50" in width, including SUVs with track conversion kits
- Snowmobiles: Motorized over-snow vehicles that operate on a track, use one or more skis for steering, have handle-bar steering, and a seat designed to be straddled by the operator
- Other OSV ≤ 50": Other over-snow vehicles less than or equal to 50" in width, including ATVs with track conversion kits

## **What uses are exempt from OSV use designations?**

The following uses are exempt from the designations, so they will be allowed regardless of designations:

- Limited administrative use by the Forest Service
- Use of any fire, military, emergency, or law enforcement vehicle for emergency purposes
- Authorized use of any combat or combat support vehicle for national defense purposes
- Law enforcement response to violations of law, including pursuit, and
- Over-snow vehicle use that is specifically authorized under a written authorization issued under Federal law or regulations.

## **What is the history of OSV use on the Kaniksu?**

Over-snow vehicle use in the Kaniksu has changed over the years. In the early days machines were fairly low-powered and were infamous for not being mechanically reliable. This limited the range of their use. All of that has changed. OSVs now come in a variety of forms; and new technology makes them more powerful and dependable, allowing riders to access steeper and more challenging terrain and cover greater distances in shorter times. Additionally, track conversion kits are a relatively recent innovation that are gaining popularity. These kits turn many types of wheeled vehicles, from ATVs to full-size four-wheel-drive vehicles, into powerful over-snow machines. As a result of this improved technology, over snow use is increasing in popularity and expanding to areas on the Forest previously considered inaccessible.

The history of OSV use on the Kaniksu NF is punctuated by several key events. As early as 1969, the Northern Region of Forest Service (R1) printed a snowmobiling brochure with emphasis on "a popular acceptance of snowmobiling and cooperation for land owners." Trail maps often referring to the Kaniksu National Forest date back to the mid-1980s. In 1982 the Forest Service signed their first agreement with the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation outlining an agreement to assist the Idaho Panhandle NF by providing snowmobile grooming.

In the early 1990s two separate grooming committees were established: Priest Lake Groomers Association and East Bonner County Groomers. Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation established groomed routes and partially funded the grooming operations through Idaho snowmobile registrations. By the late 1990s snowmobile clubs were becoming more active, requesting events such as poker runs, additional developed trailheads, and safety huts. These groups continue to be active volunteers partnering with the USFS to provide grooming services for OSVs.

From the late 1990s until winter 2006, the winter recreation program on the Kaniksu remained fairly static in terms of facility development, miles of trail groomed, historic patterns of use, and areas available for OSV use.

Management of woodland caribou in the area has, in part, shaped the over-snow vehicle use on the landscape. Caribou in Idaho historically occurred as far south as the Salmon River. Since the 1960s the last remaining woodland caribou population in the lower United States have been restricted to the southern Selkirk Mountains of northeastern Washington and northern Idaho. It is estimated that the Selkirk population may have numbered up to 400 animals prior to the 1950s. As recently as the 1950s the Selkirk population consisted of approximately 100 animals. By the early 1980s the southern Selkirk population was reduced to approximately 25 animals, which centered their distribution in British Columbia. The last confirmed woodland caribou in Montana was sighted in 2002.

