



Forest Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Northern Region, Idaho Panhandle National Forests

December 2023

# Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project

## Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice



For More Information Contact:

Jessie Berner

1602 Ontario Street

Sandpoint, ID 83864

[jessie.berner@usda.gov](mailto:jessie.berner@usda.gov)

208-265-5111 x6601

Cover image: Photo of recreationist on an over-snow vehicle in the Idaho Panhandle National Forests

We make every effort to create documents that are accessible to individuals of all abilities; however, limitations with our word processing programs may prevent some parts of this document from being readable by computer-assisted reading devices. If you need assistance with any part of this document, please contact the Idaho Panhandle National Forests at 208-765-7223.

In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity (including gender expression), sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA (not all bases apply to all programs). Remedies and complaint filing deadlines vary by program or incident.

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact the responsible agency or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027, found online at [How to File a Program Discrimination Complaint](#) and at any USDA office or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by: (1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; (2) fax: (202) 690-7442; or (3) email: [program.intake@usda.gov](mailto:program.intake@usda.gov).

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.



*Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

# Contents

**Final Environmental Assessment .....6**

**Introduction .....6**

        Supporting Project Documentation.....7

**Purpose and Need: Why do we need to act?.....7**

**Proposed Action: What are we proposing to do?.....8**

        Over-Snow Vehicle Use Areas – Proposed Action.....9

        Over-Snow Vehicle Trails – Proposed Action.....10

        Design Features.....15

        Implementation and Monitoring .....15

        Changes to the Proposed Action Since Scoping .....16

**Alternatives to the Proposed Action: Are there other ways to meet the purpose and need? .....17**

        Alternative A .....17

        Alternatives Considered but not Analyzed in Detail.....23

**Comparison of Action Alternatives.....26**

**Environmental Impacts: How would our management actions affect the environment? .....26**

**Potentially Affected Environment.....27**

        Past, Present, and Reasonably Foreseeable Future Actions .....29

**Consideration of No Action: What would happen if we do not act? .....29**

**Issues Considered for Analysis .....30**

        Issue 1. Seasonal closure dates for over-snow vehicle use may reduce over-snow vehicle access to popular locations for riding during popular times of the snow season, creating an increase in user conflicts.....30

        Issue 2. Over-snow vehicle use will negatively impact non-motorized recreational experiences .....35

        Issue 3. April closures will negatively impact the economy of northern Idaho communities.....40

        Issue 4. Opening the Upper Pack River drainage to over-snow vehicle use will negatively impact wildlife and non-motorized users.....42

        Issue 5. Over-snow vehicle use will negatively affect wildlife.....52

        Issue 6. Over-snow vehicle use will negatively affect whitebark pine .....72

**Law, Regulation, and Policy Consistency .....80**

        National Forest Management Act – Land Management Plan Consistency .....80

        Travel Management Rule (36 CFR 212).....81

        Endangered Species Act .....81



*Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Sensitive Species (Forest Service Manual 2670) ..... 81

Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act ..... 83

Migratory Bird Treaty Act and Executive Order 13186, Migratory Birds..... 84

National Historic Preservation Act – Section 106 Review ..... 85

Inventoried Roadless Areas ..... 85

Special Management Areas..... 89

Clean Air Act..... 90

Clean Water Act..... 91

Pertinent Executive Orders ..... 92

**Other Findings ..... 94**

    Climate Change..... 94

    Scenery ..... 95

**Agencies and Persons Consulted ..... 95**

**Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) ..... 96**

**Context..... 96**

**Intensity ..... 96**

**Decision Notice..... 101**

**Final Decision ..... 101**

        Modifications..... 101

        Clarifications..... 103

        Errata to the Environmental Assessment ..... 103

**Summary of Public Involvement ..... 117**

**Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations..... 117**

**Implementation Date ..... 117**

**Administrative Review and Objection Opportunities ..... 117**

**Contact..... 118**

**References ..... 120**

**Appendix A – Design Features ..... 127**

**Hydrology Design Features..... 127**

        Hydrology 1 ..... 127

        Hydrology 2 ..... 127

**Botany Design Features..... 127**

        Botany 1 ..... 127



*Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Botany 2..... 127

Botany 3..... 128

**Heritage and Cultural Resource Design Features.....128**

Heritage 1..... 128

Heritage 2..... 128

Heritage 3..... 129

**Recreation Design Features .....129**

Recreation 1 ..... 129

Recreation 2 ..... 129

Recreation 3 ..... 130

Recreation 4 ..... 130

Recreation 5 ..... 131

Recreation 6 ..... 131

Recreation 7 ..... 131

**Transportation Design Features.....131**

Transportation 1 ..... 131

Transportation 2 ..... 132

Transportation 3 ..... 132

Transportation 4 ..... 132

Transportation 5 ..... 132

**Appendix B – Activities Considered for Cumulative Effects .....133**

**Appendix C – Implementation Plan.....136**

**General Monitoring and Enforcement.....136**

Signage ..... 136

Enforcement..... 137

Media Outreach..... 137

**Specific Monitoring and Enforcement for Endangered Species Act Listed Species .....137**

Grizzly Bear..... 137

Caribou ..... 137

Canada Lynx ..... 138

Whitebark pine..... 138



Reporting.....138

List of Figures

Figure 1. Map showing the project over-snow vehicle use areas ..... 12
Figure 2. Map showing the proposed action prior to April 1. Routes include both designated over-snow vehicle trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use. .... 13
Figure 3. Map showing the proposed action from April 1 to May 31. Routes include both designated over-snow vehicle trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use..... 14
Figure 4. Map showing alternative A prior to April 1. Routes include both designated over-snow vehicle trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use..... 20
Figure 5. Map showing alternative A from April 1 to April 15. Routes include both designated over-snow vehicle trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use. .... 21
Figure 6. Map showing alternative A from April 16 to May 31. Routes include both designated over-snow vehicle trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use. .... 22
Figure 7. Map of existing over-snow vehicle management within the project area ..... 28
Figure 8. Designated over-snow vehicle travel management areas pre-April 1 designated as closed to off-route over-snow vehicle travel with the modified proposed action. Also insert 1-C shows the 2.5 miles of groomed over-snow vehicle route that is removed from the proposed action. .... 105
Figure 9. Designated over-snow vehicle travel management areas post March 31 designated as closed to off-route over-snow vehicle travel with the modified proposed action. .... 106
Figure 10. Southern portion of the Priest Lake Snowmobile Trail Map. Trail added is located within the blue circle on the map. .... 107
Figure 11. Table of sound levels, L, and corresponding sound pressure and sound intensity. .... 109
Figure 12. Projected atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations. .... 116

List of Tables

Table 1. Trails with over-snow vehicle size class restrictions under the proposed action..... 15
Table 2. Trails with over-snow vehicle size class restrictions under alternative A ..... 23
Table 3. Comparison of over-snow vehicle use areas under the proposed action and alternative A ..... 26
Table 4. Comparison of designated over-snow vehicle trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use under the proposed action and alternative A..... 26
Table 5. Summary of existing over-snow vehicle management on National Forest System lands within the project area..... 29
Table 6. Summary of road and trail mileages and acres above 4,000 feet open and closed to over-snow vehicle use by season of use and alternative..... 34
Table 7. Percentage of desired distribution of forest-wide winter recreation opportunity spectrum (ROS) settings compared to the existing condition and alternatives. Units are percent of the project area... 39
Table 8. Comparison of management under the existing condition and alternatives ..... 39



*Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Table 9. Summary of management under the existing condition and alternatives ..... 44

Table 10. Wildlife species analyzed in detail..... 53

Table 11. Acres open to over-snow vehicle use by recovery zone (Selkirk, Cabinet-Yaak, and both zones combined) and alternative..... 61

Table 12. Acres of predicted denning habitat open to over-snow vehicle use by recovery zone (Selkirk, Cabinet-Yaak, and both zones combined) and alternative..... 61

Table 13. Total acres of wolverine habitat open to over-snow vehicle use prior to April 1 under the existing condition, the proposed action, and alternative A ..... 68

Table 14. Total miles of trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use in wolverine habitat prior to April 1 under the existing condition, the proposed action, and alternative A ..... 68

Table 15. Threatened, endangered, proposed or candidate species and critical habitat effect determinations ..... 83

Table 16. General trend of over-snow vehicle management within each inventoried roadless area under the proposed action and alternative A as compared to the existing condition ..... 86

Table 17. Special management area compliance determinations..... 90

Table 18. Estimated sound attenuation of an over-snow vehicle (see figure 11)..... 108

Table 19. Summary of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable activities considered in cumulative effects analysis..... 133



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

# Final Environmental Assessment

**Project Name:** Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project

**Project Initiation Date:** August 16, 2022

**Responsible Official:** Heather Degeest, Acting Forest Supervisor

**Unit:** Bonners Ferry, Coeur d'Alene River, Priest Lake, and Sandpoint Ranger Districts

**Counties:** Bonner, Boundary, and Kootenai Counties, Idaho; Lincoln and Sanders Counties, Montana; and Pend Oreille County, Washington

**Anticipated Implementation:** January 2023

**Signing Authority:** Forest Supervisor

**Project Webpage:** <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=53091>

## Introduction

The project area, consisting of the entire Bonners Ferry, Priest Lake, and Sandpoint Ranger Districts (formerly known as the Kaniksu National Forest) and a very small portion of the Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests (forest), offers some of the most sought-after over-snow vehicle recreational opportunities in Idaho. The area is also important to several species listed under the Endangered Species Act. Portions of the Selkirk Mountains have served as habitat for woodland caribou, many parts of the area provide habitat for grizzly bears, and high alpine areas in the project area provide habitat for wolverine and whitebark pine. The project area lies within the traditional territories of the Kootenai, Kalispel, Salish, and Coeur d'Alene peoples in Idaho, Washington, and Montana.

In 1982, the Forest Service and the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation entered into an agreement to provide snowmobile grooming in the Idaho Panhandle National Forests. In the early 1990s, two separate grooming committees were established in the project area—Priest Lake Groomers Association, East Bonner County Groomers—and they continue to be active volunteers partnering with the Forest Service to provide grooming services for over-snow vehicles. Kootenai County also grooms trails in the project area within Kootenai County.

Abundant snowpack in the Selkirk Mountains provides habitat for woodland caribou and portions of the Selkirk Mountains are designated as part of a caribou recovery area. In the 1990s, Idaho Fish and Game documented three instances of woodland caribou displacement in the Selkirk Mountains, which resulted in an administrative closure of 14,724 acres of the “Selkirk Crest” beginning in 1994. In 2007, a Federal district court enjoined recreational snowmobiling activities in the Idaho Panhandle National Forests portion of the caribou recovery area, but the injunction does not apply to lands administered by the Idaho Department of Lands on the east side of Priest Lake. In November 2008, the court order was modified and reopened 85 miles of trail to over-snow vehicle use.

The Idaho Panhandle National Forests' Revised Land Management Plan (2015; land management plan) included direction for over-snow vehicle management. The biological opinion received from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the effects of the land management plan on the grizzly bear includes a term and





## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

condition requiring the forest to “complete and implement a Winter Travel Plan by the end of 2023, which will include considerations for post-den emergent grizzly bears” (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2022).

Forest Service travel management planning is undertaken in accordance with the Travel Management Rule (36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 212), which requires all national forests and grasslands to develop a system of roads, trails, and areas for motorized travel. The Travel Management Rule requires the Forest Service to designate roads, trails, and areas on National Forest System lands where over-snow vehicle use is allowed (36 CFR 212 Subpart C). The regulations (36 CFR 212.81(a)) state, in part,

*Over-snow vehicle use on National Forest System roads, on National Forest System trails, and in areas on National Forest System lands shall be designated by the Responsible Official on administrative units or Ranger Districts, or parts of administrative units or Ranger Districts, of the National Forest System where snowfall is adequate for that use to occur, and, if appropriate, shall be designated by class of vehicle and time of year...*

At the end of the planning process, the designated roads, trails, and areas on National Forest System lands where over-snow vehicle use is allowed will be reflected on an over-snow vehicle use map. The map will show the designated class of vehicles and the time of year if applicable. When the over-snow vehicle use map is available, over-snow vehicle travel will not be allowed off designated roads, trails, and areas (36 CFR 261).

An over-snow vehicle is defined as “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.” (36 CFR 212.1)

Other types of motor vehicles that may operate over-snow, but do not meet the definition of an over-snow vehicle, are regulated under Subpart B of the Travel Management Rule. Roads, trails, and areas on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests for these types of vehicles were previously designated and published on a motor vehicle use map. The project area spans across Idaho, Washington, and Montana, and users will be responsible for compliance with the state laws for over-snow vehicle use within the state where they are operating the vehicle.

## Supporting Project Documentation

Throughout the document, supporting information is incorporated by reference to assist in preparing a concise document, as required by Federal regulations. Some supporting documentation for analysis appears on the project webpage or may be available upon request to the project contact listed on the second page of the document.

## Purpose and Need: Why do we need to act?

The purpose of the project is to designate roads, trails, and areas open to over-snow vehicle use on the Bonners Ferry, Priest Lake, and Sandpoint Ranger Districts.

There is a need to provide a designated system of over-snow vehicle trails and areas within the Bonners Ferry, Priest Lake, and Sandpoint Ranger Districts that is consistent with, and achieves the purposes of, the Forest Service Travel Management Regulations at 36 CFR part 212 Subpart C.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Many people visit the Idaho Panhandle National Forests to use over-snow vehicles. Desired conditions described in the forest's 2015 revised land management plan include year-round outdoor recreation opportunities (FW-DC-AR-04) and motorized winter trail systems that provide access to a range of winter trail experiences and appropriate off-trail opportunities while meeting wildlife management objectives (GA-DC-AR-LK-05, GA-DC-AR-PO-02, GA-DC-AR-PR-01). The Forest Service has a responsibility to provide reasonable motorized access to the forest and allow for over-snow vehicle use when there is adequate snow, while promoting the safety of all users, minimizing conflicts among the various uses, and providing for the protection of forest resources.

## Proposed Action: What are we proposing to do?

We used input provided by the North Idaho Working Group, local, state, and federal agencies, and tribes to develop the initial proposed action. We modified the proposed action following scoping; see the *Changes to the Proposed Action Since Scoping* section for details.

In developing the proposed action, we considered, in accordance with the Travel Management Rule, the potential effects of designating trails and areas on National Forest System lands for over-snow vehicle use with the objective of minimizing (36 CFR 212.55(b)(1–4)):

1. damage to soil, watershed, vegetation, and other forest resources.
2. harassment of wildlife and disruption of wildlife habitats.
3. conflicts between motor vehicle use and existing or proposed recreational uses of National Forest System land or neighboring federal lands; and
4. conflicts among different classes of motorized vehicle uses of National Forest System lands or neighboring federal lands.

These are referred to as the minimization criteria. Applying these criteria should not be interpreted as strictly requiring the prevention of all impacts. Instead, we seek to maintain the flexibility to manage for a reasonable reduction of impacts while still addressing the need to provide trails and areas for public over-snow vehicle experiences. Additionally, we considered the “compatibility of motor vehicle use with existing conditions in populated areas, taking into account sound, emissions, and other factors” (36 CFR 212.55(b)(5)).

To comply with the Travel Management Rule (36 CFR 212.81(d)), we developed resource-specific screening questions for resource areas related to the minimization criteria listed above. The interdisciplinary team used existing data and professional knowledge to screen each area and trail proposed for over-snow vehicle use designation. The resource-specific screening questions allowed the team to systematically consider each area and document the results. See the project record and the project webpage for documentation of the minimization criteria screening exercise.

The following uses are exempt from the over-snow vehicle use designations that will be identified in this project, so they are allowed regardless of designations proposed (36 CFR 212.81(a)(1–5)):

1. Limited administrative use by the Forest Service.
2. Use of any fire, military, emergency, or law enforcement vehicle for emergency purposes.
3. Authorized use of any combat or combat support vehicle for national defense purposes.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

4. Law enforcement response to violations of law, including pursuit.
5. Over-snow vehicle use that is specifically authorized under a written authorization issued under federal law or regulations (such as previously granted easements or permits issued to private landowners to access private property across National Forest System lands).

As described above, this project would not impact easements or permits issued to private landowners to access private property across National Forest System lands.

### Over-Snow Vehicle Use Areas – Proposed Action

The project area includes approximately 1,046,460 acres of National Forest System lands that would be divided into 10 over-snow vehicle analysis areas (figure 1). These areas are:

1. Boulder Creek/Katka, 94,332<sup>1</sup> acres, located in the Bonners Ferry and Sandpoint Ranger Districts.
2. Bunco, 87,886 acres, located in the Sandpoint and Coeur d’Alene River Ranger Districts.
3. Lower Priest, 120,413 acres, located in the Priest Lake Ranger District.
4. North Selkirks, 193,549 acres, located in the Priest Lake and Bonners Ferry Ranger Districts.
5. Purcells, 70,081 acres, located in the Bonners Ferry Ranger District.
6. Scattered Lands, 32,366 acres, located in the Sandpoint and Priest Lake Ranger Districts.
7. South Selkirks, 123,476 acres, located in the Bonners Ferry and Sandpoint Ranger Districts.
8. Trestle/Lightning, 117,976 acres, located in the Sandpoint Ranger District.
9. Upper Priest, 136,716 acres, located in the Priest Lake Ranger District.
10. West Moyie, 69,665 acres, located in the Bonners Ferry Ranger District.

Each over-snow vehicle analysis area is described in the minimization criteria screening document. Under the proposed action we categorized the National Forest System lands within these analysis areas into five over-snow vehicle management strategies (figure 2 and figure 3). We designed these management strategies to provide over-snow vehicle recreation opportunities while maintaining areas for quiet recreation and resource protection. The five over-snow vehicle management strategies under the proposed action are:

1. **Open to over-snow vehicle use prior to May 31.** These areas close on June 1. The proposed action includes 150,856 acres in this category.
2. **Open to over-snow vehicle use prior to May 31 once motorized access standards are met.** Two areas would be open to over-snow vehicle use prior to May 31 once motorized access standards (FW-STD-WL-02 and described in the land management plan, pages 151–155) have been met for grizzly bears across the respective recovery zones. The Roman Nose area in the Selkirk Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone would be open to over-snow vehicle use between November 16 and May 31, once motorized access standards are met. For Roman Nose, this is anticipated to be in 2023. The Moose Lake area in the Cabinet-Yaak Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone would be open to over-snow vehicle use

---

<sup>1</sup> Note, all acreages throughout this document are approximate. Totals may differ due to rounding.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

between December 1 and May 31, once motorized access standards are met. For Moose Lake, this is anticipated to be in 2028, although it may occur sooner. The proposed action includes 4,327 acres in this category.

