

Meeting Notes
Henry's Fork Watershed Council
March 11, 2014

THE FUTURE OF WINTER RECREATION IN ISLAND PARK

The meeting was held at the Fremont County EMS building in Island Park. Sign-in began at 8:30 a.m.; the meeting started at 9:00 a.m. with introductions and community building led by Dale Swensen (Fremont-Madison Irrigation District).

Community Building

Dale welcomed everyone (71 people in the circle). He explained how the Council works and why we observe two minutes of silence to begin. It is a time of reflection, a time to settle down. We don't allow personal attacks. We try to keep on an even keel. After the minutes of silence, Dale asked for comments or input from the attendees.

Jan Neish said thanks for the snow. Brandon Hoffner gave some background on the topics to be discussed. A year-long series of meetings will discuss Island Park issues as part of the Futures Study. A subcommittee has been assembled to help between meetings.

Jan Brown said online links to the meeting materials can be found at Sustainable Yellowstone and the Henry's Fork Watershed Council. She said we are looking at where Island Park is headed over the next 20 to 50 years.

Tom Cluff said he wants to make sure the future of Island Park isn't decided on the pages of a Boise newspaper or in the alleys of Washington, D.C.

Vance Derricott said he wanted to put the question about a national monument to rest once and for all, and asked what the answer is.

Steve Woodruff called attention to the good things in Island Park and called the meeting a tremendous opportunity to decide what its future should be. He suggested putting aside any discussion of a national monument and focusing on the assets of Island Park.

Steve Pinther asked what the end goal of the meetings is. We can do it better if we know the end goal. He acknowledged the \$1.5 million HUD grant and what is being studied, and he pointed out Rexburg used its share to study high-speed Internet.

Tom Cluff said the goal is to plan the future of Island Park. He said he will use the information to update the county's comprehensive plan. The goal is to give everyone a chance to talk about the issues they are concerned about.

Ken Watts asked if the amendment to the HUD grant has been approved. He said the language in the application indicated the money would be used to fund study of a possible national monument and not a futures study. Jan said the amendment has not been approved by HUD, and there has been "no spending from that."

National Snowmobile Trends and Public Lands Issues

Sandra Mitchell, director of Public Lands, Idaho State Snowmobile Association

Mitchell said she has been working on the Mount Jefferson issue for the 22 years she has been involved with ISSA. The southern area is closed to snowmobiles but not the northern area. A full-force media campaign was launched to make sure snowmobilers are aware of the closure. "I think most people want to follow the rules." Mount Jefferson and the issues are known around the country.

The association is funding a wolverine study to gather scientific data. When the Payette NF proposed closing tens of thousands of acres to recreation because of wolverines, there was no science available. The only available research had been done by Jeff Copeland, so he was contacted. The ISSA study is not about the impacts of snowmobiles on wolverines, but on the impacts of winter recreation. We have no idea if we have more impact from motorized or non-motorized activities. "So far, what we are finding is amazing." Females have a 100-square-mile territory while males range over 500 square miles which means one male services five females. Males protect their homes and the kits. They choose to live in high recreation areas.

"If we had had that scientific information about lynx, we wouldn't be in trouble" with areas being closed to snowmobiles because of alleged impacts on lynx.

Payette has backed off from the proposed closure.

The ISSA doesn't believe snowmobiles should be allowed everywhere, but it wants good reasons for closures, based on scientific data. The organization is fully engaged in the national monument issue, she said.

The ISSA is involved in four lawsuits that will impact snowmobiling and winter recreation:

The Winter Wildlands Alliance (WWA) Appeal - WWA filed a suit asking the court to order the Forest Service to include OSV's in travel management planning across the nation. They prevailed. The Magistrate's decision issued on March 29, 2013, has four adverse impacts on the snowmobile community:

- It orders the Forest Service to eliminate the snowmobile exemption from the 2005 Travel Management Plan (TMP) process.
- Since the snowmobile exemption is eliminated, snowmobiles now fall under the closed until open arrangement as mandated in the OHV Rule. If USFS cannot amend, redo, or issue new TMPs that cover snowmobiles because of sequestration and other limits, snowmobile access will be lost.
- The opinion reinterprets the 1972 and 1978 Nixon and Carter Executive Orders (EO's) regarding ORV access to public lands putting all ORV access at risk.
- Fourth, the Idaho ruling effectively allows activists to bring lawsuits on the basis on the EO's.