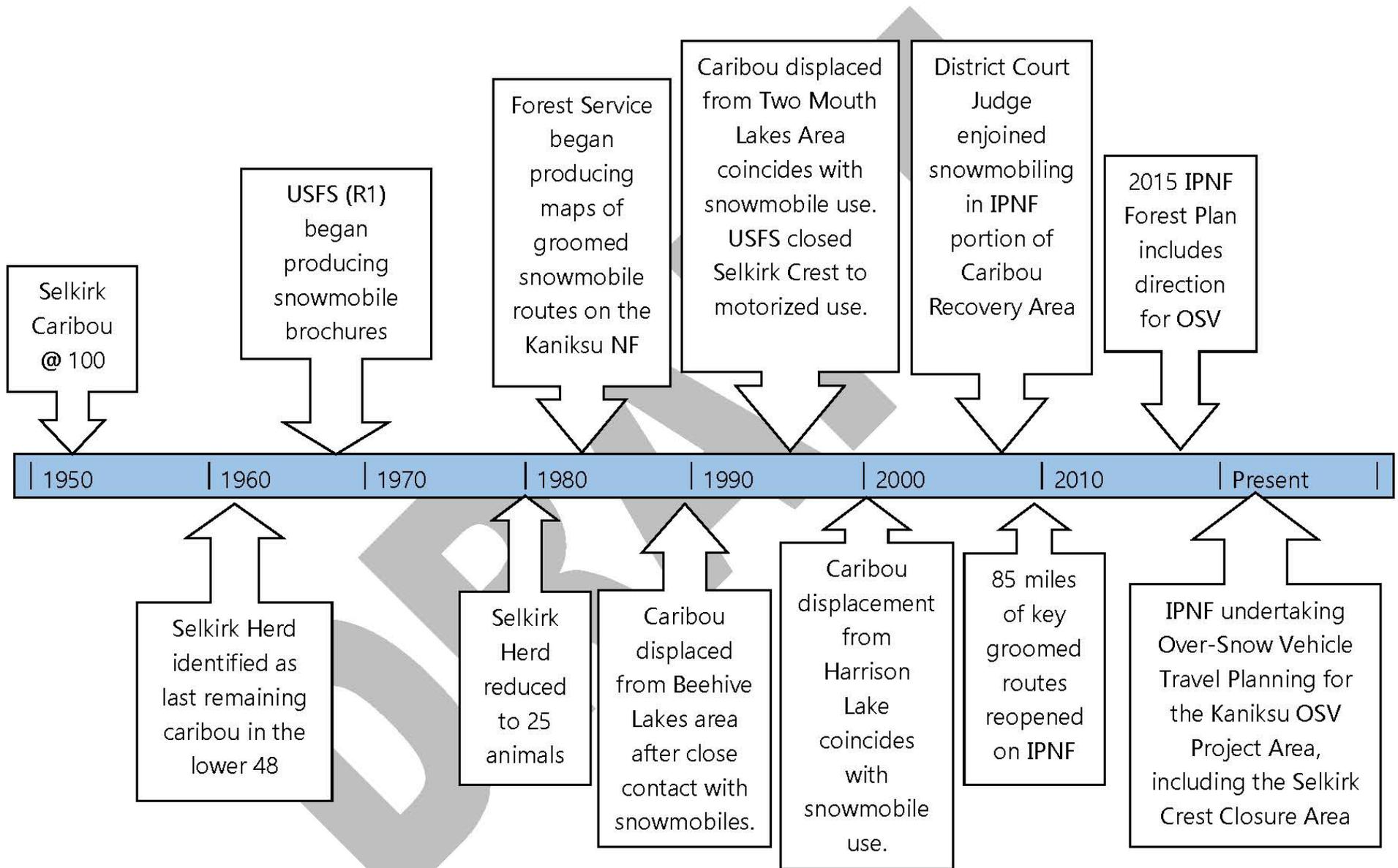
In April 1992, monitoring by Idaho Department of Fish and Game indicated that caribou were displaced from the Beehive Lakes area following an instance where snowmobiles were coming in close contact with the band of caribou. In March 1994 two instances were reported by Idaho Department of Fish and Game where caribou were displaced from the Two Mouth Lakes Area following use of that area by snowmobiles. Again in March 1997, after the closure was implemented, caribou were observed having been displaced from the Harrison Lakes area to the north following use of that area by snowmobiles.

Idaho Panhandle National Forests management direction prohibits motorized use during the winter on approximately 72,452 acres within the Caribou Recovery Area. Of this, 14,724 acres, referred to as the Selkirk Crest closure was closed administratively to motorized use beginning in the winter period in 1994. The Selkirk closure was delineated and implemented as a result of identified conflicts between snowmobiles and caribou.