3. **Open to over-snow vehicle use from November 16 to March 31.** These are areas in or adjacent to the Selkirk Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone that would be open to over-snow vehicle use from November 16 to March 31. These areas would close to off-route over-snow vehicle use after March 31 due to land management plan direction or resource protection. The proposed action includes 348,087 acres in this category.
4. **Open to over-snow vehicle use from December 1 to March 31.** These are areas in or adjacent to the Cabinet Yaak Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone that would be open to over-snow vehicle use from December 1 to March 31. These areas would close to off-route over-snow vehicle use after March 31 due to land management plan direction or resource protection. The proposed action includes 275,915 acres in this category.
5. **Closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use.** These areas would be closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use year-round due to land management plan direction or resource protection. The proposed action includes 267,275 acres in this category.

Forest Service administrative sites would be closed to over-snow vehicle use except for the exemptions discussed above (36 CFR 212.81(a)(1–5)). Developed recreation sites, with limited exemptions discussed below, would be closed to over-snow vehicle use. Existing parking and staging areas and warming huts would remain open to over-snow vehicle use. Additionally, the following developed recreation sites would be open to over-snow vehicle use:

- Open December 1 through March 31: Huckleberry campground.
- Open November 16 through March 31: Roman Nose campground (prior to motorized access standards being met), Reynolds Creek group site, Kalispell Bay day use area, Kalispell Bay boat launch and parking area, and Priest Lake information center.
- November 16 through May 31: Stampede Lake specialized sport site and Roman Nose campground (once motorized access standards are met).

## Over-Snow Vehicle Trails – Proposed Action

The proposed action designates over-snow vehicle trails within the 10 over-snow vehicle analysis areas. The types of trails proposed are:

- **Groomed trails** include roads and trails groomed by the Forest Service or its partners for over-snow vehicle use. To protect grooming equipment, in the past the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation has required that grooming only occur when 18 inches of snow is present at the lowest elevation that will be groomed. The proposed action includes approximately 450 miles of groomed trails.
- **Ungroomed trails open prior to April 1** would be open to over-snow vehicles but would not be groomed. The proposed action includes approximately 7.9 miles of ungroomed trails open prior to April 1. Additionally, the proposed action would open approximately 43.9 miles of ungroomed road to over-snow vehicle use prior to April 1. These proposed designated trails and roads are in areas closed year-round; off-route travel would not be permitted.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

- **Ungroomed trails open April 1 to May 31** would be open to over-snow vehicles within the listed season of use but would not be groomed. The proposed action includes approximately 45 miles of ungroomed trails open from April 1 to May 31. Additionally, the proposed action would open approximately 1,129 miles of ungroomed road to over-snow vehicle use from April 1 to May 31. Many of these ungroomed roads would be designated as groomed trails prior to April 1 and would transition to ungroomed roads open to over-snow vehicle use once grooming ends. These proposed designated trails and roads are in areas closed after March 31; off-route travel would not be permitted.
- **Road administered by Boundary County;** 11.2 miles are included in the proposed action. This section of road would be designated for all classes of over-snow vehicle use.

Ungroomed trails would only be designated in areas closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use. The proposed action includes groomed and ungroomed trails and roads that pass through areas closed to over-snow vehicle travel. No off-route over-snow vehicle travel is permitted in these areas.

Trails located on roads under Forest Service jurisdiction that cross lands not part of the National Forest System may require additional agreements for public over-snow vehicle use to occur. If a proposed over-snow vehicle trail is not currently located on a road in the official Forest Service database, it would be added to the system as an over-snow vehicle trail. The proposed action would not prohibit other types of nonmotorized use (e.g., backcountry or Nordic skiing) or mechanized use (e.g., fat tire mountain bikes) on designated over-snow vehicle trails.

The proposed action includes approximately 44.3 miles of proposed over-snow vehicle trails located on existing trails (both motorized and non-motorized) with motorized vehicle width restrictions. Over-snow vehicle size would also be restricted on these trails. Table 1 lists the designated over-snow vehicle trails with proposed size class restrictions under the proposed action. There are no over-snow vehicle size class restrictions on any other designated trail or road in the proposed action. Note, table 1 does not include all designated trails, only those with size class restrictions. See figure 2 and figure 3 for all designated trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use under the proposed action.

Maps showing proposed over-snow vehicle trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use are provided in figure 2 (prior to April 1) and figure 3 (April 1 to May 31). To improve readability of these maps, trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use are shown as “routes.” Detailed information on all individual proposed over-snow vehicle trails is provided in the minimization criteria screening document available in the project record and on the project webpage.



# Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

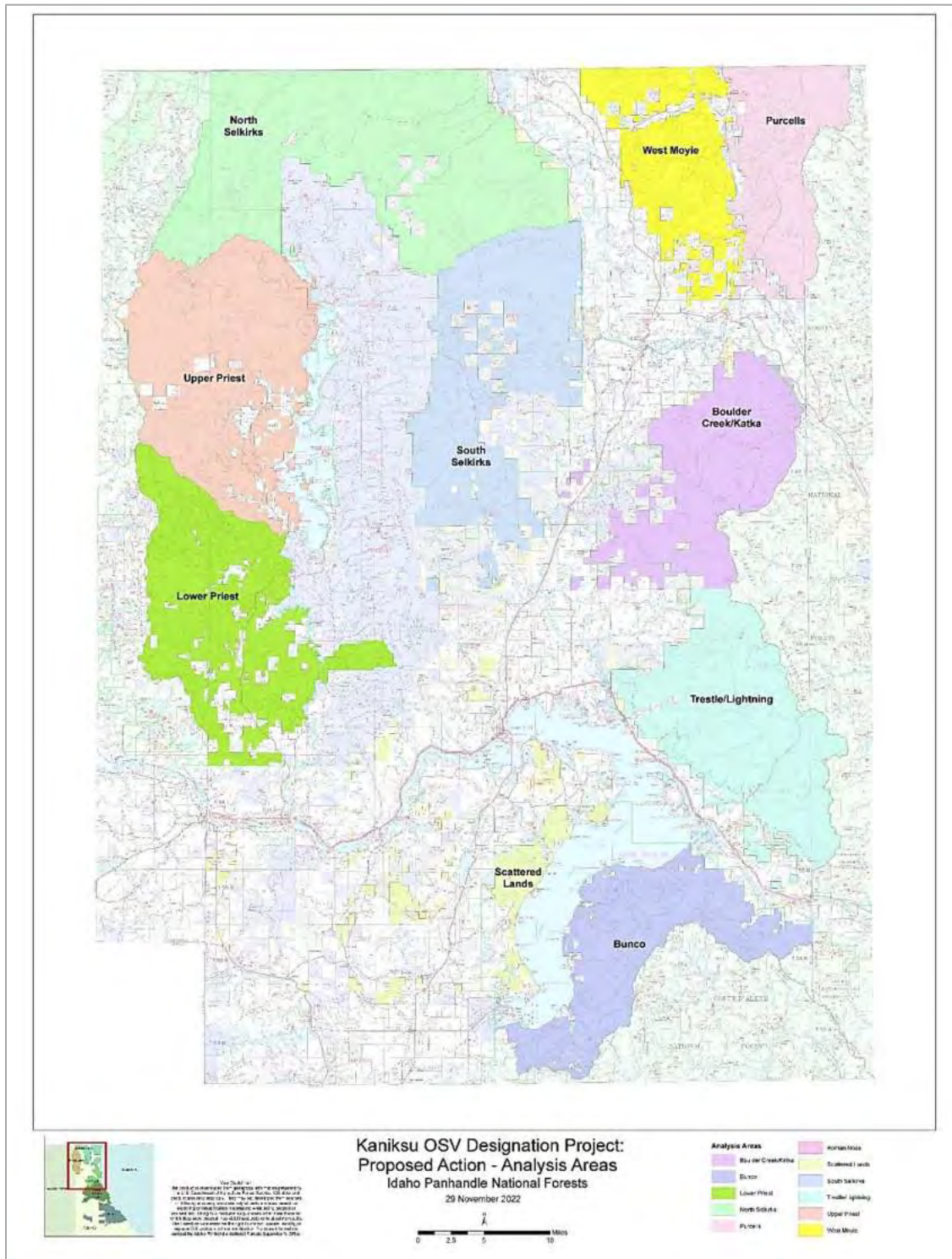


Figure 1. Map showing the project over-snow vehicle use areas



# Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



## Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

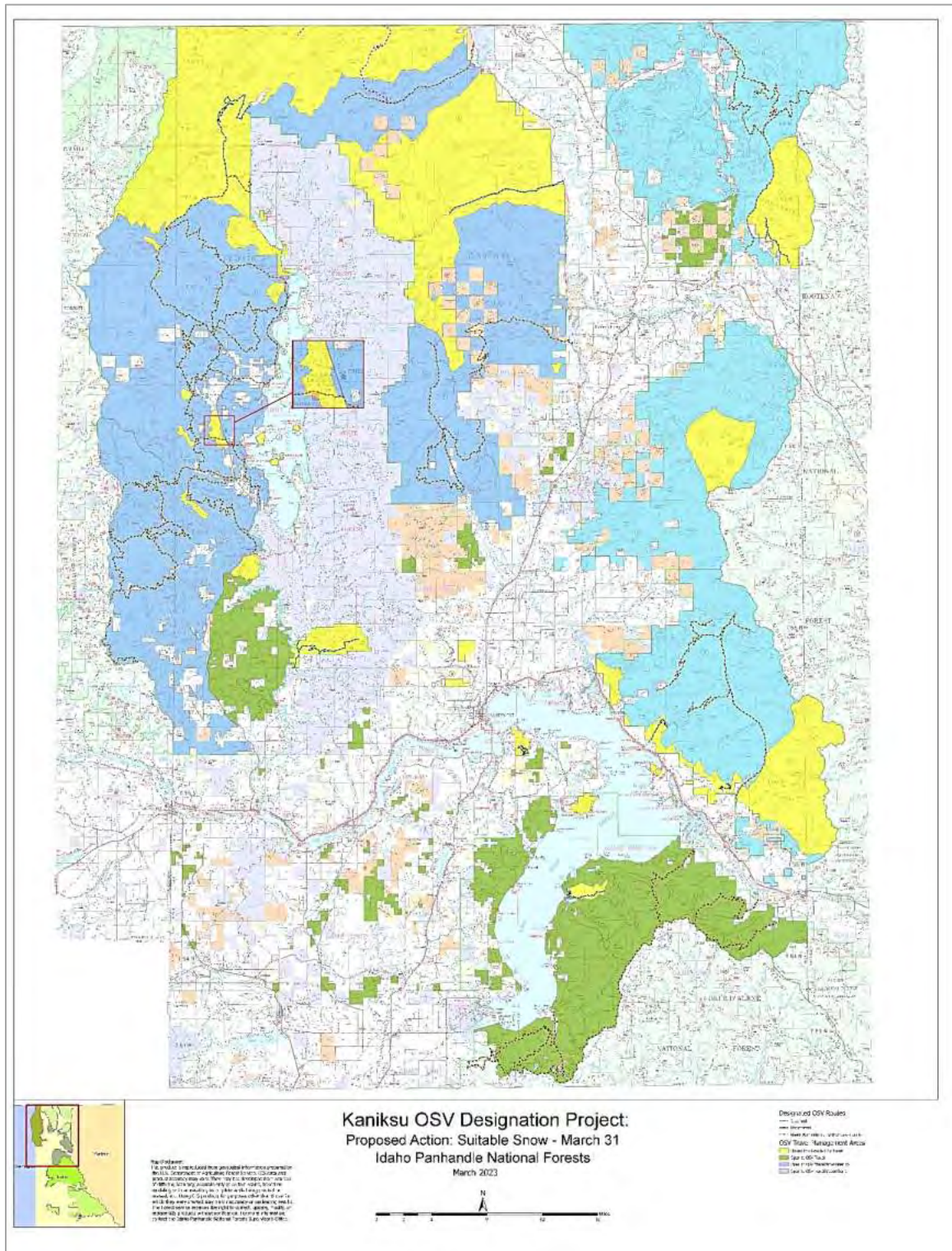


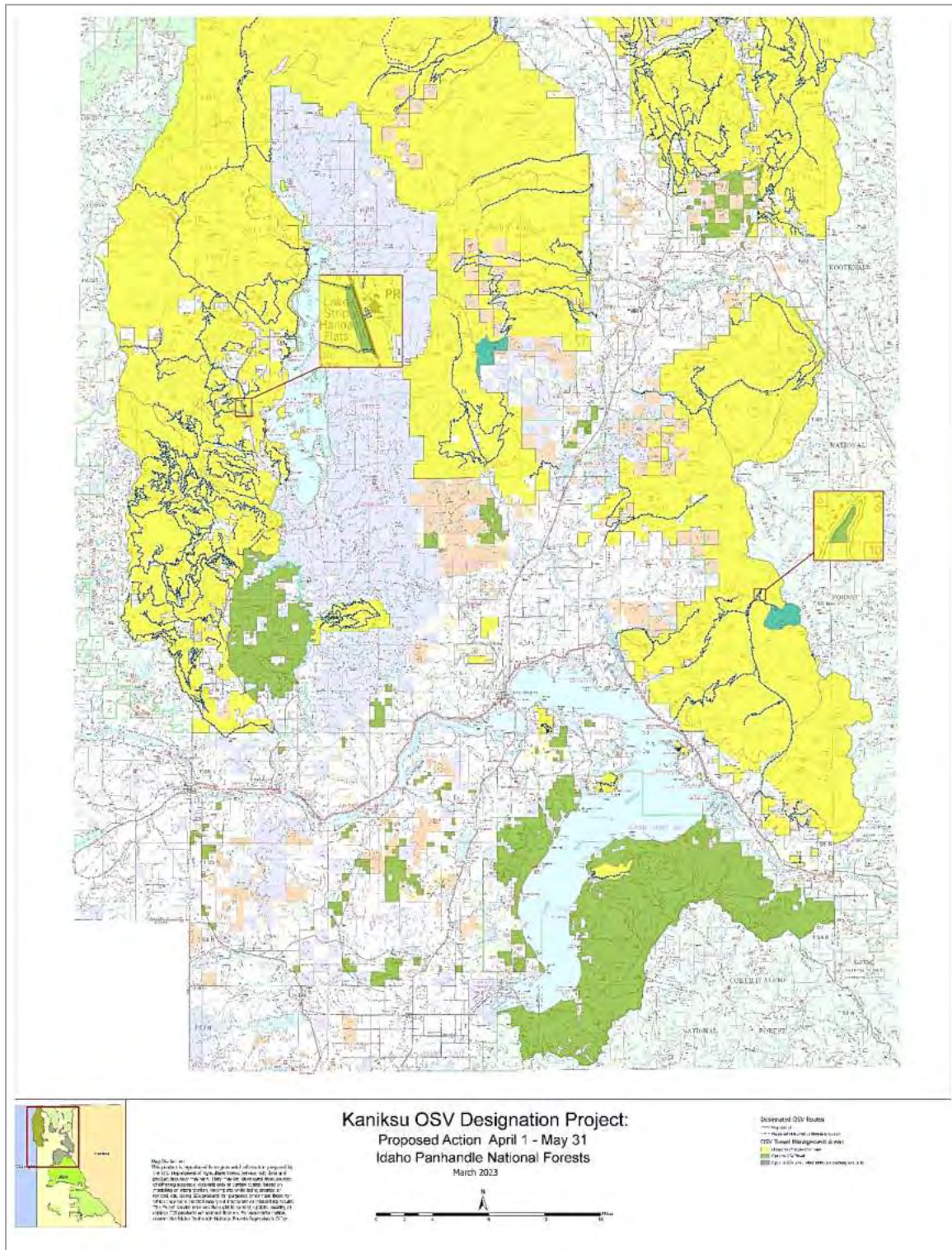
Figure 2. Map showing the proposed action prior to April 1. Routes include both designated over-snow vehicle trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use.



# Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



## Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice



**Figure 3. Map showing the proposed action from April 1 to May 31. Routes include both designated over-snow vehicle trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use.**





## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

**Table 1. Trails with over-snow vehicle size class restrictions under the proposed action**

Trail Number	Miles	Groomed or Ungroomed	Designated Season of Use	over-snow vehicle Size Class
2	1.5	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
23	2.7	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
31	1.0	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
32	4.5	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
45	1.6	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
105	1.7	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
120	2.5	Ungroomed	Open prior to April 1	Single track less than 24 inches
172	1.5	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
222	4.2	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
444	6.6	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
642	5.0	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
1386	1.7	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
2240	2.5	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
2485	1.7	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
2558	0.5	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
172A	0.3	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
32A	1.6	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
32B	0.4	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
45A	0.7	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
45B	0.7	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
45C	0.3	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
45D	1.1	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches

### Design Features

Project design features would protect sensitive resources from undesired effects and ensure consistency with the land management plan, law, regulation, and policy. Design features are part of the proposed action and are described in *Appendix A – Design Features*.