The appeal is pending before the District Court.

Clearwater National Forest Lawsuit - ISSA filed a suit against the Clearwater Forest Travel Plan in 2012. We did so because of Region 1's policy of managing all Recommended Wilderness Areas (RWA's) as Wilderness which then eliminated all snowmobiles and mountain bikes in those areas. There are no resource issues involved that could affect future qualification of these areas as future wilderness; the goal is simply to remove possible opposition to any future wilderness proposals.

At this time, the all motions are filed. We are waiting on a hearing date or decision. Everything is on hold pending one of those steps. We believe this case is our best chance to "win" on this issue

ISSA has joined with Bonner County in filing a petition with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to delist the caribou as an endangered species.

The delisting process is on-going but in the meantime, a coalition of six conservation groups filed a lawsuit challenging the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) decision to cut more than 93 percent of protected critical habitat for the endangered mountain caribou from a proposed 375,562 acres to 30,010 acres FWS's decision was solid and rational and benefited the critter and those who live, work and play in that area. In order to protect snowmobiling, we were once again forced into the court.

The Caribou is two cases: Delisting, which we are doing in cooperation with the Pacific Legal Foundation, and the intervention on behalf of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service over critical habitat which we are doing with Bonner County.

Mitchell said there are a number of things that need to be fixed:

- The Antiquities Act needs to be amended so communities have to be consulted. It gives the President authority to designate national monuments without approval from Congress.
- Recommended wilderness areas should be sunsetted if they aren't designated.
- Travel plans for public lands should be written by the people who will administer them and not by IT groups in federal headquarters.

During Question-and-answer:

Steve Pinther asked her how she rates snowmobiling in Island Park. She said nationally it stands up with the top. People from across the country and other countries are aware of Island Park for snowmobiling. One person said it is embarrassing how much money snowmobilers spend. They are nomadic and like to stay in hotels, like services and restaurants. They want extreme riding in the backcountry, not necessarily trails. Island Park has a great deal to offer, incredible views, etc. You have it all and you have a national reputation. You have to have access to Mount Jefferson. Publicity is important. Services are essential to bring in tourists. Make it somewhat easy for them. Henry's Fork represents endless winter recreation.

What's Happening in Yellowstone National Park – The New Winter Use Plan Dale Reinhart, YNP Concessions Management

The final rule for winter use in Yellowstone has been published by the National Park Service. The 2013/2014 winter season will be a transition year to the new rule during which the park will allow snowmobiles and snowcoaches under the same conditions in place for the past four winters. The one-season transition period will also allow time for the NPS to advertise and award concession contracts and for commercial tour operators to adequately prepare for the new rule. Over-the-snow has been allowed under the 1974 mast plan. Winter visitation increased from 1963 until 2000s when snowmobile use was challenged because of air pollution from the machines. Manufacturers have stepped up and said they will meet the new best available technology standards by the 2015 season.

Beginning with the 2014/2015 winter season, the previous management approach of fixed maximum number of OSVs allowed in the park each day will be replaced with a

more flexible concept of managing vehicle access by transportation events, defined as one snowcoach or a group of up to 10 snowmobiles, averaging seven seasonally. New BAT standards will be required for snowmobiles no later than the 2015/2016 season, and for snowcoaches by the 2016/2017 winter season. Snowcoaches don't have BAT standards.

The Park Service has allowed 13 snowcoach contracts and 21 snowmobile CUAs but under the new plan will issue 23 concession contracts and no CUAs.