In 2007, U.S. District Court Judge Robert H. Whaley enjoined all snowmobiling activities in the IPNF portion of the caribou recovery area, requiring the Forest Service to issue a Special Closure Order that limited winter motorized use to specific areas and trails, and closed winter motorized access to areas deemed important to late winter foraging and /or caribou travel along the Selkirk Crest. This closure does not apply to the lands managed by the Idaho Department of Lands on the east side of Priest Lake. In November 2008, several key trails (totaling 85 miles) were opened to over-snow vehicle use within the North Zone of the IPNF as a result of a court order modifying the injunction.

The closure ordered by the District Court Judge is a permanent injunction until the Forest Service conducts over-snow travel analysis in the Selkirk area and completes consultation with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In 2015 the Forest Plan for the Idaho Panhandle National Forest was approved. It includes direction for over-snow vehicle management in parts of the Kaniksu OSV Project Area.



**Figure 1 - Timeline of Kaniksu OSV Use**

## Why is the Forest Service doing OSV travel planning now?

The purpose of Kaniksu Over-snow Vehicle Travel Plan is to designate an over-snow vehicle system of routes and areas for public access and recreational travel on the Kaniksu Project Area. Desired conditions for the Idaho Panhandle National Forest include providing year-round outdoor recreation opportunities in a range of settings (Forest Plan FW-DC-AR-04) and making a variety of motorized winter recreation opportunities available (Forest Plan FW-DC-AR-05). An objective of the Idaho Panhandle National Forest is to have groomed motorized trails available for the public to use (Forest Plan FW-OBJ-AR-04).

An over-snow vehicle system is currently available on the Idaho Panhandle National Forest; however, the need for developing a new over-snow vehicle travel plan for the Kaniksu Project Area at this time is driven by:

- The US Fish and Wildlife Service's biological opinion for the Idaho Panhandle National Forests 2015 Land Management Plan requiring the Idaho Panhandle NF to conduct over-snow travel planning within five years of implementing the Revised Forest Plan to address grizzly bear and other federally listed species (Forest Plan appendix E p. 185).
- A 2007 federal district court order enjoining snowmobile use and snowmobile trail grooming in a large part of the caribou recovery area within the Idaho Panhandle National Forest until the Forest Service completes consultation with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service over the effects of these activities on woodland caribou.
- The 2005 Travel Management Rule (as amended in 2015) requiring the Forest Service to designate roads, trails, and areas on NFS lands to provide for over-snow vehicle use where snowfall is adequate for that use to occur, and if appropriate by class of vehicle and time of year. All Forest Service units will now use a consistent approach for designations by identifying on a map those routes and areas that are open to over-snow motor vehicle use. Once designations are in place, motorized travel off designated routes and areas will be prohibited. Currently, in the Kaniksu Project Area, areas are open for over-snow vehicle use unless they are closed.
- Executive Order 11644 requiring the Forest Service to, among other things, designate "the specific areas and trails on public lands on which the use of off-road vehicles may be permitted, and areas in which the use of off-road vehicles may not be permitted." The executive order applies to over-snow vehicle use.

The project will identify routes and areas acceptable for over-snow vehicle use while minimizing:

- damage to soil, watershed, vegetation, and other forest resources;
- harassment of wildlife and disruption of wildlife habitats;

- conflicts between motor vehicle use and existing or proposed recreational uses of NFS land or neighboring federal lands; and
- conflicts among different classes of motorized vehicle uses of NFS lands or neighboring federal lands.

## **What is “minimization criteria”?**

The Travel Management Rule requires the Forest Service to designate over-snow vehicle (OSV) routes to minimize:

- damage to soil, watershed, vegetation, and other forest resources;
- harassment of wildlife and disruption of wildlife habitats;
- conflicts between motor vehicle use and existing or proposed recreational uses of NFS land or neighboring federal lands; and
- conflicts among different classes of motorized vehicle uses of NFS lands or neighboring federal lands.