### Implementation and Monitoring

In accordance with 36 CFR 212.57, we would monitor the effects of over-snow vehicle use on designated roads and trails and in designated areas to ensure compliance with design features. We would consider monitoring options to assess potential over-snow vehicle damage to whitebark pine within the project area. Details would be determined through consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Following decision, we would publish an over-snow vehicle use map showing the designation of roads, trails, and areas on National Forest System lands where over-snow vehicle use is allowed. When the over-snow vehicle use map is available, over-snow vehicle travel would not be allowed off designated roads, trails, and areas. An implementation plan was developed by the forest and can be found in appendix C. Additionally, we would consider partnering with interested parties to develop user education materials.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

During scoping, commenters expressed concern over how project implementation would be affected if caribou were to become re-established in the project area in the future. See the *Issue 5 – Affected Environment* section for information on the current status of caribou in the project area. After a decision is made, if there is new information or circumstances change relating to the environmental impacts of the proposed action, the responsible official would review the information to determine its importance. The forest would complete an interdisciplinary review and consider new information within the context of the overall project. The responsible official would determine if a correction, supplement, or revision to this environmental assessment is necessary. If the responsible official determines that a correction, supplement, or revision is not necessary, implementation will continue (Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, Chapter 10). Additionally, if the responsible official determines that over-snow vehicle use on a National Forest System road, trail, or in an area on National Forest System land is directly causing or will directly cause considerable adverse effects on public safety or soil, vegetation, wildlife, wildlife habitat, or cultural resources associated with that road, trail, or area, the responsible official shall immediately close that road, trail, or area to motor vehicle use until the official determines that such adverse effects have been mitigated or eliminated and that measures have been implemented to prevent future recurrence (36 CFR 212.52(b)(2)).

The forest will create a monitoring program to gather data on floral, aquatic, and cultural issues, monitor caribou restoration, and monitor compliance with the project decision. This monitoring program would provide a positive and knowledgeable public face to the over-snow vehicle program. Additionally, it would provide an opportunity for forest staff to work in the field on education and public relations with over-snow vehicle recreationists and businesses.

There are concerns about how a long-term monitoring program would be funded. Funding could be provided through any of the programs and co-stewardship agreements currently available and now attached to permanent funding sources as per 2022 White House summit direction. Future monitoring may qualify under Tribal Forest Protection Act/638 contracts, Good Neighbor Authority, the National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers Memorandum of Agreement, and several others specific to tribes. Two of our four tribal partners have expressed interest in hiring permanent crews for this type of monitoring work.

### **Changes to the Proposed Action Since Scoping**

We initiated a 30-day scoping period on August 16, 2022 (more information can be found in the *Agencies and Persons Consulted* section). We received public comments during the scoping period and completed additional interdisciplinary review of the proposed action, resulting in the following modifications to the proposal since it was published in the scoping notice:

- We developed two separate proposed action maps showing designations prior to April 1 and after March 31.
- We removed ungroomed roads and trails in open over-snow vehicle use areas from the proposed action. Because these areas are open to off-route travel, over-snow vehicle use on the trails and roads within them would still be permitted.
- We included all roads and trails open to motorized vehicle use after March 31 as designated ungroomed trails in areas otherwise closed to over-snow vehicle use after March 31.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

- We expanded the open area around the Nordman Airstrip at the north and south ends to include the Nordic skiing parking lots and immediately adjacent areas.
- We corrected mapping errors to accurately show the locations of groomed trails.
- We corrected several other mapping errors to show the accurate locations of trails and boundaries of open and closed areas.
- Through the minimization criteria screening process, we adjusted trails and the boundaries of open areas to minimize effects to resources.

## Alternatives to the Proposed Action: Are there other ways to meet the purpose and need?

### Alternative A

- We developed alternative A to address public comments and wildlife issues. The travel management regulations, including minimization criteria and exemptions, described in the proposed action also apply to this alternative. Under this alternative, Design Features, Implementation and Monitoring would be the same as described in the proposed action.

Alternative A differs from the proposed action in the following key ways:

- Alternative A closes the west side of the upper Pack River to over-snow vehicle use year-round. This responds to public comments and minimizes effects to Canada lynx.
- Alternative A changes the closure dates for off-route travel outside grizzly bear recovery zones from April 1 to April 15. The off-route closure date for areas within grizzly bear recovery zones would remain April 1. Areas identified in the proposed action as open until May 31 would remain so. This responds to public concerns about impacts of April 1 closure dates on motorized recreation and associated socioeconomic impacts.
- Alternative A adds and expands the following areas with May 31 closure dates: Jeru Ridge, Wellington Creek, and Porcupine Creek in addition to Roman Nose and Moose Lake. This responds to public concerns about impacts of April 1 closure dates on motorized recreation and associated socioeconomic impacts.
- Alternative A eliminates proposed grooming of the Cow Creek trail (upper National Forest System Road 655) to minimize effects to Canada lynx.

### Over-Snow Vehicle Use Areas – Alternative A

Under alternative A, the project area is divided into the same 10 over-snow vehicle analysis areas described in the proposed action. We categorized the National Forest System lands within these analysis areas into 8 over-snow vehicle management strategies (figure 4, figure 5, and figure 6):

- **Open to over-snow vehicle use prior to May 31.** These areas would close on June 1. Alternative A includes 150,856 acres in this category.
- **Open to over-snow vehicle use from November 16 to March 31.** These are areas in or adjacent to the Selkirk Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone that would be open to over-snow vehicle use from



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

November 16 to March 31. These areas would close to off-route over-snow vehicle use after March 31 due to land management plan direction or resource protection. Alternative A includes 189,757 acres in this category.

- **Open to over-snow vehicle use from November 16 to April 15.** These are areas in or adjacent to the Selkirk Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone that would be open to over-snow vehicle use from November 16 to April 15. These areas would close to off-route over-snow vehicle use after April 15 for resource protection. Alternative A includes 142,034 acres in this category.
- **Open to over-snow vehicle use from November 16 to May 31.** These are areas in and adjacent to the Selkirk Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone that would be open to over-snow vehicle use from November 16 to May 31. Alternative A includes 9,784 acres in this category.
- **Open to over-snow vehicle use from December 1 to March 31.** These are areas in or adjacent to the Cabinet Yaak Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone that would be open to over-snow vehicle use from December 1 to March 31. These areas would close to off-route over-snow vehicle use after March 31 due to land management plan direction or resource protection. Alternative A includes 175,684 acres in this category.
- **Open to over-snow vehicle use from December 1 to April 15.** These are areas in or adjacent to the Cabinet Yaak Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone that would be open to over-snow vehicle use from December 1 to April 15. These areas would close to off-route over-snow vehicle use after April 15 for resource protection. Alternative A includes 90,979 acres in this category.
- **Open to over-snow vehicle use from December 1 to May 31.** These areas in the Cabinet Yaak Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone would be open to over-snow vehicle use from December 1 to May 31. Alternative A includes 11,541 acres in this category.
- **Closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use.** These areas would be closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use year-round due to land management plan direction or resource protection. Alternative A includes 275,823 acres in this category.

Forest Service administrative sites would be closed to over-snow vehicle use except for the exemptions discussed in the proposed action section (36 CFR 212.81(a)(1–5)). Developed recreation sites, with limited exemptions discussed below, would be closed to over-snow vehicle use. Existing parking and staging areas and warming huts would remain open to over-snow vehicle use. Additionally, the following developed recreation sites would be open to over-snow vehicle use:

- Open December 1 through March 31: Huckleberry campground.
- Open November 16 through March 31: Reynolds Creek group site, Kalispell Bay day use area, Kalispell Bay boat launch and parking area, and Priest Lake information center.
- November 16 through May 31: Stampede Lake specialized sport site and Roman Nose campground.

### Over-Snow Vehicle Trails – Alternative A

Alternative A includes the following trail designations:

- **Groomed trails** include roads and trails groomed by the Forest Service or its partners for over-snow vehicle use. To protect grooming equipment, in the past the Idaho Department of Parks and



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Recreation has required that grooming only occur when 18 inches of snow is present at the lowest elevation that will be groomed. Alternative A includes approximately 449 miles of groomed trails.

- **Ungroomed trails open prior to April 1** would be open to over-snow vehicles but would not be groomed. Alternative A includes approximately 4.8 miles of ungroomed trails in areas closed to off-route travel year-round. Additionally, alternative A would open approximately 52.2 miles of ungroomed road to over-snow vehicle use prior to April 1. These proposed designated trails and roads are in areas that are closed year-round; off-route travel would not be permitted.
- **Ungroomed trails open April 1 to May 31** would be open to over-snow vehicles within the listed season of use but would not be groomed. Alternative A includes approximately 11.5 miles of ungroomed trails in areas closed to off-route travel from April 1 to May 31. Additionally, alternative A would open approximately 392.5 miles of ungroomed road to over-snow vehicle use from April 1 to May 31. Many of these ungroomed roads would be designated as groomed trails prior to April 1 and would transition to ungroomed roads open to over-snow vehicle use once grooming ends. These proposed designated trails and roads are in areas closed after March 31; off-route travel would not be permitted.
- **Ungroomed trails open only from April 16 to May 31** would be open to over-snow vehicles within the listed season of use but would not be groomed. Alternative A includes approximately 26 miles of ungroomed trails in areas closed to off-route travel after April 15. Additionally, alternative A would open approximately 615 miles of ungroomed road to over-snow vehicle use after April 15. Note, these mileages do not include the trails and roads open from April 1 to May 31. These proposed designated trails and roads are in areas closed after April 15; off-route travel would not be permitted.
- **Road administered by Boundary County;** 11.2 miles are included in alternative A. This section of road would be designated for all classes of over-snow vehicle use.

Ungroomed trails would only be designated in areas closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use. Alternative A includes groomed and ungroomed trails and roads that pass through areas closed to over-snow vehicle travel. No off-route over-snow vehicle travel is permitted in these areas.

Trails located on roads under Forest Service jurisdiction that cross lands not part of the National Forest System may require additional agreements for public over-snow vehicle use to occur. If a proposed over-snow vehicle trail is not currently located on a road in the official Forest Service database, it would be added to the system as an over-snow vehicle trail. Alternative A would not prohibit other types of nonmotorized use (such as backcountry or Nordic skiing) or mechanized use (such as, fat tire mountain bikes) on designated over-snow vehicle trails.



# Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



## Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

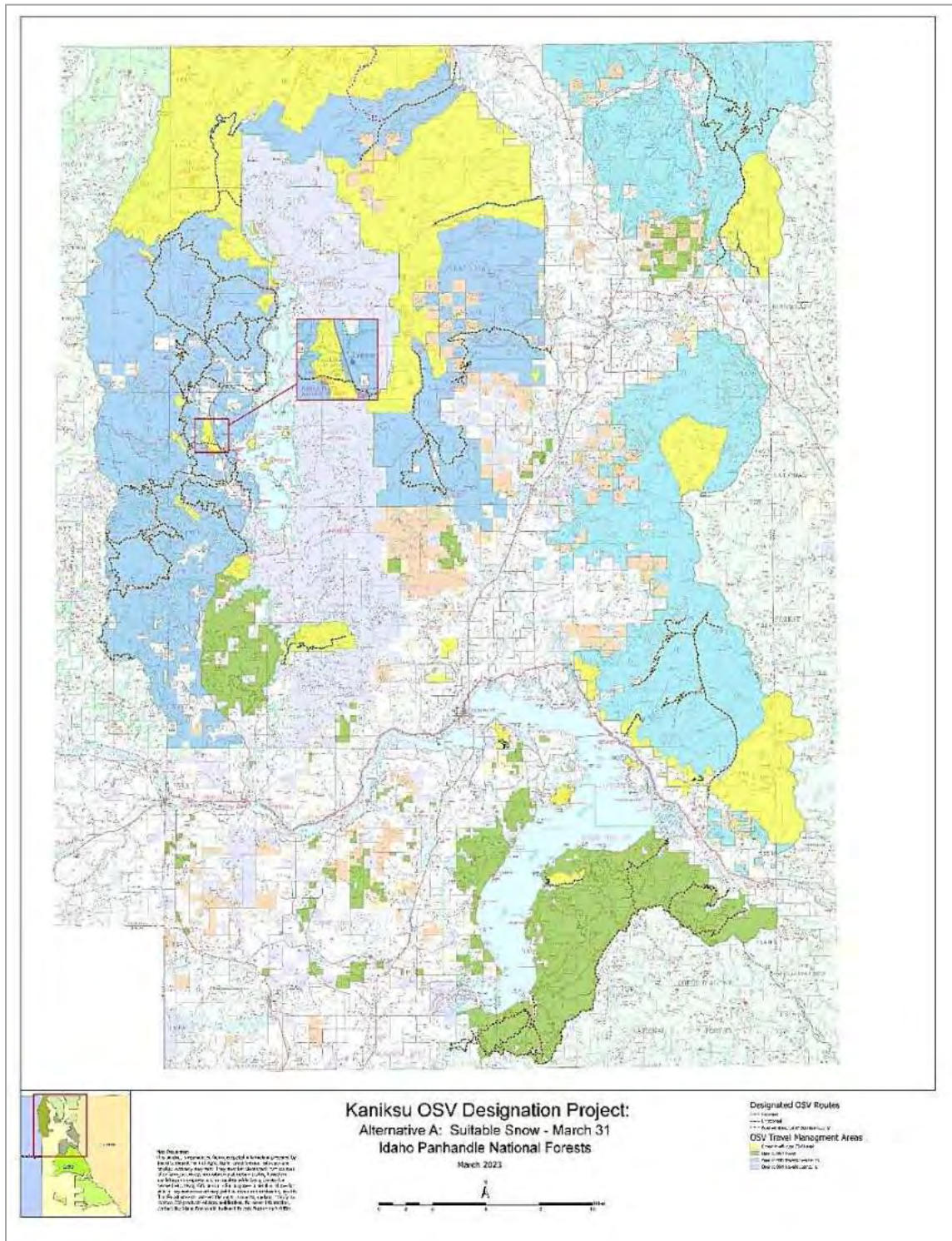


Figure 4. Map showing alternative A prior to April 1. Routes include both designated over-snow vehicle trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use.



# Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



## Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

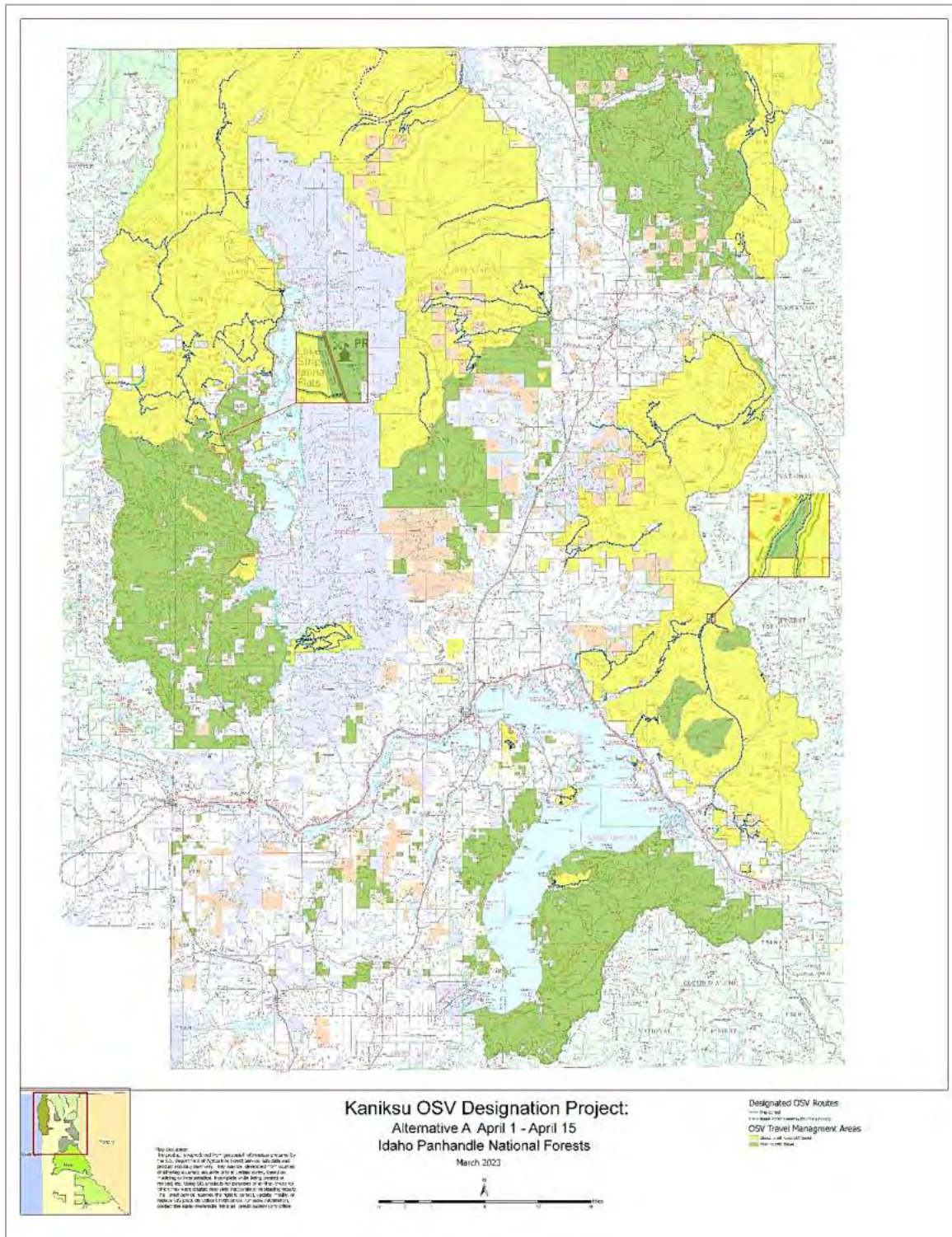


Figure 5. Map showing alternative A from April 1 to April 15. Routes include both designated over-snow vehicle trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use.



Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

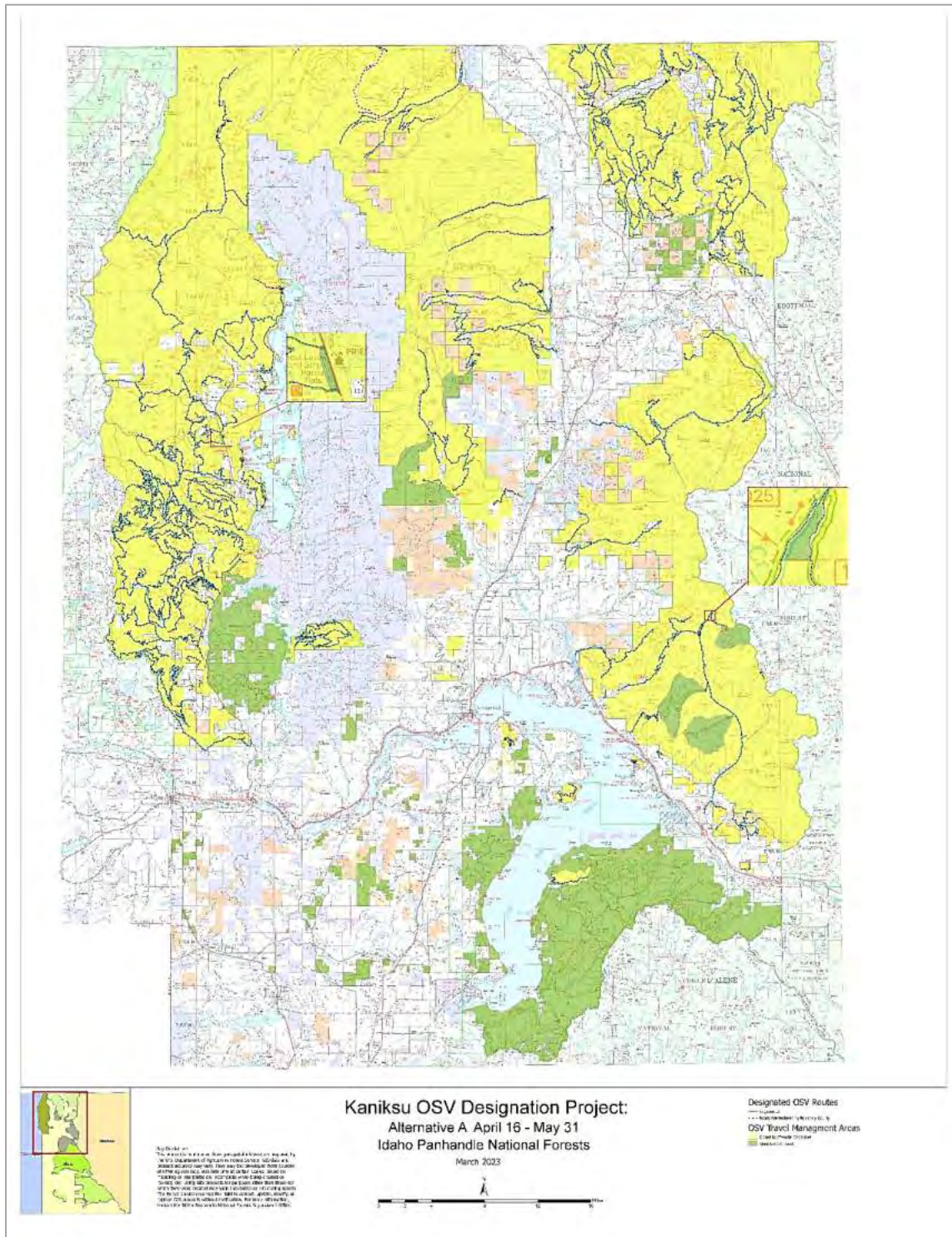


Figure 6. Map showing alternative A from April 16 to May 31. Routes include both designated over-snow vehicle trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use.





## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Alternative A includes approximately 36.8 miles of proposed over-snow vehicle trails located on existing trails (both motorized and non-motorized) with motorized vehicle width restrictions. Over-snow vehicle size would also be restricted on these trails. Table 2 lists the designated over-snow vehicle trails with size class restrictions proposed under Alternative A. Note, table 2 does not include all designated trails, only those with size class restrictions. See figure 4 through figure 6 for all designated trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use proposed under alternative A.

Maps showing proposed over-snow vehicle trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use are provided in figure 4 (prior to April 1), figure 5 (April 1 to April 15), and figure 6 (April 16 to May 31). To improve readability of these maps, trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use are shown as “routes.” Detailed information on all individual over-snow vehicle trails proposed as part of alternative A is provided in the minimization criteria screening document available in the project record and on the project webpage.

**Table 2. Trails with over-snow vehicle size class restrictions under alternative A**

Trail Number	Miles	Groomed or Ungroomed	Designated Season of Use	over-snow vehicle Size Class
2	1.5	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
23	2.7	Ungroomed	April 16-May 31	Less than 50 inches
31	1.0	Ungroomed	April 16-May 31	Less than 50 inches
32	4.5	Ungroomed	April 16-May 31	Less than 50 inches
45	1.6	Ungroomed	April 16-May 31	Less than 50 inches
105	1.7	Ungroomed	April 16-May 31	Less than 50 inches
120	2.5	Ungroomed	Open prior to April 1	Single track less than 24 inches
172	1.5	Ungroomed	April 16-May 31	Less than 50 inches
222	4.2	Ungroomed	April 16-May 31	Less than 50 inches
444	6.6	Ungroomed	April 1-May 31	Less than 50 inches
1386	1.7	Ungroomed	April 16-May 31	Less than 50 inches
2485	1.7	Ungroomed	April 16-May 31	Less than 50 inches
2558	0.5	Ungroomed	April 16-May 31	Less than 50 inches
172A	0.3	Ungroomed	April 16-May 31	Less than 50 inches
32A	1.6	Ungroomed	April 16-May 31	Less than 50 inches
32B	0.4	Ungroomed	April 16-May 31	Less than 50 inches
45A	0.7	Ungroomed	April 16-May 31	Less than 50 inches
45B	0.7	Ungroomed	April 16-May 31	Less than 50 inches
45C	0.3	Ungroomed	April 16-May 31	Less than 50 inches
45D	1.1	Ungroomed	April 16-May 31	Less than 50 inches

## Alternatives Considered but not Analyzed in Detail

### Eliminate Over-Snow Vehicle Use Across the Project Area

We considered an alternative that would eliminate over-snow vehicle use across the entire project area. However, this alternative would not meet the purpose and need of the project and would not comply with the land management plan.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

### Eliminate Over-Snow Vehicle Use in Inventoried Roadless Areas

Commenters recommended we consider an alternative that eliminates winter motorized use in all inventoried roadless areas, which would reduce winter motorized recreation across the project area. Large portions of many inventoried roadless areas would be closed to over-snow vehicle use prior to April 1 under the proposed action. After March 31, the proposed action would close almost all inventoried roadless areas to over-snow vehicle use. Effects to roadless characteristics are addressed in the *Law, Regulation, and Policy Consistency* section.

### Open and Close Over-Snow Vehicle Areas Based on Minimum Snow Depths

Commenters recommended we consider opening and closing over-snow vehicle use areas based on minimum snow depths. We considered this request; however, minimum snow depths would be challenging to enforce. To protect grooming equipment, in the past the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation has required that grooming only occur when 18 inches of snow is present at the lowest elevation that will be groomed. Over-snow vehicles may be damaged if they are operated on shallow snow depths; However, users typically self-limit use on shallow snow depths.

### User Education Versus Closing Areas to Over-Snow Vehicle Use

Commenters requested we partner with the over-snow vehicle community to provide education on caring for natural resources rather than closing areas to over-snow vehicle use. User education is included in the proposed action and alternative A. Closed areas provide opportunities for solitude for non-motorized recreationists and provide for the protection of forest resources, in accordance with the land management plan.

### Close Roman Nose to Over-Snow Vehicle Use

Commenters recommended we consider an alternative closing Roman Nose Lakes area to all over-snow vehicle use. The Roman Nose area has been a regional destination for over-snow vehicle users for over 30 years and provides one of the primary riding areas on the east side of the Selkirk Mountains. It is currently accessed by three different groomed trails, two of which are non-Forest Service trails outside of National Forest System lands. Closing this area to over-snow vehicle use would be difficult to enforce and would likely send traffic to other more sensitive areas.

### Close Priest Lake Airstrip to Over-Snow Vehicle Use

A comment requested we close the Priest Lake Airstrip (sometimes called the Nordman Airstrip) to over-snow vehicle use due to safety concerns. The Priest Lake Airstrip is a small public airstrip owned by the U.S. Forest Service. It is not maintained in the winter. The Forest Service has historically used the airstrip property for snowmobile training and the airstrip has also been used for annual vintage snowmobile races. The land adjacent to the airstrip is closed to over-snow vehicle use. Airplanes seldom use the airstrip in the winter and safety concerns are expected to be minimal.

### Close Specific Areas to Over-Snow Vehicle Use

Commenters requested that we close several other specific areas to over-snow vehicle use, including:

- Grouse Mountain area
- Caribou Lake and Mount Casey area



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

- Area south of the Clark Fork River
- Eliminate grooming on National Forest System Road 231

We considered closing these areas to over-snow vehicle use. However, we also received public comments requesting these areas remain open to over-snow vehicle use. We have a responsibility to minimize conflicts among the various uses and provide for the protection of forest resources while also providing reasonable motorized access to the forests and allow for over-snow vehicle use when there is adequate snow. This environmental assessment analyzes impacts associated with both open and closed areas.

### Open Entire Project Area to Over-Snow Vehicle Use

Commenters requested that we eliminate all closed areas and open the entire project area to over-snow vehicle use. Opening the entire project area to over-snow vehicle use would be inconsistent with the land management plan. The land management plan does not allow over-snow vehicle use in wilderness, recommended wilderness, or research natural areas. Except for the Northwest Peaks Scenic Areas, over-snow vehicle use is not allowed within botanical, geological, pioneer, or scenic areas. Over-snow vehicles are only allowed on designated roads and trails through experimental forests. The land management plan also prescribes wildlife-related restrictions on over-snow vehicle use. Closed areas provide opportunities for solitude for non-motorized recreationists and provide for the protection of forest resources, in accordance with the land management plan.

### Open Specific Areas to Over-Snow Vehicle Use

Commenters requested that we open several other specific areas to year-round over-snow vehicle use, including:

- Saddle Pass area
- Spar Lake area
- All areas west of Murphy Mountain, Thunder Mountain, Keno Mountain, Buckhorn Ridge, and Canuck Peak
- All areas north of Scotchman Number Two
- West Fork Cabin area
- Smith Creek
- The area between National Forest System Road 1137 and National Forest System Road 306

We are proposing to close these areas for all or part of the year for a variety of reasons, including resource protection, public comments requesting closure of these areas, and land management plan direction. This is aligned with the Travel Management Rule's minimization criteria.

### New Non-Motorized Use Area at Bearpaw in Lower Priest

Commenters requested we develop a new non-motorized use area at Bearpaw in Lower Priest. We considered this request; however, this alternative would not meet the purpose of the project, which is to designate roads, trails, and areas open to over-snow vehicle use.



## Comparison of Action Alternatives

As described in the *Alternative A* section above, alternative A differs from the proposed action in the following ways. Alternative A would close the west side of the upper Pack River to over-snow vehicle use yearlong; change the closure dates for off-route travel outside grizzly bear recovery zones from April 1 to April 15; add and expand the following areas with May 31 closure dates: Jeru Ridge, Wellington Creek, and Porcupine Creek in addition to Roman Nose and Moose Lake; and eliminate proposed grooming of the Cow Creek trail (upper National Forest System Road 655). Table 3 compares acres of areas open and closed to over-snow vehicle use in the proposed action and alternative A. Table 4 compares miles of designated trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use in the proposed action and alternative A.

**Table 3. Comparison of over-snow vehicle use areas under the proposed action and alternative A**

Management Strategy	Proposed Action (acres)	Alternative A (acres)
Open to over-snow vehicle use prior to May 31	150,856	150,856
Open to over-snow vehicle use prior to May 31 once motorized access standards are met	4,327	0
Open to over-snow vehicle use from November 16 to March 31	348,087	189,757
Open to over-snow vehicle use from November 16 to April 15	0	142,035
Open to over-snow vehicle use from November 16 to May 31	0	9,785
Open to over-snow vehicle use from December 1 to March 31	275,915	175,684
Open to over-snow vehicle use from December 1 to April 15	0	90,979
Open to over-snow vehicle use from December 1 to May 31	0	11,541
Closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use year-round	267,275	275,823

**Table 4. Comparison of designated over-snow vehicle trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use under the proposed action and alternative A**

Management Strategy	Proposed Action (miles)	Alternative A (miles)
Groomed trails	450	449
Ungroomed trails and roads open prior to March 31 in areas closed year-round	52	52
Ungroomed trails and roads open April 1 to May 31	1,174	404 <sup>1</sup>
Ungroomed trails and roads open only from April 16 to May 31	0	641 <sup>2</sup>
Road administered by Boundary County	10.5	11.9

<sup>1</sup>This number does not include the mileage of roads and trails open only from April 16 to May 31.

<sup>2</sup>This number does not include the mileage of roads and trails open from April 1 to May 31.

## Environmental Impacts: How would our management actions affect the environment?

The following sections describe how the project complies with the relevant laws, regulations, policies, and the land management plan, which provide the basis for thresholds for significance. Consistency with



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

relevant laws, regulations, policies, and land management plan standards ensures that the proposed action does not exceed thresholds for significance and supporting analysis and rationale for consistency are provided to reach a finding of no significant impact (FONSI).

## Potentially Affected Environment

The project area includes 1,046,460 acres of National Forest System lands on the Bonners Ferry, Priest Lake, and Sandpoint Ranger Districts on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests. The project area spans in elevation from about 1,800 to 7,700 feet above sea level. Several communities are within and near the project area, including Sandpoint, Bonners Ferry, Priest River, and Priest Lake. The Colville National Forest bounds the project area to the west, the Kootenai National Forest provides the eastern boundary, and the United States border with Canada is the northern boundary. The Priest Lake State Forest lies between the Upper Priest and South Selkirks analysis areas and contains numerous over-snow vehicle trails, some of which tie into current trails and roads on National Forest System lands. The state of Idaho does not restrict cross-country over-snow vehicle use in the Priest Lake State Forest or on other lands administered by the Idaho Department of Lands. The Kootenai National Wildlife Refuge lies directly to the east of the South Selkirks analysis area and does not allow snowmobile use on refuge lands or roads. Priest Lake and Lake Pend Oreille are the primary water bodies in the project area.

Within the project area, public over-snow vehicle use currently occurs in areas without existing closures or other prohibitions. See figure 7 for a map of existing over-snow vehicle management within the project area and table 5 for the acres of land and miles of trail currently open to over-snow vehicle use. Approximately 751,026 acres of National Forest System lands within the project area currently allow over-snow vehicle use. Most of this land receives enough snow for over-snow vehicle use at some point during the winter season; however, the snow at low elevations is typically icy and low quality due to freezing and thawing cycles. Many over-snow vehicle recreationists avoid this poor-quality snow because they typically seek fresh snow at higher elevations. Most years there is enough snow in the project area for over-snow vehicle use from December through May (NRCS 2022).

Currently, there are approximately 361 miles of groomed over-snow vehicle trails and 350 miles of ungroomed over-snow vehicle trails and roads on National Forest System lands within the project area. Groomed trails are maintained by two groomer boards, both managed by Bonner County. There are several warming huts within the project area. Over-snow vehicle use is concentrated in these areas as recreationists often travel from one warming hut to another.

See the *Issues Considered for Analysis* section for descriptions of the affected environment related to recreation, wildlife, and vegetation.



# Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

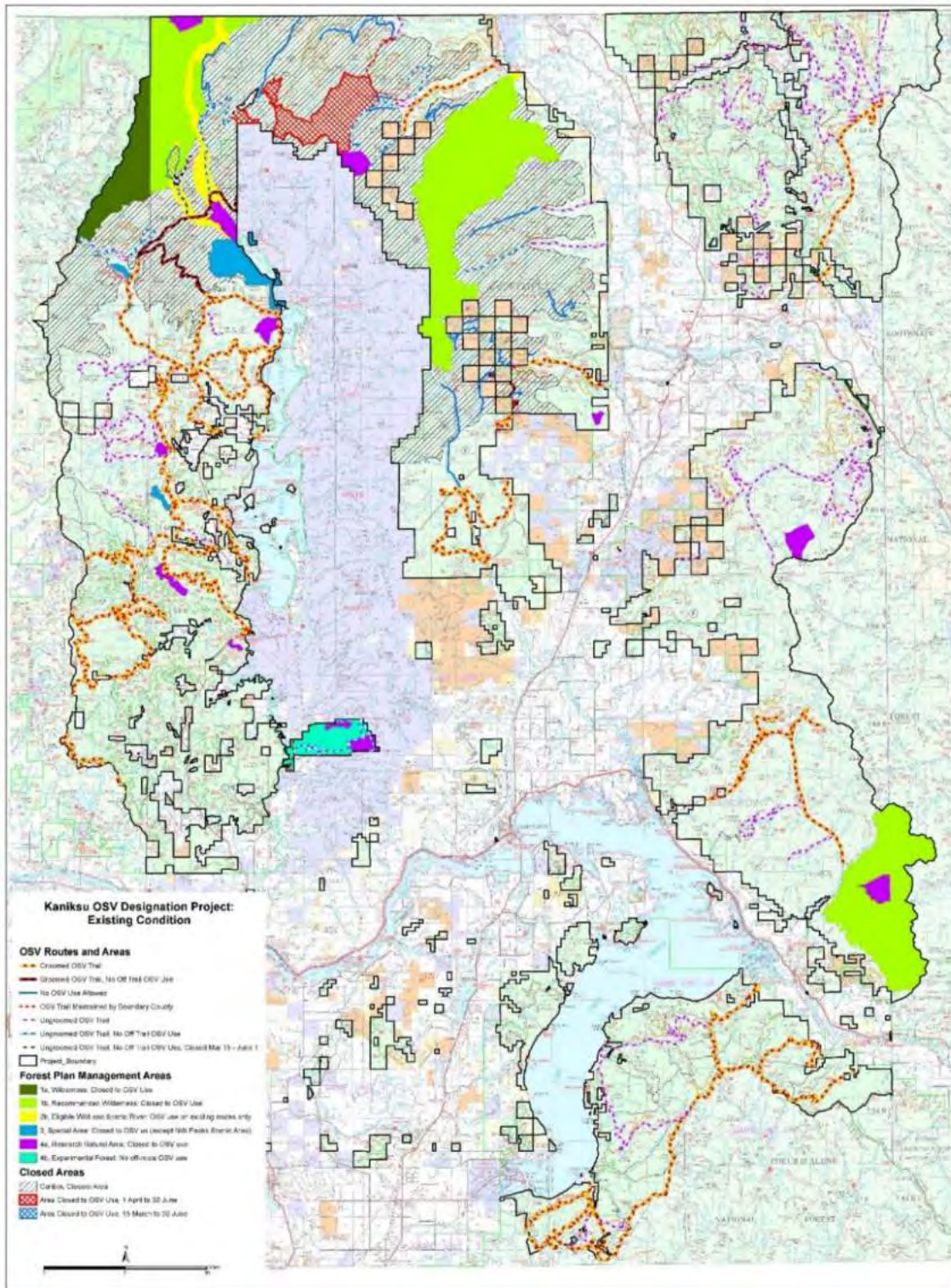


Figure 7. Map of existing over-snow vehicle management within the project area



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

**Table 5. Summary of existing over-snow vehicle management on National Forest System lands within the project area**

Management Strategy	Existing Condition
Open to over-snow vehicle use year-round	740,338 acres
Closed to over-snow vehicle use	295,435 acres
Closed to over-snow vehicle use, April 1 to June 30	10,044 acres
Closed to over-snow vehicle use, March 15 to June 30	644 acres
Groomed trails	361 miles*
Ungroomed roads and trails	350 miles*

\*The document published for public scoping reported 416 miles of existing groomed over-snow vehicle trails and 366 miles of existing ungroomed over-snow vehicle trails and roads. However, these numbers inaccurately included 55 miles of groomed trails and 16 miles of ungroomed trails and roads not under Forest Service jurisdiction.