Commercial tour operators will be able to use their allocated transportation events for snowmobiles, snowcoaches, or a mix of both, as long as no more than 50 of the authorized 110 daily transportation events are snowmobile transportation events. This approach allows the proportion of snowcoaches or snowmobiles in the park each day to be adjusted, allows for an increase in the size of snowmobile groups to meet demand on peak days, and permits an increase in vehicle group size per transportation event if voluntary enhanced emission standards are met.

The plan also allows one non-commercially guided group of up to five snowmobiles to enter through each park entrance every day. The park will be working with interested stakeholders to develop the Non-commercially Guided Snowmobile Access Program, along with the Yellowstone Snowmobile Education Certification. The rule also continues to allow OSV use on the East Entrance road over Sylvan Pass.

Amy Taylor asked for clarification. So by 2015-16, you will not be able to snowmobile in the part without a new snowmobile that isn't available yet? Yes, she was told.

One person asked why sound tests have been done at full throttle when there is a speed limit in force in the park? Reinhart said new testing will be done at the speed limits in the park – 25 mph for coaches and 35 mph for snowmobiles. He said the speed limit is not strictly enforced.

Winter Recreation in Island Park – Perspectives on Management Challenges and Opportunities

Liz Davy, Caribou-Targhee National Forest

The forest offers opportunities for snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, backcountry skiing, snowshoeing, dog sledding, fishing, and fat biking, and in cooperation with Harriman State Park, keeps the Mesa Falls Visitor Center open on weekends all winter. The forest has 28 miles of cross-country trails, three cabins for rent, nine winter outfitters, and issues event permits for snowmobiles, dog sleds, fat bikes, among others.

The forest has 3 ½ employees on the recreation staff, down by half of what it used to be. Budgets are static or dwindling, and the staff is trying to accommodate new users. Surveys show 95 percent of those surveyed about the Caribou-Targhee are satisfied with winter recreation.

Tamra Cikaitoga, Fremont County Parks and Recreation director

Snowmobile trails in Island Park have been groomed since 1972 when Fremont County got one of the first groomers purchased by the state of Idaho. Fremont County now maintains more than 500 miles of groomed trails “from extreme to mild in a minute.” Twenty-five percent of the entire region’s registration sticker budget comes to Fremont County. We have a national reputation. SnoWest Magazine annually lists Fremont County’s trail system as #2 in the West, second only to Yellowstone Park. “If we had a geyser, we would be #1 but the commissioners won’t buy one.”

She said she was invited in 1998 to sit down at the table with YNP to work on the winter use plan. It has taken a long time. It is still adaptive management. It can change, she said.

Numbers dropped when YNP went to BAT. People figured Island Park and surrounding areas would see increases as people whose sleds don’t meet BAT went elsewhere to recreate, but instead “people didn’t come here.” Numbers have stayed stagnant. We can pay the bills but not increase.

Studies show that snowmobilers spend \$8.5 million in a 100-day season in the Gallatin, Fremont County and Teton County, Wyo. The Caribou-Targhee had 300,000 user days in that period.

Cikaitoga said we need to convince the Legislature and State Parks that we have non-traditional users who need to help pay for the trails. (Fat biker Jay Petervary said he buys snowmobile registrations for his bike for that reason, but some vendors won’t sell them to him. Dog sledder Linda Janssen she always buys a sticker for her sled.)

We also need enforcement on park and ski stickers.

State Parks is going to what is called Certificate of Number in place of registration. Weight limits will be raised from 1,000 pounds to 2,000 pounds for vehicles on groomed trails to allow UTVs with track systems.

John Sullivan, manager, Harriman State Park

We help the Forest Service groom 30 miles of non-motorized trails. We have skate skiers, cross-country and snowshoes.

He said his goal is reverse the trends of increasing costs and limited budgets. He plans marketing and promotional campaigns, creating awareness and more events and dovetailing with the local community. He is also looking at facility improvements.