These are referred to as the “minimization criteria”. The Travel Management Rule requires the Forest Service to comply with the minimization criteria in a manner that is feasible, prudent, and reasonable in light of the agency’s multiple-use mandate (*WildEarth Guardians v. USFS* June 22, 2015). The Forest Service has a mandate to provide for multiple uses of the national forests, including over-snow vehicle access and recreation opportunities, so “minimization” includes the use of over-snow vehicles on National Forest System lands. Accordingly, the IPNF Forest Plan provides for over-snow vehicle use.

## **What is the process for over-snow vehicle travel planning?**

**Public Involvement:** Over snow travel planning provides for community input and local decision-making so that those with knowledge of local areas can provide input on how to best balance natural resource issues with recreational uses of national forest land. Public, community, Tribal, and local government participation and input is essential for the project’s success. Designations must be made with public input, ensuring protection of natural resources while providing appropriate over-snow recreational opportunities.

**Develop a proposed action:** We are in this phase now. The Forest Service will use public input provided by a collaborative focus group; local, state, and federal governments; and tribes to develop a proposed action that meets the requirements of the travel management rule and falls within the decision space allowed by the forest plan.

**Environmental analysis documented in an environmental impact statement (EIS):** The Forest Service will conduct environmental analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act

(NEPA), which provides opportunities for input from local communities, local government, and all interested parties.

**Identify issues resulting from the proposed action:** When the proposed action is developed you will have an opportunity to provide comments on the proposed action and make recommendations about issues and alternatives. The FS plans to have public open house meetings and take input using a variety of methods during this step in the process.

**Develop alternatives to the proposed action:** The Forest Service will review public input to identify issues resulting from the proposed action. Those issues will drive alternatives to the proposed action.

**Conduct environmental analysis and document in an environmental impact statement (EIS):** An interdisciplinary team of specialists will predict the environmental consequences of the proposed action and the alternatives then document findings in a draft EIS.

**Distribute the draft EIS for public comment:** The draft EIS will be available for 45 days to allow the public to review and comment.

**Distribute the FEIS and draft record of decision:** The FS will respond to comments on the draft EIS then issue a final EIS and a draft record of decision announcing the Responsible Officials selected alternative. This begins the administrative review process (commonly referred to as the "objection process"). People who have submitted substantial comments during this process would have standing to file an objection during the 45-day objection filing period.

**Issue a signed decision:** When the objection resolution process is complete, the Responsible Official will sign a record of decision.

**Publish the over-snow vehicle use map (OSVUM):** The OSVUM will show where over-snow vehicles may be used on National Forest System lands in the three northern districts of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests.

## **Who is the responsible official?**

The Forest Supervisor of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests is the Responsible Official for this project. This person has the authority to make and sign the decision for the project.

## **Decision Space / Sideboards**

The route and area designations will be consistent with the 2015 Forest Plan for the Idaho Panhandle National Forest. Routes and areas proposed for OSV use will be compared with all Forest Plan components before the proposed action is finalized. The following components are the most pertinent for OSV designations.

The Forest Plan made decisions for over-snow vehicle use that will not be changed with this planning process (see the existing condition map), including:

- Management Areas where **no motorized vehicle use** is allowed:
  - Salmo-Priest Wilderness (MA1a)
  - Recommended Wilderness (MA1b): Salmo-Priest, Scotchman Peaks, and Selkirk
  - some Botanical, Geological, Pioneer, Recreational or Scenic Areas (MA3)
  - Research Natural Areas (MA4)
- Areas where **no additional OSV routes or areas are allowed**: Wild segments of Eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers (MA2b)
- Areas where **OSV will be on designated routes only**: Priest River Experimental Forest (MA4b)
- No **grooming of snowmobile routes in grizzly bear core habitat after April 1** of each year (FS-STD-WL-04)

