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Park Service strikes compromise on snowmobiles in Yellowstone

By Juliet Eilperin, February 22, 2013



A hiker stands on top of Mount Sheridan, overlooking Heart Lake in the Red... (LUCY NICHOLSON/REUTERS )

After more than 15 years, the Yellowstone snowmobile wars may have reached an end.

The National Park Service announced Friday it has a new plan for managing snowmobiles and snow coaches in Yellowstone National Park, a compromise between tour operators eager to bring tourists in during the winter and environmentalists who oppose the pollution and noise accompanying such vehicles.

“We think we’ve got something they can get behind,” said Yellowstone Superintendent Dan Wenk.

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Under the proposal, which will take a few months to finalize, the park will allow 50 snowmobile groups and 60 snow coaches — small buses on skis or tracks — to enter daily. During the winter season, which runs from Dec. 15 to March 15, there can be no more than an average of seven snowmobiles in a group, although during peak times operators can take up to 10 snowmobiles in a group.

The increasingly popular snow coaches — more than half of Yellowstone’s winter visitors now come on them — must reduce their vehicle emissions by 25 percent over the next few years, while both snowmobiles and snow coaches will be required to run more quietly. Snowmobiles will face a noise limit of 67 decibels, while snow coaches are bound to 75 decibels, and the speed limit will be reduced from 35 mph to 25 mph.

Tour operators and park advocates said they could accept the plan, although they hoped to make small tweaks before it becomes final in the late spring.

“The concept is great,” said Yellowstone Vacations co-owner Randy Roberson, whose family company brings roughly 5,000 visitors each winter into Yellowstone on snowmobiles and snow coaches. He praised the plan’s flexibility.

Mark Pearson, conservation program director for the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, said he believed the plan could “pass muster with pretty much everybody.”

“They’ve figured out how to minimize the impacts on air quality, wildlife and noise to a sufficient extent to protect the park’s wildlife, while allowing a robust amount of access for visitors,” said Pearson, whose group represents individual conservationists in the region as well as some environmental groups and businesses.

Kristen Brengel, who directs legislative and government affairs for the National Parks Conservation Association, said she and other environmentalists would continue to push park

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officials to make additional changes, such as reevaluating whether it is acceptable to have as many as 10 snowmobiles in a single group.

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The issue of how to handle motorized winter recreation in Yellowstone has spanned three administrations and sparked four lawsuits. Yellowstone, established in 1872 as the first national park, has the world's largest collection of geysers as well as [wolves](#), [grizzly bears](#) and bison. In 2000, under the Clinton administration, the Park Service decided to phase out most snowmobile use in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Park on the grounds that the machines harmed both the environment and the visitors' experience. A federal court threw out the decision as too restrictive in 2001, and the Bush administration adopted two different plans allowing motorized recreational vehicles in the park during the winter.

Roberson said that it will be easy to meet the proposal's stricter technology requirements for snowmobiles, since he turns over half of his fleet each year. While it will be more expensive to upgrade snow coaches, it was "doable," Roberson said.

Then-Interior Secretary Gale A. Norton was a vocal proponent of allowing snowmobiles into Yellowstone, even going to Yellowstone [to ride one herself](#) in 2005.

But in 2008 a federal judge threw out a revised Park Service plan allowing for 540 recreational snowmobiles and 83 snow coaches in Yellowstone as excessive, calling it "arbitrary and capricious, unsupported by the record, and contrary to law."

Since 2009, the park has operated under an interim plan that permits up to 318 snowmobiles and 78 snow coaches per day.

"I'm excited to get it over with," Roberson said of the controversy. "There's certainty here."

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 **rj2008** wrote:  
2/22/2013 11:41 AM MST

Why do business interests always win out over nature. If they want to see the park in winter then walk around or stay out.



**ksilton** responds:  
2/22/2013 12:28 PM MST

Then the same rules should apply in the summer. Cars and busses clog the roads in Yellowstone during the summer. Maybe everyone should park at the entrance and hike in or stay out.



**elwoll** responds:  
2/22/2013 1:01 PM MST

Hike in or stay out. Great idea!

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