Sullivan also manages Henry's Lake State Park and pointed to a new campground there which has the highest occupancy rate in the state park system.

The winter program is pretty small, with a budget of only \$17,000 allocated to the Nordic ski program, but it takes about \$20,000 to run the program. The \$4 you pay to ski comes directly back to the park. Overall, during those same months, they generate a total revenue of approximately \$53,000 (ski fees, yurts, lodging, entrance fees etc).

Non-motorized recreation has a value. Do they really understand the value of recreation to a community? Non-motorized recreation is on the rise. Technology in those industries allows people to go deeper, farther and easier in winter. Outdoor education is also big.

Robert Lugar, Nordic director, Idaho Falls Ski Club

IFSC has 1,200 to 2,000 members; the largest percentage are downhill skiers. Because of technology, downhill skis can do backcountry.

The club sponsors three to four Nordic trips a year up here, one in YNP, one on Buffalo River and another Pond's to Harriman. Idaho Falls also has an alpine ski club that promotes winter recreation. There will always be competition for the areas we want to play in.

As numbers increase, you need to plan for sanitation, maybe more overnight yurts. There will always be new uses, always people who will think up ways to come up here and enjoy.

Jan asked if we need more warming huts. Would people use them?

Tamra said 880 people this season used the hut at Big Springs. Is it worth what it costs to keep it open? Is it something you would like to see out on the trails?

Questions were raised about registrations, bird watching in Harriman and ice skating. Sullivan said there are no habitat restrictions to prevent bird watching in Harriman, and ice skating rinks in Utah where he worked were a nightmare.

One person commented on the money spent by snowmobilers and four-wheeler owners. We need more four-wheeler trails so they don't compete with snowmobiles.

Another person said we have great cooperation with the Caribou-Targhee but it is not like that statewide.

Greg Walker said we hope that group (national monument) keeps it in mind we don't want any travel restrictions summer or winter.

Leeann Yancey asked about the national monument discussion. There is no formal proposal for a national monument according to the last meeting. When is the public going to get a chance to comment on it? It's in the grant.

Ken Watts said the grant amendment application online specifies the money is to be used for study of the National Monument issue.

Jan Brown said the county commissioners aren't promoting a National Monument and intend the Futures Study to look at the issues facing Island Park and what its people want Island Park to be.

Steve Woodruff from the National Wildlife Federation said his organization, which has agreed to match the \$75,000 amendment to the HUD grant, was originally attracted by talk of a National Monument. We have changed the focus of the grant to this futures study.

Brent Larson said it is great any time we can get this many people in a room. This collaborative effort is beneficial. We can define a management strategy to ensure we sustain our recreational values.

Lunch Break

A total of 80 box lunches were ordered from Subway in Island Park, and fewer than 10 were left.

Winter Fishing – History and Regulations

Dan Garren, Regional Fisheries supervisor, Idaho Fish and Game

Garren explained that Fish and Game is a trust, managed by trustees such as the biologists who monitor the resource, identify surplus, inform the public, facilitate dialogue and manage as directors. The public is the beneficiary.

He talked about management plans for fisheries and wildlife, and how fishing rules are decided, taking public input into account. He traced the history of fishing in the Island Park area:

- Late 1800s to early 1900s, Henry's Lake was operated as a commercial fishery. Fish were shipped to mining camps in Montana.
- 1900s to WWII, the public was limited in its travel for recreation by time and transportation. Fishing was local, and there was little need for restrictions.
- 1950s to 1970s, people had more leisure time and better modes of travel, and fishing was considered a food source.
- 1980s to 2000, catch and release was introduced, and restrictions were needed to preserve the fishery. Seasonal closures were put into effect. The daily limit was reduced.
- 2000 to present, rules are being simplified, fishing opportunities are being restored, and seasons have been liberalized. Today, you can fish year-round on the Henry's Fork.

Angler surveys show in 2003 in Fremont County, \$50 million was spent on fishing. In 2011 that number was \$62 million.