Other Forest Plan direction allow flexibility in designating OSV routes and areas. The Forest Plan includes the following desired conditions and goals directly related to over-snow vehicle designations:

- Management activities should avoid or minimize disturbance in areas of predicted denning habitat during spring emergence (April 1 through May 1) (FS-GDL-WL-01).
- During the winter period of December 1 to April 30, disturbance from over-snow vehicle use should be avoided or minimized in areas known to be occupied by caribou (FW-GDL-WL-04).
- Provide over-snow vehicle opportunities and contribute to the social and economic well-being of local communities while meeting wildlife management objectives (GA-DC-AR-LK-05, GA-DC-AR-PO-02, GA-DC-AR-PR-01, GOAL-SES-01, FW-DC-SES-01, FW-DC-SES-02), specifically providing:
  - areas with low levels of disturbance or no disturbance for woodland caribou in the Selkirk Mountain range (GA-DC-WL-PO-03 and GA-DC-WL-PR-04),
  - low levels of human disturbance for denning activities of wide-ranging carnivores in the upper elevations of Northwest Peaks and the Selkirk Mountains (GA-DC-WL-LK-03), and
  - habitat conditions for wildlife movement, especially woodland caribou, throughout the Selkirk recovery zone (GA-DC-WL-PR-01).
  - FW-GDL-WL-11. Big Game. Management activities should avoid or minimize disturbance to native ungulates on winter range between December 1 and April 30, with the exception of routes identified on MVUM as open to motor vehicle use. Management activities that occur on winter range during the winter period should concentrate activities to reduce impacts to native ungulates.

- FW-GDL-WL-12. Big Game. Management activities should be avoided on native ungulate winter range areas during the critical mid-winter period (January and February) when snow depths most likely influence movement and availability of forage.

## Existing Condition

**2007 court-ordered injunction plus the 2015 IPNF Forest Plan direction:** A federal district court order enjoined snowmobile use and snowmobile trail grooming in the caribou recovery area within the Idaho Panhandle National Forest until the Forest Service completes consultation with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service over the effects of these activities on woodland caribou. This has been the condition for OSV use on the Kaniksu for the last 11 years. The 2015 Forest Plan no longer allows motor vehicle use in some routes and areas outside the injunction area. Approximately 500 miles of ungroomed snowmobile routes and 316 miles of groomed snowmobile routes are available on NFS lands for the public to use. Public OSV use is prohibited on approximately 311,130 acres of NFS lands. See the corresponding map.

## Pre-Injunction Condition

**2007 pre-injunction use:** Prior to the 2007 court-ordered injunction, over-snow vehicle use was allowed on more routes and areas than is currently allowed under the injunction and the 2015 Forest Plan. Approximately 330 miles of ungroomed snowmobile trails and 640 miles of groomed snowmobile trails were available on NFS lands for the public to use. Public OSV use was prohibited on approximately 94,800 acres of NFS lands. See the corresponding map.

## What are the preliminary issues to be addressed for OSV route and area designations?

**Wildlife (grizzly, caribou, lynx, wolverine, and big game):** Descriptions of the requirements and regulatory framework for these species are given in the Draft Wildlife Summaries (separate documents). The proposed action will be designed to minimize harassment of the animals and disruption of their habitats. See corresponding maps for grizzly bear, woodland caribou, Canada lynx, big game, and wolverine.

**Conflict Between Uses:** Some snowmobile routes are located on roads that provide access to homes and are open to full-size wheeled vehicles, so full-sized wheeled vehicles are using the same route as snowmobiles. This could be dangerous, and the plowing and grooming results in early spring melt making conditions poor for snowmobiling. The proposed action may be designed to address this issue if suitable alternate routes can be identified.