### Past, Present, and Reasonably Foreseeable Future Actions

Council on Environmental Quality regulations require an assessment of cumulative impacts, defined as “the impact on the environment which results from the incremental impact of the action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions regardless of what agency (Federal or non-Federal) or person undertakes such other actions” (40 CFR 1508.1(g)). Cumulative impacts occur when the effects of an activity, or activities, overlap in space and time with effects of the proposed project. Per the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ 2005), “Generally, agencies can conduct an adequate cumulative effects analysis by focusing on the current aggregate effects of past actions without delving into the historical details of individual past actions.”

Consistent with this guidance and Forest Service regulations for cumulative effects analysis (36 CFR 220.4(f)), the interdisciplinary team considered past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions relevant to the proposal, including how they may have contributed to existing conditions and trends. See *Appendix B – Activities Considered for Cumulative Effects* for a summary of the activities considered in the cumulative effects analysis.

### Consideration of No Action: What would happen if we do not act?

Taking no action means the Forest Service would not designate over-snow vehicle trails and areas, although all other ongoing authorized activities would continue. The potentially affected environment reflects current over-snow vehicle use management activities within the project area and represents the existing baseline condition or trends by which the action alternatives are compared. Current management reflects the 2007 closure order and direction in the land management plan. The no-action alternative would not designate areas or trails open to over-snow vehicle use and thus would not be consistent with Subpart C of the Travel Management Rule. Taking no action would also be inconsistent with the term and condition in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s biological opinion for the land management plan.

The environmental assessment will not analyze a stand-alone no-action alternative. However, the impacts analysis considers the baseline conditions in the affected environment and contrasts the impacts of the proposed action and alternative A with the current condition and expected future condition if the proposed action or alternative A were not implemented (36 CFR 220.7(b)(2)(ii)).



## Issues Considered for Analysis

Comments received during public scoping along with review and input from the interdisciplinary team of resource specialists were used to determine the scope of issues to be addressed and for identifying issues related to the proposed action (40 CFR 1501.7). We considered the following issues or concerns in the environmental analysis:

1. Seasonal closure dates for over-snow vehicle use may reduce over-snow vehicle access to popular locations for riding during popular times of the snow season, creating an increase in user conflicts.
2. Over-snow vehicle use will negatively impact non-motorized recreational experiences.
3. April closures will negatively impact the economy of northern Idaho communities.
4. Opening the Upper Pack River drainage to over-snow vehicle use will negatively impact wildlife and non-motorized users.
5. Over-snow vehicle use will negatively affect wildlife.
6. Over-snow vehicle use will negatively affect whitebark pine.

The following issues or topics raised in public comments are addressed in the *Law, Regulation, and Policy Consistency* section:

- Effects of over-snow vehicle use on cultural resources and sacred sites.
- Effects of over-snow vehicle use on designated areas or recommended/eligible special management areas.
- Effects of over-snow vehicles on roadless characteristics.
- Effects of over-snow vehicles on water quality.

### **Issue 1. Seasonal closure dates for over-snow vehicle use may reduce over-snow vehicle access to popular locations for riding during popular times of the snow season, creating an increase in user conflicts**

#### Issue 1 – Affected Environment

Popular areas for over-snow vehicle use in the project area vary widely among recreationists. The Trapper Peak and Sundance wildfires played a historically important part of snowmobiling within the analysis area by opening thousands of acres of forested land. Although still exceptionally popular, the burned areas are now more than 56 years old, and vegetation is regenerating. Even in deep snow years, the landscape offers less vast, uncongested opportunities that in the past. As existing burns continue to re-grow, focus could move toward ridge tops, lake bowls, or land with heavy timber harvest treatments.

Historically popular areas associated with the Trapper Peak burn include Trapper Peak, Phoebe Tip (on State of Idaho lands), Cow Creek, Trapper “Burn,” Mollies (on State of Idaho lands), Continental Mine, Continental Mountain, Grass Mountain, Grass Creek Drainage, Blue Joe Creek, and Green Bonnet Mountain (on State of Idaho lands). Historically popular areas associated with the Sundance burn include Snow Creek, Cooks Lake, Bottleneck Lake, Roman Nose Lakes, Apache Ridge, Ruby Pass, Fall Creek





## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

drainage, Dodge Peak, Pearson Basin, and Jeru Ridge and Peak. These locations are all above 4,000 feet in elevation.

Weather plays a large role in winter recreation. Many of the distinct landforms create micro-climates. A dependable snowpack throughout the winter season is essential for winter recreation. A climate change vulnerability assessment for the Forest Service Northern Rockies Region (Halofsky et al. 2018a), including the Idaho Panhandle National Forests, indicates that temperature is projected to increase throughout the twenty-first century. Snowfall is projected to decrease in the Northern Rockies region, particularly in relatively warm locations such as mid- to low-elevation locations (Klos et al. 2014, Luce et al. 2014). As described in Halofsky et al. 2018b, climate change is expected to have a generally negative effect on snow-based winter activities, although a wide range of effects at local scales is possible because of variations across the region in site location and elevation. Warmer projected winter temperatures for the region are expected to reduce the proportion of precipitation as snow, even if the total amount of precipitation does not deviate significantly from historical norms.

Within the project area, a dependable snowpack can be found consistently at higher elevation. A local ski resort, “Schweitzer Mountain,” has a base area located at approximately 4,000 feet. This resort is the most popular and most visited destination for winter recreation within the analysis area. The main qualities that make an area popular are available access, open landscapes, and deep snowpack; these qualities are found in the higher elevations (above 4,000 feet). Therefore, for this analysis, popular winter recreation areas are defined as areas located at 4,000 feet and above.

Within the project area 585,178 acres are above 4,000 feet elevation. Currently, during the winter season of use above 4,000 feet elevation, approximately 326,834 acres (56 percent) are open and approximately 258,344 acres (44 percent) are closed to over-snow vehicle use. Approximately 268,388 acres (46 percent) above 4,000 feet are closed after March 31 under the existing condition.

The Sandpoint, Priest Lake, and Bonners Ferry Ranger Districts of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests have a long history of winter recreational use. Lands within the analysis area are distinctive in that they offer exceptionally high-quality recreational opportunities in a variety of settings within an hour of several full-service communities. These communities are located along major interstate and Idaho State highways. None of these plowed and maintained major roadways access high-elevation mountain passes through the Selkirk Mountains. As a result, recreationists often use over-snow vehicles to access higher elevations even when participating in some non-motorized types of winter recreation such as backcountry skiing and downhill snowboarding.

Well-developed road and trail systems provide readily available backcountry access. Winter opportunities range from numerous groomed over-snow vehicle trails allowing visitor access from developed resorts operating under special use permit to more rugged ungroomed backcountry experiences in remote settings. Each of the ranger districts in the project area provide a full range of opportunities for winter recreation.

The mixture of motorized and non-motorized forms of backcountry recreation can result in user conflicts. Use of the same area by multiple people, participating in the same form of recreation, can also result in user conflicts. In over 10 years, confrontations between snowmobilers and other recreationists in popular over-snow vehicle areas (above 4,000 feet in elevation) have not led to law enforcement actions. This could be because many visitors participating in backcountry skiing or snowboarding use over-snow vehicles to access higher elevations within the project area. Such conflicts could also be under-reported.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Most likely, visitors participating in winter recreational pursuits generally have ample room to disperse and resolve conflicts by seeking areas with less competition.

Front-country user conflicts have included over-snow vehicle use of non-motorized cross-country ski trails, visitors participating in over-snow vehicle-related recreation parking within Nordic ski parking areas, failure to purchase park and ski passes, visitors failing to properly register over-snow vehicles, pets being caught in foot traps, visitors exceeding camping stay limits, littering, and overnight use of day-use sites. At times, the recreating public has self-policed and chastised each other for these infractions. The Forest Service has prioritized educational efforts to reduce user conflict and help minimize law enforcement actions. This tactic has resulted in better compliance with over-snow vehicle registrations and increased revenue generated through Idaho State's Park and Ski program. Additionally, signage is posted every year to inform visitors of existing rules and regulations. Gates and width limiting devices have been incorporated into project designs and law enforcement citations have been issued when warranted.

#### Issue 1 – Direct and Indirect Effects of the Proposed Action

Under the proposed action, 67 percent, or 390,033 acres, of areas above 4,000 feet elevation would be open to off-route over-snow vehicle use during the winter season. Access to these higher-elevation destinations would be provided by 450 miles of groomed over-snow vehicle trails. The proposed action would continue to provide access to the popular destinations found in the Trapper and Sundance burns.

To comply with existing laws, regulations, and Forest Service policies (see wildlife specialist report) much of these areas are proposed to be open to over-snow vehicle recreation through the most popular times of the year (winter) but would have seasonal restrictions during the spring season. Under the proposed action, approximately 91 percent of the land above 4,000 feet would be closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use after March 31. Approximately 35,100 acres above 4,000 feet elevation would remain open to off-route over-snow vehicle use after March 31.

After March 31 approximately 1,174 miles of ungroomed trails and roads would be open to over-snow vehicle travel through areas closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use. Spring access to higher-elevation areas would be provided by these ungroomed trails and roads. Access to ungroomed trails and roads would vary year to year as use would depend on snow level. Forest visitors participating in on-trail over-snow vehicle riding during the spring would continue to enjoy ample opportunities until snow levels recede.

Off-route over-snow vehicle use is best experienced on an undisturbed snowpack. For this reason, user conflicts, as described in the *Issue 1 – Affected Environment* section above, could develop between over-snow vehicle recreationists as they compete for the same resource. By restricting higher-elevation areas available by 91 percent after March 31, these user conflicts could worsen. This could result in the displacement of users onto other lands without spring restrictions. Many of the historically popular locations associated with both the Trapper Peak and Sundance burns are located within the Priest Lake State Forest.

#### Issue 1 – Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative A

Under alternative A, 65 percent, or 381,617 acres, of areas above 4,000 feet elevation would be open to off-route over-snow vehicle use during the winter season during the 20 year project timeframe. Access to these higher-elevation destinations would be provided by 449 miles of groomed over-snow vehicle trails.



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Alternative A would continue to provide access to the popular destinations found in the Trapper and Sundance burns.

Under alternative A, approximately 76 percent of the land above 4,000 feet would be closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use after March 31. Approximately 140,636 acres above 4,000 feet elevation would remain open to off-route over-snow vehicle use from April 1 to April 15. After April 15, the area available for off-route over-snow vehicle use would be further reduced to roughly 64,747 acres.

After March 31, approximately 416 miles of ungroomed trails and roads would be open to over-snow vehicle travel through areas closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use. After April 15, an additional 641 miles of ungroomed trails and roads would open to over-snow vehicle travel through areas closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use. Spring access to higher-elevation areas would be provided by these ungroomed trails and roads. Access to ungroomed trails and roads would vary year to year as use would depend on snow level. Forest visitors wishing to participate in on-trail over-snow vehicle riding during the spring would continue to enjoy ample opportunities until snow levels recede.

As described above, the spring reduction in high-elevation areas open to off-route over-snow vehicle use could result in user conflicts and displacement onto neighboring lands. The seasonal restrictions would vary more under alternative A than under proposed action. Seventy-six percent of lands above 4,000 feet available to off-route over-snow vehicle use would be closed after March 31, and 89 percent would be closed after April 15. These varying closures could be confusing to visitors and add complexities to enforcement.

### **Issue 1 – Cumulative Effects of the Proposed Action and Alternative A**

Future timber harvest and fuels reduction on lands of other ownership may reduce miles of both groomed and ungroomed roads and trails available to over-snow vehicle use throughout the seasons of use. This could occur because of the need to plow roads to facilitate winter log haul. When combined with the actions proposed under the proposed action and alternative A, this could lead to additional competition in the remaining areas above 4,000 feet available to off-route over-snow vehicle use during popular seasons of use.

Timber harvest and fuels reduction on Forest Service managed lands above 4,000 feet may similarly reduce the mileage of groomed and ungroomed roads and trails available to over-snow vehicle use. Timber harvest and fuels reduction could also create additional areas sought after by visitors participating in off-route over-snow vehicle use. This could affect popular riding locations. When combined with the actions proposed under the proposed action and alternative A, this could lead to additional competition in the remaining areas available to off-route over-snow vehicle use during the winter.

Road construction, decommissioning, and storage could reduce mileage of roads available to over-snow vehicle travel. When combined with the actions proposed under the proposed action and alternative A, this could potentially lead to additional competition within the remaining areas available to off-route over-snow vehicle use (above 4,000 feet) during the popular seasons of use. However, just because a road is decommissioned does not mean that it would automatically close to over-snow vehicle use. Whether it stays open would be informed by the future project-specific travel analysis and NEPA processes.

Wildfires occurring in areas designated as open to off-route over-snow vehicle use could reduce the forest canopy in burned areas and indirectly create popular areas for over-snow vehicle use. When combined with the actions proposed under the proposed action and alternative A, this could lead to an increase in the



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

**Table 6. Summary of road and trail mileages and acres above 4,000 feet open and closed to over-snow vehicle use by season of use and alternative.**

Management	Existing Condition	Proposed Action	Alternative A
Acres open to off-route over-snow vehicle use above 4,000 feet prior to April 1	326,834 acres (56 percent)	390,033 acres (67 percent)	381,617 acres (65 percent)
Acres closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use above 4,000 feet prior to April 1	258,344 acres (44 percent)	195,143 acres (33 percent)	203,559 acres (35 percent)
Acres above 4,000 feet closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use after March 31	268,388 acres (46 percent)	534,783 acres (91 percent)	444,540 acres (76 percent) are closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use after March 31 520,429 acres (89 percent) are closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use after April 15
Miles of groomed trails	361 miles	450 miles	449 miles
Miles of ungroomed roads and trails open prior to April 1	350 miles	52 miles	52 miles
Miles of ungroomed routes open after March 31. Dependent on the existing snow levels.	350 miles	1,174 miles	404 miles open from April 1-April 15 1,045 miles open from April 16-May 31

use of burned areas if the areas are open to off-route over-snow vehicle use. This increase in use could occur during the winter.

The Chloride Gold project planned on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests could temporarily reduce the mileage of roads open to over-snow vehicle travel within the Chloride Gold project area to facilitate winter log haul. When combined with the actions proposed under the proposed action and alternative A, this could lead to additional competition within the remaining areas available to off-route over-snow vehicle use during the winter. It could also indirectly create popular areas for off-route over-snow vehicle use. Depending on the designation proposed for the area, this could shift forest visitors' perspective of seasonal closures and access to popular locations for over-snow vehicle use in popular times of the year.

The Black Ram and Knotty Pine projects planned on the Kootenai National Forest could potentially displace recreationists and increase over-snow vehicle use (in the short term) in the Idaho Panhandle National Forests.

### Issue 1 – Comparison of Effects

Table 6 summarizes the miles of roads and trails within the project area and acres above 4,000 feet that are open and closed to over-snow vehicle use during the winter and spring riding seasons. Additional information on project effects, including methodology, may be found in the project recreation report available in the project record and on the project webpage.



## Issue 2. Over-snow vehicle use will negatively impact non-motorized recreational experiences

### Issue 2 – Affected Environment

Forms of non-motorized winter recreation vary widely among recreationists. Forest visitors participating in Nordic skiing, winter camping, fat-tire biking, snowshoeing, dogsledding, and backcountry skiing and snowboarding all pursue varied recreation experiences. Participation in these recreation pursuits occur at all elevations of the project area. For purposes of analysis, the similarities in non-motorized winter recreation are best categorized into the recreation opportunity spectrum used in the direction provided by the land management plan. The recreation opportunity spectrum delineation of the analysis area makes clear distinction between non-motorized and motorized forms of recreation as these recreational experiences have great differences.