Asked about the closure of the Ashton Hatchery, he said the decision was based on the cost of raising fish at Ashton, which was considerably more than at other hatcheries. It was a budgetary decision.

Hatcheries are operated from revenues from fishing licenses.

Asked about catch and release within the boundaries of Harriman State Park, he explained that is because of a clause in the agreement with the Harrimans, who donated the park to the state on the condition it be developed as a state park and as a game preserve. It stipulated fishing would be catch and release only within the park.

Dale Swensen asked how much more fishing pressure Fremont County can take. Garren said biologically, "a whole lot," and socially, "not a whole lot." He said the fishery in Island Park is "really robust." Winter is where we have more room for anglers.

Ann Kuck said she thought at Henry's Lake it makes better biological sense to open the season earlier and close it during July and August when the water is warm.

Chamber Perspectives on Water Recreation and Tourism Potential

Linda Janssen, Ashton Chamber of Commerce

Ashton's big winter draw is the Ashton Dog Derby, which will celebrate its 100th anniversary in 2017. Teams bring in a minimum of five persons per team, and then there are the spectators. Originally, the race was run 55 miles from West Yellowstone to Ashton. The race is now started on Main Street in Ashton.

She said she would like to see more development of the Rails to Trails program. The Ashton to Tetonian trailhead is currently in Ashton, but there has been talk about moving it to Marysville.

She said Ashton benefits primarily in the summer from the Mesa Falls Scenic Byway. Ashton streets, except for Main Street, are open to snowmobiles during the winter.

Jackie Jensen, Island Park Area Chamber of Commerce

Jackie listed events held in Island Park during the winter to bring tourists to town: Christmas Fest, Snow Fest, Wild West Festival (which had more than 100 sleds in the parade of sleds this year, 178 people at the pancake breakfast, more than 100 people registered for the fishing derby, and gave horse-drawn sled rides to more than 500 people), Flat Tire bike race, and Fugowee Fun Run. Three-day weekends are big, and Mardi Gras is the final event of the season. She said locals come on weekends while snowmobilers from the Midwest come during the week.

Asked about hotel/motel occupancy rates, she said the chamber doesn't have those figures, nor do they track transient rentals.

Jay Petervary reported the Fat Bike race scheduled two weeks earlier had 60 registrants and 100 volunteers, and pumped more than \$25,000 into the community.

Marysue Costello, West Yellowstone Chamber of Commerce

Costello said fat bikes are not allowed in the Gallatin National Forest.

West Yellowstone does have a local resort tax which raises money for marketing.

During the last year YNP was open to anyone on snowmobiles, winter visitation accounted for 30 percent of West's annual resort tax collection. Now, with restrictions in place, that number has dropped to 15 percent and has put increased pressure on businesses to make it during the summer months.

A new ice fishing tournament is growing and helps to build the thinking that West Yellowstone is a place I can go for winter recreation. Events are much bigger than just the event itself. With no large populations centers near to Island Park and West Yellowstone, “you have to offer something I can’t get closer to home” to keep people coming back. Now, only so many people can go into YNP so we have to find other ways to draw them in. She suggested a joint trail tax for the trail system, and joint fishing licenses. It is about communication.

Glade Gunnell lodged a protest to Cathy and Sherri about all the Futures Study meetings not being held in Island Park. Cathy explained the next meeting was scheduled in Ashton because many of the presenters will be coming from other areas, and it is closer for them.

Component Groups Discuss Winter Recreation SWOTs

After the afternoon refreshment break, the attendees were divided into two groups to conduct a SWOT analysis of winter recreation issues – citizens and agencies.