**Peatlands:** Peatland habitats have special protection in the IPNF Forest Plan, due largely to both their sensitivity to impacts and the species richness within these habitats of rare species-both plants and animals (FW-GDL-VEG-09). Some subalpine fen peatlands occur in popular

snowmobile areas (including areas around Roman Nose lakes, Moose Lake, Blacktail Lake, etc.). Snowmobile use in these areas when snow levels are low pose two potential impacts to peatlands:

- Snow and ice compaction could affect spring emergence and pollinator relationships
- Rutting and soil disturbance (if OSV use around the lakes continues into early thaw) can affect both hydrologic water levels, as well as cause direct and indirect effects to peatland-dependent plant species.

Monitoring would be used to determine if changes in designations would be needed to protect these areas.

**Whitebark Pine:** Whitebark pine is currently listed as a sensitive plant species in the Forest Service's Region One, and is afforded protection both through IPNF Forest Plan, as well as the National Forest Management Act to avoid activities which could trend the species towards federal listing (FW-GDL-VEG-07). The US Fish and Wildlife Service is planning to perform the whitebark pine species assessment in 2018 or 2019, with a likely decision shortly thereafter. If the species is listed under the Endangered Species Act, any potential impacts to the species would need to be assessed and potentially consulted with USFWS. There is evidence to show that snowmobile use when snow levels are low can contribute to branch or top pruning of conifers, which could delay flowering/reproduction, growth, and potentially breakage points (which could serve as secondary pathogen entry points.)

**Plantations:** OSVs driving over areas where trees are planted can break the tops of seedlings that protrude above the snow. When this happens, young trees grow multiple tops and are unable to form single, straight boles. Tree planting is an important and expensive financial investment in our future forests. The proposed action may not be able to address this because potential effects change as trees grow and new areas are harvested or burned, but we may be able to inform the public about the concern.

**Cultural Resources:** Some snowmobile routes direct publics to areas containing sensitive cultural resources. Without clear guidance to avoid these areas, snowmobile riders could inadvertently damage these resources. The proposed action may be designed to address this issue by designating routes through an area without allowing OSV use off the designated routes. Another options is to monitor and make adjustments if it becomes apparent that changes in designations would be needed.

**Sediment:** As snow begins to recede in the spring people drive full-size vehicles on wet roads, creating ruts because they want to drive right up to the snow line so they don't have to run their OSVs on mud. When this occurs near a stream crossing and ruts are created, they can channel sediment from the road to the stream.

## **Why is the FS conducting OSV travel planning on the Kaniksu portion of the IPNF? Why not a smaller or larger area?**

The resulting Kaniksu Over-snow Vehicle Use Map will correspond to the same area as the Kaniksu Motor Vehicle Use Map for motorized , wheeled, summer vehicle use.

A federal district court order enjoined snowmobile use and snowmobile trail grooming in a portion of the caribou recovery area within the Idaho Panhandle National Forest until the Forest Service completes consultation with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service over the effects of these activities on woodland caribou. Caribou are only known to occupy portions of the northern part of the IPNF, so there is no need to address effects of OSV use to caribou in the Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District or St. Joe Ranger District.

The forest plan for the Idaho Panhandle National Forests requires over-snow travel planning be conducted to address grizzly bear which are only known to occupy portions of the northern part of the IPNF, so addressing this requirement of the forest plan does not involve the southern districts. Grizzly bear core habitat and potential denning habitat occur outside the current closure for the caribou injunction, so we need to address OSV planning beyond the caribou injunction area.

### **How can you help?**

- ✓ Keep informed
  - Website address: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=53091>
  - Get on the mailing list:
    - send your contact info to: [lmyhre@fs.fed.us](mailto:lmyhre@fs.fed.us) or
    - sign up for email notifications by clicking on "Subscribe to Email Updates" at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=53091>
  - Provide input to the focus group
- ✓ Share information
  - Let your friends, family, coworkers know about the project
  - Share the website address
  - Get them on the mailing list
- ✓ Provide input
  - Give information to the focus group about specific routes and areas
  - Be specific about your concerns

### **Draft Wildlife Summaries**

Draft Wildlife summaries are located in separate documents.