The recreation opportunity setting takes as its major premise the fact that recreation is more than just the activity, such as hiking, fishing, and camping, in which people participate. It also includes the quality of the specific setting where that activity takes place. For this reason, the Forest Service categorizes landscapes into recreation opportunity spectrum settings for planning purposes. The land management plan designated the desired condition recreation opportunity spectrum categories within the project area. The categories of recreation opportunity spectrum are summarized as follows:

- Primitive (P): Natural areas unmodified by human activity and large enough so that visitors can find solitude and feel close to nature. The remoteness means that one must be self-reliant, using backcountry survival skills, and thus experience challenge and some risk. The activities are all those using muscle power and basic equipment.
- Semi-primitive, non-motorized (SPNM): In this category are factors such as size of area, degree of human intervention or chance of meeting other people, which reduces slightly the primitive experience of the first category. Minimal site controls may be needed, but the overall experience should be similar to primitive. The same activities are appropriate.
- Semi-primitive motorized (SPM): This is essentially the same as the previous category, but because motorized activities such as motorboats, snowmobiles, or all-terrain vehicles are allowed, the qualities of quietness and absence of disturbance are likely to be impaired.
- Roaded Natural (RN): This category is mainly natural in character, although management activities may be present, and there will be more evidence of use, including roads that provide easier access. The experience will be some solitude and some social interaction, but risk taking and self-reliance aspects will be reduced in importance.
- Rural (R): This is where human activities start to dominate over the natural character, although the landscape contains significant natural components. Thus, solitude and closeness to nature are highly compromised, and there is little scope for risk taking or using backwoods skills. There is more chance to socialize, and as use is more concentrated there is a need for more facilities.
- Urban (U): The widest range of activities are possible, but the setting is more or less completely dominated by human activities, and generally constitutes an urbanized environment. Consequently, a large amount of design and management is required, as well as many facilities. The setting makes solitude difficult to accomplish, although by good design and management some representation of



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

this element may be possible. The need to find challenge and risk is not apparent in most users' minds.

Within the project area, the following recreation opportunity spectrum management prescriptions are currently open to over-snow vehicles during the winter season of use: primitive (76,874 acres or 7 percent), semi-primitive non-motorized (218,301 acres or 21 percent), semi-primitive motorized (591,505 acres or 57 percent), roaded natural (131,562 acres or 13 percent), rural (16,479 acres or 2 percent), and urban (13 acres or 0 percent). There are approximately 11,726 acres with an unknown recreation opportunity spectrum setting.

The Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail, designated by Congress in 2009, runs through the project area. The Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail is a 1,200-mile hiking trail running from the Continental Divide in Montana to the Pacific Ocean on Washington's Olympic Coast. The proposed route of the trail travels east to west across the project area for approximately 102 miles. The route is not finalized and is, therefore, described as the proposed route in this document. Currently, approximately 42 miles of the proposed route run through areas open to over-snow vehicle use and approximately 60 miles run through areas closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use. Use of the trail increases in the summer months and becomes minimal by fall. During months of snow cover (winter and spring), use of this trail by long distance hikers is minimal to non-existent.

### **Issue 2 – Direct and Indirect Effects of the Proposed Action**

Potential user conflicts between forest visitors participating in non-motorized recreation and visitors participating in over-snow vehicle use could include both real and perceived risks of collision. Visitors recreating in a multiple-use environment could smell vehicle emissions and could hear the over-snow vehicles. Within the state of Idaho, over-snow vehicles are required to have a muffler that passes at 96 decibels at the half-meter test, SAE J1287 (Idaho Code 67-7125). Non-motorized recreationists may feel that over-snow vehicle users have a sense of entitlement, and they might choose to recreate in other areas closed to over-snow vehicle use. Potential conflict may occur between the two groups as they both pursue areas of undisturbed snowpack. Finally, the quality of the snow available to non-motorized forms of recreation may become increasingly compacted, tracked, and rutted in areas where off-route over-snow vehicle use is authorized.

The proposed action would result in a 3 percent increase of acres in the project area open to motorized forms of off-route recreation during the winter season. This would alter the currently managed recreation settings within the project area. These changes would focus on areas managed for semi-primitive motorized versus semi-primitive nonmotorized forms of recreation. Currently, approximately 21 percent of the project area is managed for semi-primitive non-motorized forms of recreation. Under the proposed action, 18 percent of the project area would be primarily managed for semi-primitive non-motorized forms of recreation. The proposed action would close approximately 267,275 acres to off-route over-snow vehicle use. These areas would largely provide a semi-primitive non-motorized experience during the winter. Seasonal restrictions would indirectly provide a spring season of use (April 1 to snow melt) for backcountry skiers and snowboarders to recreate in a semi-primitive non-motorized setting on 85 percent (891,277 acres) of the project area.

The proposed changes to the existing recreation opportunity spectrum setting would establish recreation opportunity spectrum categories that more closely resemble the desired conditions provided by the land management plan (FW-DC-AR-04 and FW-DC-AR-05) than the existing condition. In other words, the



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

proposed action would trend the project area's recreation opportunity spectrum settings toward the forestwide desired condition.

Approximately 15 miles of Nordic trails are groomed for cross-country skiing in the project area. These areas would continue to be closed to motorized forms of recreation. Multiple use of groomed over-snow vehicle trails would also continue to be allowed under the proposed action. Similarly, all areas open to motorized use would allow backcountry skiers abundant opportunities to ski in a multiple-use environment on over 779,000 acres of Forest Service-managed lands. No high-elevation passenger vehicle roads exist within the analysis area. As a result, backcountry skiers frequently use over-snow vehicles to access higher-elevation mountainous areas that facilitate the recreational experience they pursue.

Recreational users of the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail pursue a non-motorized recreational setting throughout the entire year. Under the proposed action, approximately 43 miles of the trail proposed route would be open to off-route over-snow vehicle use. On April 1, the route would be entirely located in areas proposed to be closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use, trending toward the desired non-motorized experience.

#### **Issue 2 – Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative A**

Potential user conflicts under alternative A are the same as those described for the proposed action.

Alternative A would result in a 2 percent increase of acres in the project area open to motorized forms of off-route recreation during the winter season. This would alter the currently managed recreation settings within the project area. These changes would focus on areas managed for semi-primitive motorized versus semi-primitive non-motorized forms of recreation. Currently, approximately 21 percent of the project area is managed for semi-primitive non-motorized forms of recreation. Under alternative A, 19 percent of the project area would be primarily managed for semi-primitive non-motorized forms of recreation. Alternative A would close approximately 275,823 acres to off-route over-snow vehicle use year-round. These areas would largely provide a semi-primitive non-motorized experience during the winter. Seasonal restrictions would indirectly provide a spring season of use (April 1 to snow melt) for backcountry skiers and snowboarders to recreate in a semi-primitive non-motorized setting. Alternative A would also trend the recreation opportunity spectrum settings toward the desired condition listed in the land management plan.

Under alternative A, approximately 43 miles of the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail's proposed route would be located within areas open to off-route over-snow vehicle use during the winter. Thirty-one miles of the proposed route would be in areas open to off-route over-snow vehicle use after March 31. Fifteen miles of the proposed route would be in areas open to off-route over-snow vehicle use after April 15.

#### **Issue 2 – Cumulative Effects of the Proposed Action and Alternative A**

Future timber harvest and fuels reduction on lands of other ownership may reduce miles of both groomed and ungroomed roads and trails available to over-snow vehicle use throughout the seasons of use. This could occur because of the need to plow roads to facilitate winter log haul. When combined with the actions proposed under the proposed action or alternative A, this could lead to a reduction in the areas accessible to motorized and non-motorized forms of recreation. It could reduce impacts to non-motorized



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

recreational experiences, and it could also increase motorized recreational use in the remaining areas leading to an increase in impacts to non-motorized recreation.

Timber harvest and fuels reduction on National Forest System lands may similarly reduce the mileage of groomed and ungroomed roads and trails available to over-snow vehicle use. Timber harvest and fuels reductions could also create additional areas sought after by visitors using over-snow vehicles off-route. When combined with the actions proposed under the proposed action and alternative A, this could affect popular riding locations and create additional negative impacts to non-motorized recreational experiences.

Road construction, decommissioning, and storage could reduce mileage of roads available to over-snow vehicle travel. When combined with the actions proposed under the proposed action and alternative A, this could potentially affect popular riding locations and create additional negative impacts to non-motorized recreational experiences. However, just because a road is decommissioned does not mean that it would automatically close to over-snow vehicle use. Whether it stays open would be informed by the future project-specific travel analysis and NEPA processes.

Wildfires occurring in areas designated as open to off-route over-snow vehicle use could reduce the forest canopy in burned areas, indirectly creating popular areas for over-snow vehicle use. As different areas become more popular with recreationists, this could create additional impacts to non-motorized recreational experiences.

A potential land exchange with Stimpson Lumber Company could add acreage to the project area. If land comes under management by the Idaho Panhandle National Forests, over-snow vehicle management would be applied on the concept of adjacency, to be managed similar to the National Forest System parcels adjacent to the acquired land. Those lands acquired by the forest would assume the designations of the lands surrounding the parcel. When combined with the actions proposed under the proposed action and alternative A, this could affect popular riding locations and create additional negative impacts to non-motorized recreational experiences.

The Chloride Gold project could temporarily reduce the mileage of roads available to over-snow vehicle travel within the Chloride Gold project area to facilitate winter log haul. It could also indirectly create popular areas for off-route over-snow vehicle use. When combined with the actions proposed under the proposed action and alternative A, this could affect popular riding locations and create additional negative impacts to non-motorized recreational experiences.

The Black Ram and Knotty Pine projects planned on the Kootenai National Forest could potentially displace over-snow vehicle users and increase over-snow vehicle use (in the short term) on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests.

### Issue 2 – Comparison of Effects

Table 7 compares the forestwide recreation opportunity spectrum setting desired conditions (FW-DC-AR-04, land management plan page 34) with the existing condition and project alternatives. Table 8 compares acres open and closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use, recreation opportunity spectrum settings, and miles of Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail proposed route between the existing condition and alternatives. Additional information on project effects, including methodology, may be found in the project recreation report available in the project record and on the project webpage.





Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

**Table 7. Percentage of desired distribution of forest-wide winter recreation opportunity spectrum (ROS) settings compared to the existing condition and alternatives. Units are percent of the project area.**

ROS Setting	Desired Condition Forest-wide Winter ROS	Existing Condition	Proposed Action	Alternative A
Primitive	1	7	7	7
Semi Primitive Non-Motorized	18	21	18	19
Semi-Primitive Motorized	67	57	60	59
Roaded Natural	12	13	13	13
Rural	2	2	2	2

**Table 8. Comparison of management under the existing condition and alternatives**

Management	Existing Condition	Proposed Action	Alternative A
Acres open to off-route over-snow vehicle use prior to April 1	751,026 acres (72 percent)	779,185 acres (75 percent)	770,636 acres (74 percent)
Acres closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use prior to April 1	295,435 acres (28 percent)	267,275 acres (25 percent)	275,823 acres (26 percent)
Acres closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use after March 31	306,123 (29 percent)	624,002 acres (60 percent)	641,365 acres (61 percent) would be closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use after March 31  874,379 acres (84 percent) would be closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use after April 15
Acres providing a particular ROS setting during the winter season (December 1–February 28)	P: 7 percent SPNM: 21 percent SPM: 57 percent RN: 13 percent R: 2 percent U: 0 percent *Until snow recedes	P: 7 percent SPNM: 18 percent SPM: 60 percent RN: 13 percent R: 2 percent U: 0 percent *Until snow recedes	P: 7 percent SPNM: 19 percent SPM: 59 percent RN: 13 percent R: 2 percent U: 0 percent *Until snow recedes



Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Management	Existing Condition	Proposed Action	Alternative A
Acres providing a particular ROS setting during the spring season (after March 31)**	P: 7 percent SPNM: 21 percent SPM: 57 percent RN: 13 percent R: 2 percent U: 0 percent	P: 7 percent SPNM: 78 percent SPM: 11 percent RN: 3 percent R: 0 percent U: 0 percent	<u>April 1–April 15</u> P: 7 percent SPNM: 54 percent SPM: 28 percent RN: 9 percent R: 1 percent U: 0 percent  <u>April 16–May 31</u> P: 7 percent SPNM: 76 percent SPM: 13 percent RN: 3 percent R: 0 percent U: 0 percent
Miles of the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail proposed route within areas open to off-route over-snow vehicle use during the winter season	42 miles	43 miles	43 miles
Miles of the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail proposed route within areas closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use during the winter	60 miles	59 miles	59 miles
Miles of the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail proposed route within areas open to off-route over-snow vehicle use after March 31	41 miles	0 miles	31 miles of the proposed route would be in areas open to off-route over-snow vehicle travel from April 1 to April 15  15 miles of the proposed route would be in areas open to off-route over-snow vehicle travel on the from April 16 to May 31

Note: P = primitive, SPNM = semi-primitive non-motorized; SPM = semi-primitive motorized, RN = roaded natural, R = rural, U = urban

\*\*Spring ROS figures are only listed for “over the snow” forms of recreation. As winter turns to spring, snow levels recede and at a certain point off-highway vehicles and passenger vehicles will begin to use the roadway. During this time of year, ROS categories shift into a summer season management of recreational resources.

**Issue 3. April closures will negatively impact the economy of northern Idaho communities**

**Issue 3 – Affected Environment**

Population change in the area is impacting how people use public lands and the economic contributions those lands have to local economies. From 2010 to 2020, Kootenai County, Idaho, had a 20 percent increase in population (26,825 people), Bonner County had a 10 percent increase (3,977 people), and



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Boundary County had a 13 percent increase (1,364 people). Idaho had a 15 percent increase in population (227,570 people) during the same period (U.S. DOC 2022).

Recreation activities, including snowmobiling, contribute jobs and income to local economies. Spending on snowmobiling recreation across Idaho in 2015 added more than 4,000 jobs. However, snowmobile registrations in Idaho saw a slight decline from 2007 to 2016. According to the Idaho Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, “Trends suggest that registrations began falling around the time the United States experienced the Great Recession (2007 to 2009) and have not fully recovered. Additionally, snowmobile registrations may be impacted by winter snow conditions” (Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation 2018).

The Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation sells registrations for snowmobile use. Revenue from these registrations is distributed across the state. Since 2016, the snowmobile registrations have had minor fluctuations, but there was a significant increase from 2021 to 2022, which mirrors the trend across the state of Idaho. Snowmobile registrations for the Kaniksu project area are about 5 percent of the total registrations sold in Idaho, so any changes to over-snow vehicle recreation in the area would have minimal effects on the overall economy.

In 2019, there were an estimated 1.7 million annual visits to the Idaho Panhandle National Forests. This level of use contributed 490 annual jobs and \$17 million in labor income to the local economy. The most frequently reported primary activities were hiking and walking (20 percent), hunting (12 percent), and fishing (8 percent). About 4 percent of visitors reported snowmobiling as their primary activity (USDA Forest Service 2019).

The jobs and income generated by the activities, outputs, and benefits from national forest management may not remain stable as recreation use increases from growing populations. This would affect the sustainability of contributions to the functional economy surrounding the Idaho Panhandle National Forests.

For more details, see the socioeconomic effects analysis available in the project record and on the project webpage.

### **Issue 3 – Effects of the Proposed Action**

The proposed action would have the most miles of groomed trails (450 miles) and the most miles of ungroomed roads and trails open after March 31 (1,174 miles), as compared to the existing condition and alternative A. While the total acres closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use after March 31 (891,277 acres) would be greater than under the existing condition and alternative A, the increase in groomed routes and designated ungroomed roads and trails open to over-snow vehicle use in otherwise closed areas is expected to offset any seasonal closures. Some users may be displaced onto neighboring lands (see Issue 1 above). Therefore, for the proposed action, recreation visitation related to over-snow vehicle use and the associated economic impacts are not expected to differ substantially from the existing condition. Localized impacts could occur due to the changes in routes and acres available for over-snow vehicle use.

### **Issue 3 – Effects of Alternative A**

Alternative A would have more miles of groomed trails (449 miles) and ungroomed roads and trails open after March 31 (404 miles open April 1 and an additional 641 miles open on April 16) than the existing condition, though less than the proposed action. While the total acres closed to off-route over-snow



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

vehicle use after March 31 (641,264 acres with an additional 233,014 acres closing on April 16) is greater than under the existing condition, the increase in groomed trails and designated ungroomed roads and trails in otherwise closed areas is expected to offset any seasonal closures. Therefore, for alternative A, recreation visitation related to over-snow vehicle use and the associated economic impacts are not expected to differ substantially from the existing condition.

## **Issue 4. Opening the Upper Pack River drainage to over-snow vehicle use will negatively impact wildlife and non-motorized users**

### Issue 4 – Recreation

#### *Affected Environment*

For the purposes of analysis, the Upper Pack River drainage was spatially delineated using the Headwaters Pack River subwatershed (hydrologic unit code 170102140101). This subwatershed is 26,503 total acres in size and contains 25,916 acres of National Forest System lands. People participate in a variety of non-motorized recreation activities in this area. See the *Issue 2 – Affected Environment* section for a description of the recreation opportunity spectrum.

Under the existing condition, approximately 16,620 acres (64 percent) of the Headwaters Pack River subwatershed is open to off-route over-snow vehicle use and approximately 9,296 acres (36 percent) is closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use. The Headwaters Pack River subwatershed currently contains approximately 12.9 miles of groomed over-snow vehicle trail. Within the Headwaters Pack River subwatershed, the following recreation opportunity spectrum management prescriptions are currently open to over-snow vehicles during the winter season of use: primitive (1,596 acres), semi-primitive non-motorized (7,699 acres), semi-primitive motorized (12,868 acres), and roaded natural (3,720 acres). An additional 33 acres are not assigned to a recreation opportunity spectrum management prescription.

#### *Direct and Indirect Effects of the Proposed Action and Alternative A*

The proposed action would open the entire Headwaters Pack River subwatershed to off-route over-snow vehicle use throughout the winter season. On April 1, the entire area would be closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use. Seasonal closures could assist the Forest Service with management of recreational use within the Headwaters Pack River subwatershed. Signage placed on the Pack River Road could inform all users of the restrictions.

Under the proposed action, 19 miles of groomed trails would be available throughout the winter season and 21.5 miles of ungroomed roads and trails would be open to over-snow vehicle travel after March 31. Visitors pursuing non-motorized forms of recreation could experience the sights and sounds associated with a multi-use recreation environment during the winter months. In the spring (after March 31), visitors would recreate in a primarily non-motorized environment once they leave designated ungroomed roads and trails.