Final Community Building – Component Groups Report

Jan Brown presented the top three issues listed by the citizen group in each SWOT category:

- Strengths –
 - Elevation, geology and geography – key factors in our abundant snowfall (10) tied with a natural outdoor experience (10)
 - Public lands – 84% of the land base (9)
 - Harriman State Park (7)
- Weaknesses –
 - Public lands – 84% of the landscape (13)
 - Lack of a cohesive future vision (11) and lack of scientific data on winter use (11)
 - Infrastructure (6)
- Opportunities
 - More non-motorized uses – e.g. yurt system (7)
 - More trails on national forest (5) and new sports, new technologies – e.g. fat bikes (5)
 - Develop new partnerships for funding (3)
- Threats
 - Federal land designations that could limit snowmobile access – e.g. National Monument designation; full closure of Mount Jefferson (27)

- Too many people from the outside (8)
- Increased semi-trailer truck traffic on Hwy 20 (5)

Rob Van Kirk presented the top three as listed by the agency group:

- Strengths
 - Diversified/great scenery/wildlife (2), Harriman State Park (2) and off-trail areas that are steep and deep (Mt. Jefferson) (2)
 - Diverse trail system/terrain (1), public land (1) and diversity of user groups (1)
- Weaknesses
 - Coordinated marketing (4), lack of food and lodging options (4), and potential for conflict between user groups (4)
 - Connection of/ linking of non-motorized areas (3)
 - Internet service (2) and lack of funding (2)
- Opportunities
 - Local option tax (7)
 - Attract other user groups (6)
 - Expanded fishing season (3)
- Threats
 - Regulatory uncertainty (8)
 - Declining budgets (agencies) (6)
 - Climate change (5)

Tom Cluff thanked everyone for their participation.

There were 36 people in the final circle.

Steve Pinther said the council should look at more meetings in Island park because there are more people from Island Park and we are studying Island Park.

Ann Kuck said she heard a lot of good feedback today.

Jay Petervary said he was excited about how many times he heard “fat bike” said today.

Stan Clark said we talked about a lot of things and still had a good time.

Wendy Lowe said she works in five different states, and “I hope you understand how rare your capacity here is to resolve problems.”

Jay Petervary asked what the next step is. Jan said it is her job to take the information and post it publicly, online. The subcommittee will meet Tuesday to distill the schedule for next months.

Ann Kuck asked that notes be emailed to everyone.

Garth Blanchard said it is about figuring out what we want to be. A report that says, this is what we see for Island Park. That is the end of this process.

Ken Watts quoted Jan from last month's notes as saying Jim Caswell will not give up on the idea of a national monument and that she had guided tours of people interested in the national monument. Jan said she was not at liberty to reveal the identities of those people, but said they are very real and not boogey men.

Steve Woodruff said the NWF got involved because of the article in the Boise Statesman about a national monument and saw an opportunity to get involved. With a four-county study already under way, NWF has refocused its energy on the futures study. We want conservation of wildlife.

The question was asked if Jim Caswell is funded by any conservation group. No one could answer for certain. He has worked for a variety of groups and is involved in his own company.

Richard Bishop said it is hard to participate when you can't talk about a national monument.

Jordan Stoddard said the commissioners thought they should have the input on what people in the area want. They recognize that Island Park is important to Fremont County.

Ken Watts referred to the national monument as the 800-pound gorilla in the room. We need to talk about it and get past it.

Woodruff said the NWF contributed \$75,000 to the process and has a strong commitment to the process. We see this sort of collaborative approach across the West as the way of the future. The best way to ward off a national monument . . . is to list all of the reasons it doesn't fit here. If you don't, other people can step in and decide it for you. We think this is a better way to do it . . . and why we are investing in this approach.

Steve Pinther asked him if we decide we want more snowmobile trails, you'd be OK that you contributed to it.

Woodruff replied, "I'd think you were foolish if you didn't."

Jan Brown said the county is invested in the process, not the end result. We are not invested in the status quo like so many of you.

Stoddard said, "I want for Island Park what the people of Island Park want. The study is a good way to find out what that is."

Ann Kuck said, regarding the national monument, "is there a boogey man there pulling the string? Why hasn't it been put out to the public?"

Stan Clark complimented Jan for going to the county commissioners and moved we adjourn.