Alternative A would open approximately 70 percent, or 18,150 acres, of the Headwaters Pack River subwatershed to off-route over-snow vehicle use through March 31. Approximately 7,765 acres of the subwatershed would be closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use year-round. From April 1 to April 15, alternative A would close 19,296 acres to off-route over-snow vehicle use. From April 16 to May 31, alternative A would close 24,198 acres to off-route over-snow vehicle use.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Under alternative A, 19 miles of groomed trails would be available throughout the winter season and 24 miles of ungroomed roads and trails would be open to over-snow vehicle travel after March 31. Visitors pursuing non-motorized forms of recreation could experience the sights and sounds associated with a multi-use recreation environment during the winter months. In the spring (after March 31), visitors would recreate in a primarily non-motorized environment once they leave the designated ungroomed roads and trails.

Potential user conflicts are the same as those described for issue 2 (see *Issue 2 – Direct and Indirect Effects of the Proposed Action* section).

#### ***Cumulative Effects of the Proposed Action and Alternative A***

Future timber harvest and fuels reduction on lands of other ownership may reduce miles of both groomed and ungroomed roads and trails available to over-snow vehicle use throughout the seasons of use. This could occur because of the need to plow roads to facilitate winter log haul. When combined with the actions proposed under the proposed action and alternative A, this could affect popular riding locations and create additional negative impacts to non-motorized recreational experiences if these actions were to occur within the Headwaters Pack River subwatershed.

Timber harvest and fuels reduction on lands of other ownership may reduce miles of both groomed and ungroomed roads and trails available to over-snow vehicle use throughout the seasons of use. This could occur because of the need to plow roads to facilitate winter log haul. When combined with the actions proposed under the proposed action or alternative A, this could lead to a reduction in the areas accessible to both motorized and non-motorized forms of recreation. It could reduce impacts to non-motorized recreational experiences, and it could also increase motorized recreational use in remaining areas, leading to an increase in adverse impacts to non-motorized forms of recreation if these actions were to occur within the Headwaters Pack River subwatershed.

Timber harvest and fuels reduction on lands of other ownership may similarly reduce the mileage of groomed and ungroomed roads and trails available to over-snow vehicle use temporarily if the roads are plowed to facilitate winter log haul. Timber harvest and fuels reduction could also create additional areas sought after by visitors participating in off-route use. When combined with the actions proposed under the proposed action and alternative A, this could affect popular riding locations and popular areas sought after by visitors wishing to participate in motorized recreational experiences.

Road construction, decommissioning, and storage could reduce mileage of roads available to over-snow vehicle travel. When combined with the actions proposed under the proposed action and Alternative A, this could affect popular riding locations and create additional negative impacts to non-motorized recreational experiences if these actions were to occur within the Headwaters Pack River subwatershed. A reduction in miles of available trails and roads could also potentially provide a minor benefit to non-motorized types of recreation. However, just because a road is decommissioned does not mean that it would automatically close to over-snow vehicle use. Whether or not it stays open would be informed by the future project-specific travel analysis and National Environmental Policy Act processes.

Wildfires occurring in areas designated as open to off-route use could reduce the forest canopy in burned areas and indirectly create popular areas for over-snow vehicle use. As different areas become more popular with recreationists, this could create additional impacts to non-motorized recreational experiences if these actions were to occur within the Headwaters Pack River subwatershed.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

#### Comparison of Effects

Table 9 compares acres open and closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use within the Headwaters Pack River subwatershed, miles of trails and roads, and recreation opportunity spectrum settings between the existing condition and alternatives. Additional information on project effects on recreation, including methodology, may be found in the project recreation report available in the project record and on the project webpage.

#### Issue 4 – Wildlife

The Wildlife analysis generally refers to the “Upper Pack River” as all National Forest System lands in the Pack River drainage west of state highway 95. This area was used to adequately assess potential effects to wildlife species that may have individual home ranges incorporating tens to hundreds of thousands of acres.

#### Selkirk Mountains Woodland Caribou Affected Environment and Effects

The Upper Pack River drainage represents the southernmost limit of the Selkirk Mountains Caribou recovery area. About 19,500 acres of this drainage is within the Pack Caribou Management Unit. See *Issue 5 Selkirk Mountains Woodland Caribou* discussion for a more complete description of Selkirk Mountains woodland caribou habitat requirements and potential effects of over-snow vehicle use.

Currently, about 10,000 acres in the northern half of this caribou management unit are closed to over-snow vehicle use. About 7,680 acres of this have been closed to over-snow vehicle use since 1994, when several reported incidents of caribou being displaced by over-snow vehicle use in the area prompted an emergency closure. The 2007 court injunction expanded this closure somewhat and closed the (previously groomed) upper Pack River Road (National Forest System Road 231) to over-snow vehicle use above the Pearson Creek Road junction (National Forest System Road 2605).

**Table 9. Summary of management under the existing condition and alternatives**

Management	Existing Condition	Proposed Action	Alternative A
Acres open to off-route over-snow vehicle use within the Headwaters Pack River subwatershed prior to April 1	16,620 acres (64 percent)	25,916 acres (100 percent)	18,150 acres (70 percent)
Acres closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use within the Headwaters Pack River subwatershed prior to April 1	9,296 acres (36 percent)	0 acres (0 percent)	7,765 acres (30 percent)
Acres closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use within the Headwaters Pack River subwatershed after March 31	0 acres (0 percent)	25,916 acres (100 percent)	19,296 acres (74 percent) would be closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use after March 31  24,198 acres (93 percent) would be closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use after April 15
Miles of groomed trails within the Headwaters Pack River subwatershed	12.9 miles	19 miles	19 miles



Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Management	Existing Condition	Proposed Action	Alternative A
Miles of ungroomed roads and trails within the Headwaters Pack River subwatershed. Displayed mileages are dependent on the existing snow levels and could vary depending on season of use.	0 miles	21.5 miles	24 miles
Acres within the Headwaters Pack River subwatershed providing a particular ROS setting during the winter season (December 1–February 28)	P: 6 percent SPNM: 33 percent SPM: 46 percent RN: 14 percent U: 0 percent	P: 0 percent SPNM: 0 percent SPM: 86 percent RN: 14 percent U: 0 percent	P: 6 percent SPNM: 24 percent SPM: 56 percent RN: 14 percent U: 0 percent
Acres within the Headwaters Pack River subwatershed providing a particular ROS setting during the spring season (after March 31)**	P: 6 percent SPNM: 33 percent SPM: 46 percent RN: 4 percent U: 0 percent	P: 6 percent SPNM: 94 percent SPM: 0 percent RN: 0 percent U: 0 percent	<u>April 1–April 15</u> P: 6 percent SPNM: 24 percent SPM: 56 percent RN: 14 percent U: 0 percent  <u>April 16–May 31</u> P: 6 percent SPNM: 87 percent SPM: 5 percent RN: 2 percent U: 0 percent

Note: P = primitive, SPNM = semi-primitive non-motorized; SPM = semi-primitive motorized, RN = roaded natural, R = rural, U = urban

\*\*Spring ROS figures are only listed for "over the snow" forms of recreation. As winter turns to spring, snow levels recede and at a certain point off-highway vehicles and passenger vehicles will begin to use the roadway. During this time of year, ROS categories shift into a summer season management of recreational resources.

The proposed action would open the entire area within the caribou management unit to over-snow vehicle use until April 1 of each year, when it would be closed to all off-route over-snow vehicle use. The upper Pack River Road would be groomed until April 1 and would remain legal to ride beyond this date.

Like the proposed action, alternative A would allow grooming and over-snow vehicle use of the upper Pack River Road. However, the approximately 7,680 acres in the upper drainage west of the Pack River that had been closed by the 1994 administrative closure would remain closed to over-snow vehicle use. The remainder of the caribou management unit would be open to over-snow vehicle use until April 1 of each year, when much of this area would close. About 1,850 acres at the extreme southwestern portion of the caribou management unit (National Forest System lands in the upper Jeru and Homestead Creek drainages) would remain open to over-snow vehicle use until May 31.

Alternative A would seemingly be more protective of caribou habitat than the proposed action, as the 1994 closure area likely contains better habitat than the smaller area that would be opened starting April 1 (including Harrison Lake, where winter caribou use has been documented). However, at this point it is unlikely that caribou would reoccupy this portion of the recovery area during the life of this plan. The Upper Pack River area is the farthest removed (of the recovery area) from the United States-Canada border area, where reintroduced or transient caribou would likely originate from. Caribou resident in the upper Pack River in the 1990s were probably descendants of animals reintroduced in upper Ball Creek (a



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

few miles north) several years earlier. Reopening (or not reopening) a portion of the Upper Pack River drainage to over-snow vehicle use is not expected to affect caribou in the foreseeable future.

#### *Grizzly Bear Affected Environment and Effects*

The Upper Pack River area is mostly within the Myrtle bear management unit of the Selkirk Recovery Zone. A brief discussion of potential effects of over-snow vehicle use on grizzly bear is found in the *Issue 5 Grizzly Bear* discussion. In general, the main threat to grizzly bears from such use is the potential for animals (particularly sows with cubs) to be disturbed or displaced from the area near their den immediately after den emergence in the spring.

Currently, 41 percent of National Forest System lands in the bear management unit (about 15 percent of the bear management unit is in private ownership), and about 33 percent of the predicted denning habitat, is open to over-snow vehicle use. And there are no date restrictions on over-snow vehicle use in the bear management unit. Immediately adjacent to the Upper Pack River drainage, the Roman Nose Lakes area is likely one of the more heavily used over-snow vehicle areas in the Selkirk Mountains portion of the forest.

Approximately 28,100 acres of National Forest System lands in of the Upper Pack River are in an area of recurring grizzly use referred to as the Pack River Bears Outside Recovery Zone area. Currently, there are no restrictions on over-snow vehicle use in this area.

Under the proposed action, approximately 85 percent of National Forest System lands in the bear management unit (and 79 percent of the predicted denning habitat) would be open to over-snow vehicle use prior to April 1 of each year. However, after March 31 all but about 3 percent of National Forest System lands in the bear management unit (the Roman Nose Lakes area) would be closed to over-snow vehicle use, including about 3 percent of predicted denning habitat in the bear management unit.

Similar to current management, the entire Bears Outside Recovery Zone area within the Pack River drainage would be open to over-snow vehicle use prior to April 1. However, from this date on over-snow vehicle use would only be allowed on about 300 acres that are included in the Roman Nose Lakes late-season over-snow vehicle area, which includes about 100 acres of predicted denning habitat.

In general, the proposed action would be more protective of grizzly bears in this area than the current condition. While it more than doubles the areas of allowed over-snow vehicle use in the Myrtle bear management unit during the presumed denning period (November 16 through March 31), it nearly eliminates over-snow vehicle use during den emergence when harmful effects are most likely. As discussed in the wildlife report, over-snow vehicle use of denning habitat during the denning season is considered a minor effect (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2022), den abandonment due to snowmobile activity has not been documented, and no other substantive adverse effects on bears from snowmobile use have been substantiated (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2008a). Conversely, disturbance to grizzly bears from over-snow vehicle use is most consequential shortly after den emergence of a female with cubs (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2013) and can result in adverse effects to grizzly bear feeding, breeding (cub rearing), and sheltering behavior because of potential displacement from the den site (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2022).

Alternative A would allow over-snow vehicle use on about 8,550 fewer acres in the upper Pack River prior to April 1, resulting in 69 percent of National Forest System lands in the bear management unit being open to this use. This would reduce the amount of predicted denning habitat where over-snow





## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

vehicle use is allowed to 63 percent of that available in the bear management unit. After March 31, the area (and predicted denning habitat) where use is allowed in the Myrtle bear management unit would be the same as for the proposed action.

The principal difference between the proposed action and alternative A in the Upper Pack River area with respect to grizzly bears would be in how over-snow vehicle use is managed in the Bears Outside Recovery Zone area after March 31. Alternative A would allow off-trail over-snow vehicle use to continue in most of the zone until April 15 (changed from March 31 in the proposed action). Additionally, alternative A would allow off-route use until May 31 on about 7,580 acres on Jeru Ridge in the Bears Outside Recovery Zone area.

The change in the season-ending date in most of the Bears Outside Recovery Zone area has the potential to adversely affect individual grizzly bears that choose to den here during the den emergence period. However, any bears affected during this time period are likely to be males or the occasional single female. Grizzly bear denning chronology data for the area indicate that fewer than half of female grizzly bears have exited dens by the end of the second week of April, and no females with cubs have been documented outside dens prior to this (Kasworm et al. 2022a, 2022b). As a result, the consequences of such disturbance would be far less severe, as males and single females could move away from the disturbance relatively easily, while cubs may experience mortality or reduced fitness from being displaced or possibly separated from their mother.

Late-season over-snow vehicle use in the Jeru Ridge area could impact about 2,830 acres of predicted denning habitat. While this is a considerable proportion (29 percent) of this habitat in the Pack River Bears Outside Recovery Zone area, it is immediately adjacent to the Selkirk Recovery Zone where denning habitat is abundant. Less than 1 percent of the Selkirk Recovery Zone would be subject to late-season over-snow vehicle use. For context, if the Pack River Bears Outside Recovery Zone area were combined with the Idaho Panhandle National Forests portion of the Selkirk Recovery Zone, less than 3 percent of predicted denning habitat would be subject to over-snow vehicle use after April 15 (approximately 3,740 of 125,840 acres).

Nonetheless, any grizzly bears that den in this area could be disturbed or displaced by late-season over-snow vehicle use. As discussed above, the consequences of such displacement may be relatively minor for single, adult bears, but more severe for females with cubs. However, the effects of such an encounter would not persist for more than one year for any individual or family group, and a low number of grizzly bears are expected to experience these effects due to the relatively low density of bears in the Selkirks and the abundance of predicted denning habitat.

While the Jeru Ridge area contains a high percentage of predicted denning habitat, so do adjacent areas on the forest in this portion of the Selkirk Range. In these adjacent areas, over-snow vehicle use would not be allowed after March 31 (McCormick Creek) or at all (north of Chimney Creek) under alternative A. Unlike Jeru Ridge, there are no mid-slope motorized roads or trails that access these areas, so they would be less likely to experience hunter-related fall use. Therefore, there is alternative, and preferable, denning habitat available to grizzly bears in this portion of the Pack River drainage.

Alternative A would be less protective of grizzly bear habitat than the proposed action, but an improvement over the current condition. It would allow less over-snow vehicle use in grizzly bear habitat during the denning season, which (as discussed previously) has relatively minor or non-existent effects on grizzly bears. However, it would allow over-snow vehicle use in more areas after March 31, which could



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

adversely impact individual bears, including (in the case of Jeru Ridge) family groups. However, this alternative would reduce allowed over-snow vehicle use both during the denning season and the post-den emergence period compared to the existing condition.

Both alternatives would allow late season (den emergence period) over-snow vehicle use in inconsequential amounts of predicted denning habitat: less than 1 percent of denning habitat in the Selkirk Recovery Zone under the proposed action, and less than 3 percent of denning habitat in the combined recovery zone and Bears Outside Recovery Zone area under Alternative A.

#### *Canada Lynx Affected Environment and Effects*

Canada lynx habitat in the Upper Pack River is within the Pack River lynx analysis unit and a portion of the Snow lynx analysis unit. Lynx analysis units provide the appropriate scale at which specific lynx habitat parameters can be measured. Lynx analysis units are not intended to represent actual lynx home ranges, but their scale approximates the size of a female lynx home range.

Management of lynx habitat on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests is guided by the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction (USDA Forest Service 2007a), which has been incorporated into the land management plan. Specific direction regarding over-snow vehicle use is found in guideline HU G11 (land management plan page 163), which directs that designated over-the-snow routes or play areas should not expand outside areas of consistent snow compaction established between 1998 and 2000. This could be calculated on an individual lynx analysis unit basis, or across a combination of immediately adjacent lynx analysis units.

Currently, over-snow vehicle use is allowed on approximately 34 percent of the Snow lynx analysis unit, and 60 percent of the Pack River lynx analysis unit. In the years 1998 to 2000, approximately 82 percent of the Snow lynx analysis unit, and 62 percent of the Pack River lynx analysis unit were open to over-snow vehicle use. The Snow lynx analysis unit currently has 10.9 miles of over-snow vehicle routes, which is reduced from 21.4 miles in 1998 to 2000. The Pack River lynx analysis unit historically and currently has 5.7 miles of routes.

The proposed action would more than double the area of allowed over-snow vehicle use in the Snow lynx analysis unit to about 78 percent, which is still below the amount open to such use from 1998 to 2000. The entire Pack River lynx analysis unit would be open to over-snow vehicle use under the proposed action. The Snow lynx analysis unit would have 15.4 miles of designated over-snow vehicle routes in this alternative, while the Pack River lynx analysis unit would have a slight reduction in designated route miles. Approximately 0.6 mile of the Fault Lake Trail within the Pack River lynx analysis unit was formerly approved for grooming but has not actually been groomed since the bridge over McCormick Creek washed out one spring. This trail would be dropped from grooming, and likely sees little over-snow vehicle use as an ungroomed trail due to difficult access in winter.

Lynx are generally tolerant of some level of human disturbance, and do not appear to alter their behavior to avoid humans. As a result, dispersed recreational activities such as over-snow vehicle use are not expected to cause direct effects to lynx. However, activities that result in snow compaction in the winter (including over-snow vehicle use and grooming of trails) may allow other predators (particularly coyotes) to access lynx habitat from which they were previously excluded by deep, unconsolidated snow. In these instances, lynx may lose their natural competitive advantage over other carnivores that results from their large feet relative to their weight.



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Although there is a lack of evidence that packed snow trails facilitate competition with other predators, there is evidence that competing predators use packed trails, suggesting a potential effect on individual lynx (USDA Forest Service 2007b). However, research has also found little dietary overlap between coyotes and lynx during winter (Kolbe et al. 2007). These researchers concluded that the influence of snowmobile trails on coyote movements and foraging success during winter appeared to be minimal (Kolbe et al. 2007).

Nonetheless, the uncertainty surrounding this potential effect led to the inclusion of guideline HU G11 in the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction. In the proposed action, off-trail use would be allowed on about 7,130 acres of the Pack River lynx analysis unit that were closed to over-snow vehicle use in 2000. However, guideline HU G11 specifically applies to designated play areas, and since this alternative would not designate any such areas and would not increase designated routes from the 2000 condition in either lynx analysis unit, it is consistent with this guideline. Additionally, when the South Selkirk lynx analysis units (Pack River, Snow, Cascade, and Trout) are combined, there would be nearly 15,000 fewer acres available to off-route over-snow vehicle use under the proposed action than in the 2000 condition. Also, the North Selkirk area would have about 68,000 fewer acres open to off-trail over-snow vehicle use under the proposed action than in 2000. Overall, allowed over-snow vehicle use in lynx habitat on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests portion of the Selkirk Range would be reduced from the 2000 condition.

Alternative A would allow over-snow vehicle use in 74 percent and 60 percent of the Snow and Pack River lynx analysis units, respectively. In both cases, the areas of over-snow vehicle use would decrease from the 1998 to 2000 condition. The miles of designated routes would be the same as in the proposed action and would be reduced from the 1998 to 2000 condition in both lynx analysis units. Alternative A would also allow late-season (after April 1) over-snow vehicle use on about 5,000 acres in the southwest periphery of the Pack River lynx analysis unit. However, since the snowpack is generally firm at this point in the season, it is unlikely that any advantage would be gained by competing predators from snow compaction activities. There would be additional disturbance during this time period than the proposed action.

Even so, alternative A would likely have less of an effect on lynx than the proposed action in the Upper Pack River because more of the affected lynx analysis units would be closed to over-snow vehicle use during the winter months. Like many wildlife species in northern latitudes, winter habitat may be the most limiting for lynx, since starvation mortality is more common during this season and lynx use a narrower range of available habitat than in summer (Squires et al. 2010). Also, unlike the proposed action, under alternative A the total area where over-snow vehicle use is allowed would be reduced from the 1998 to 2000 condition in each of the affected lynx analysis units.

#### *North American Wolverine Affected Environment and Effects*

Wolverines are a low-density, wide-ranging species occurring over a variety of alpine, boreal, and arctic habitats. They are primarily scavengers, and in montane habitats at southerly latitudes wolverines remain at high elevations throughout the year. Year-round (“primary”) habitat for the wolverine is found at high elevations centered near the tree line in conifer forests (below tree line), rocky alpine habitat above tree line, cirque basins, and avalanche chutes that have food sources. Deep, persistent, and reliable spring (mid-April to mid-May) snow cover is the best overall predictor of wolverine occurrence, possibly due to the species’ need for deep snow during the denning period. Female wolverines give birth and rear young



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

from mid-February to approximately the end of March in dens excavated in (often deep) snow (“maternal denning” habitat).

Wolverine habitat was mapped in the Northern Region of the Forest Service based on the work of Inman et al. (2013), which used radio-telemetry data from the Yellowstone region and resource selection function modelling. This work produced four habitat layers: maternal habitat, primary habitat, female dispersal habitat, and male dispersal habitat. While dispersal activities could be affected to some degree, these habitats are not suitable for the establishment of home ranges and reproduction and are generally not used for foraging. Therefore, the analysis focused on primary and maternal denning habitat to display potential effects of the alternatives.

The Upper Pack River drainage is within the South Selkirk analysis area. This area contains nearly 40,000 acres of modeled primary habitat, and about 4,170 acres of maternal denning habitat. Currently, approximately 33 percent of primary habitat and 53 percent of maternal denning habitat is open to over-snow vehicle use prior to April 1. Over-snow vehicle use after this date is likely of minor consequence to this species, since wolverines do not appear to avoid people or roads and trails outside of the denning season. Additionally, furbearer trapping seasons in the project area close for most species March 31 (except for gray wolf), so incidental trapping mortality is not expected after this date.

The proposed action would increase the level of potential over-snow vehicle use to 73 percent of primary habitat and 82 percent of maternal denning habitat, in the South Selkirk area prior to April 1. Over-snow vehicle use during the winter months may represent a risk to wolverines by increasing trapper access, affecting prey (such as big game) distribution, or by disrupting wolverine use of habitat, particularly female wolverines in the vicinity of natal and maternal dens.

Trapping mortality of wolverine is relatively uncommon in Idaho. Fourteen incidentally trapped wolverines have been reported statewide since 1965 (IDFG 2014), and incidental trapping risk to wolverines is deemed very low in the contiguous United States (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2013b). Traps set for bobcat or gray wolf (the ones most likely to catch wolverine) are generally at low elevations where use by wolverine is infrequent. Trapping at higher-elevation deep snow areas where wolverine occurrence is more likely is generally targeted toward marten, and most traps are set in such a way as to preclude capture of larger animals (fisher and wolverine).

Although over-snow vehicle use may temporarily alter the distribution of potential prey (big game), these movements would be relatively short in distance and unlikely to change available prey resources appreciably at the scale of a wolverine home range. Additionally, big game winter range is very limited in the Upper Pack River area (see below), so this effect would be minor here if it occurs at all.

Human disturbance to denning wolverines could potentially result in reduced wolverine reproductive success or in increased wolverine mortality. Recent research has found that wolverine movement rates increased notably when the animals were within portions of their home ranges with higher recreation use, and those movement rates were highest on days of the week when recreational activities were high (Heinemeyer et al. 2019). Increased movement rates are due to fewer resting periods in recreated areas and may result in additive energetic effects on wolverines during the critical winter and denning periods (Heinemeyer and Squires 2013).

However, this same research also notes that some wolverines reside in landscapes that have relatively high levels of winter recreation, and at the home range scale are not excluded from these areas. In the case



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

of the Upper Pack River, some areas would remain closed to over-snow vehicle use under both alternatives. Additionally, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service did not identify management activities of land management agencies, including winter recreation and timber harvest, as threats to wolverines (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2013).

Finally, while research results indicated that wolverines avoided areas of both motorized and non-motorized winter recreation, off-road recreation showed a stronger response than road-based recreation (Heinemeyer et al. 2019). Most over-snow vehicle use in the Upper Pack River area likely takes place along trails approved for grooming, which do not traverse maternal denning habitat.

In alternative A, 60 percent of primary habitat, and 75 percent of maternal denning habitat, would be open to over-snow vehicle use in the South Selkirks. Compared to the proposed action, the closure of about 8,550 acres in the upper Pack River prior to April 1 represents a decrease of 500 acres of primary habitat and 300 acres of maternal denning habitat open to over-snow vehicle use. Potential effects to wolverine would be reduced under this alternative compared to the proposed action. While both alternatives would allow increased over-snow vehicle use of the Upper Pack River area, it would not be at a level that would jeopardize the species.

#### ***Big Game Winter Range Affected Environment and Effects***

Traditional winter range (lands below 4,000 feet in elevation on south and west aspects) is absent from the upper reaches of the Pack River and is almost exclusively limited to the river bottom and lower slopes to the east of the Pack River on National Forest System lands throughout the rest of the upper portion of the drainage. Except for the occasional moose, it is uncommon for wintering ungulates to be present above approximately Hellroaring Creek in this drainage. The Upper Pack River drainage accumulates considerable snowpack during most winters, and as a result most wintering deer and elk retreat to private lands low in the drainage.

Regarding potential effects to traditional winter range, there is no difference between the alternatives, or from the current condition in the extent of allowed over-snow vehicle use. Moose may occasionally come into contact on established roads and trails in the Upper Pack River area. The fact that moose are generally widely dispersed and at low densities, along with limited over-snow vehicle use of the mature stands they prefer in midwinter combine to make moose and over-snow vehicle encounters a relatively uncommon occurrence. While such incidents may be stressful to individual moose, they do not likely cause population-level effects.

In general, the landscape features that attract elk and mule deer in winter (brushy, often steep and rocky areas on south and west aspects with shallow snowpack) discourage over-snow vehicle users for the same reasons. Given the lack of winter range in the upper portion of the Pack River drainage, the effects of over-snow vehicle use here on big game winter range would be inconsequential.

#### ***Cumulative Effects of the Proposed Action and Alternative A on all Wildlife Species Analyzed***

Timber harvest on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests can affect over-snow vehicle use (and subsequently influence wildlife) in two ways: (1) regeneration harvest can open areas to over-snow vehicle use that were previously difficult to access due to dense vegetation, and (2) winter logging can disrupt established over-snow vehicle travel on roads and displace over-snow vehicle use to other areas. Sales associated with the Westside Project will result in regeneration harvest on approximately 3,000 acres in the Myrtle, Snow, and Caribou Creek drainages adjacent to the Upper Pack River.



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

However, since these activities are generally confined to the middle or lower portions of these drainages, it is unlikely they would cumulatively increase effects to individuals beyond the upper portions of the drainages.

The Upper Pack River drainage shares a border with Idaho Department of Lands property. We are unaware of any restrictions on over-snow vehicle use on these state-administered lands, and the Idaho Department of Lands also permits helicopter skiing to a private tour operator a short distance from the Upper Pack River. This use can displace wildlife into National Forest System lands in the Upper Pack River drainage or amplify disturbance from over-snow vehicle use here. These cumulative effects would be more pronounced under the proposed action, as it would have more area available for over-snow vehicle use than alternative A.

Relatively few public activities (besides over-snow vehicle use) take place during the season of over-snow vehicle use because snow accumulation generally prevents access to interior National Forest System lands for all but tracked vehicles. As a result, nearly all public activities on affected lands in winter relate to over-snow vehicle use and are considered under the discussion of effects above.

Routine road maintenance is expected to continue in this area. No road storage or decommissioning, or construction, is currently planned for the Upper Pack River. The adjacent Westside project will result in a net decrease in road miles available to wheeled use—although this would likely have little effect on over-snow vehicle use.

Wildfire, particularly the high-severity, stand-replacing type, can alter the forest landscape in such a way as to markedly increase over-snow vehicle access by creating large openings in what was formerly densely wooded terrain. It is possible that a large fire could occur in the Upper Pack River area during the life of the plan, but the specific effects are impossible to predict. Fires that are effectively suppressed before they grow large would not substantially change the landscape in a way that enhances over-snow vehicle use, but this effect is similarly difficult to accurately quantify.

The Stimson Land Exchange, and activities on the Colville and Kootenai National Forests are well-removed from the Upper Pack River and would not cumulatively add to the effects of the alternatives in this area.

### **Issue 5. Over-snow vehicle use will negatively affect wildlife**

Species considered in this analysis (table 10) were identified from a species list provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (available in the project record), the Regional Forester's Sensitive Species List (updated in 2023), and other wildlife species or species groups identified during internal scoping. Some wildlife species were not analyzed in detail as they do not have suitable habitat or are not regularly present or expected to be in or near the proposed activity area, are affected at a level that does not increase risk to the species, or effects have been adequately mitigated by altering the design of the project. Preliminary analysis information and effects determinations for species not analyzed in detail are in the wildlife report.

Analysis methodology, including assumptions and measurement criteria, are described in the wildlife report available in the project record and on the project webpage.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

**Table 10. Wildlife species analyzed in detail.**

Species	Preferred Habitat	Rationale for Detailed Analysis
Selkirk Mountains woodland caribou ( <i>Rangifer tarandus caribou</i> )	Above 4,000 feet in Engelmann spruce/subalpine fir and western red cedar/western hemlock forests	The project area is within the Woodland Caribou Recovery Area and could impact future caribou occupancy.
Grizzly bear ( <i>Ursus arctos horribilis</i> )	Habitat generalist: denning areas isolated and remote from human development	Over-snow vehicle use would occur within both Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zones, recurring use areas outside recovery zones and other areas where grizzly bears may be present. There is potential for disturbance of individuals immediately following den emergence.
Canada lynx ( <i>Lynx canadensis</i> )	Higher-elevation spruce/fir forests with adequate prey base of snowshoe hares, its primary food	Over-snow vehicle use would occur within designated lynx analysis units and linkage areas. Potential for disturbance and snow compaction from over-snow vehicle use.
North American wolverine ( <i>Gulo gulo</i> )	Far-ranging omnivorous habitat generalist	The project would result in potential disturbance in maternal denning habitat and primary wolverine habitat.
Big game winter range	Various—generally lands below 4,000 feet in elevation on south and west aspects	The project would result in potential disturbance to big game on winter range.

### Selkirk Mountains Woodland Caribou

#### *Affected Environment*

Woodland caribou are one of seven subspecies of caribou throughout the world. They occupy the boreal forest and alpine tundra of suitable mountainous habitats in North America. Caribou within the Selkirk Mountains are part of the “mountain” ecotype and are associated with deep snow environments, where they feed almost exclusively on arboreal lichens during the winter months. They are highly adapted to upper-elevation boreal forests including Engelmann spruce/subalpine fir and western red cedar/western hemlock forest types.

Woodland caribou distribution once included portions of the northern tier of the continental United States from Washington to Maine, as well as most of Canada. By the early 1980s, their range in the United States had contracted to the population centered in the Selkirk Mountains, and by 2020 they had been extirpated from the project area. Predation has been identified as the main immediate cause of woodland caribou mortality over much of their historical distribution, and undoubtedly played a prominent role in the extirpation of caribou in the South Selkirks. However, the reasons for the ultimate extirpation of the Selkirk Mountains woodland caribou almost certainly stem from changing predator/prey dynamics combining with increased human presence and possibly climate effects (SCITWG 2018).

The Caribou Recovery Area in the Selkirk Mountains was generally established in the original recovery plan (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 1985) and consists of approximately 941,500 acres (3,810 square kilometers) in southern British Columbia, northeastern Washington, and northern Idaho. Approximately 252,700 acres of the recovery area is on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests, representing 27 percent of the caribou habitat in the recovery area and 57 percent of the caribou habitat in the United States.



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Currently, over-snow vehicle use is allowed during most of the winter on about 23,500 acres in the Idaho Panhandle National Forests' portion of the recovery area.

Wintertime recreational activities including snowmobiling, heli- or cat-skiing, and backcountry skiing can impact short-term behavior, long-term habitat use, and physiology of caribou (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2013). Because of the overlap between preferred snowmobile habitat and preferred caribou habitat, Simpson and Terry (2000) suggest that snowmobile activity represents the greatest threat to mountain caribou relative to other winter recreation activities. Deep snow, open forest, and scenic vistas are characteristics found in caribou winter habitat that are also preferred by snowmobilers (Seip et al. 2007), and snowmobilers can generally access these areas. Additionally, research suggests that trail compaction resulting from high levels of wintertime recreational activities may act as travel corridors for wolves and other potential predators.

#### *Effects of the Proposed Action and Alternative A*

The effects of existing over-snow vehicle use on caribou, described above under the affected environment, apply to the proposed action and alternative A.

Under the proposed action, some 104,185 acres would be open to over-snow vehicle use in the recovery area (about 40 percent) until April 1, with approximately 2,040 of these acres remaining open until May 31. While the proposed action more than quadruples the amount of the recovery area open to over-snow vehicle use compared to the existing condition, the anticipated effects to Selkirk Mountains caribou—now and for the foreseeable future—would be minor if they occur at all. Given the current situation, it is somewhat unlikely that caribou will occupy the Selkirk Mountains within the United States during the life of the project. Since the risk to caribou from over-snow vehicle use stems from disturbance, effects during implementation of the plan are not expected as there would be no individuals present to be disturbed.

The proposed action would maintain an over-snow vehicle closure several miles wide along the entire Canadian border in the Selkirk Mountains on the forest. If any transient animals or reintroductions were to occur, it would likely be in this area. Except for the Trapper Burn, all areas proposed to be open to over-snow vehicle use are at the southern and eastern margins of the recovery area at generally lower elevations. The upper elevations along the Selkirk Crest and Shedroof Divide would remain closed to over-snow vehicle use except for the Trapper Burn and associated Smith Creek drainage.

Alternative A is essentially the same as the proposed action within the caribou recovery area with two notable changes: (1) alternative A would not reopen approximately 7,680 acres in the upper Pack River that were closed by the 1994 administrative closure, and (2) alternative A would open approximately 1,850 more acres from April 1 to May 31 in the Jeru Ridge area. Under alternative A, 38 percent of the recovery area on the forest would be open to over-snow vehicle use until April 1.

Designated critical habitat for the Selkirk Mountains woodland caribou has been closed to over-snow vehicle use since the 1987 land management plan, as it is within the Salmo-Priest Wilderness and a proposed addition to the wilderness. It is also currently closed under the land management plan and would remain closed to over-snow vehicle use under both the proposed action and alternative A. There would be no effects to caribou critical habitat from this proposal.





## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

### *Cumulative Effects*

Timber harvest associated with the Westside project is currently the only vegetation management project within the Caribou Recovery Area on the forest. This project will regeneration harvest about 50 acres of mature stands and create one opening larger than 40 acres. Since this portion of the recovery area is currently unoccupied, effects are unlikely during the life of this plan so cumulative impacts are similarly unlikely.

While lands of other ownership in the “checkerboard” areas of the recovery area may have, in the past, provided old forest habitat for caribou, very little (if any) currently does. Additionally, there are few restrictions on over-snow vehicle use in these areas. As a result, the analysis assumes no contribution to caribou habitat from these ownerships now or in the foreseeable future. A substantial portion of the caribou recovery area in the United States is administered by the Idaho Department of Lands. Since there are few restrictions on over-snow vehicle use on state lands, there is a potential for disturbance if caribou reoccupy the area. Since caribou are not currently present, state activities are not contributing to cumulative effects.

Since effects to the species are unlikely during the life of this plan, cumulative effects from public activities are similarly unlikely. In general, public activities that take place in the caribou recovery area during the over-snow vehicle use period would be directly associated with over-snow vehicle use, and the effects are analyzed above.

Road construction, decommissioning, and storage activities are expected to make relatively small changes to miles of roads available for over-snow vehicle use at the scale of the project area. Any changes would likely be inconsequential during the life of this plan since caribou occupancy is unlikely.

High-severity wildfire generally renders caribou habitat unsuitable by causing mortality in most mature trees and subsequent reduction of arboreal lichens. Conversely, effective fire suppression can help preserve high-elevation mature stands and the habitat they provide. The amount of future fire and level of successful suppression is impossible to predict but would generally result in these effects.

No areas on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests within the caribou recovery area would be affected by the proposed Stimson Land Exchange, so no cumulative effects are expected.

No areas are proposed for caribou recovery on the Kootenai National Forest, so activities here would not cumulatively impact the species. The Colville National Forest land management plan has identified management areas where over-snow vehicle use would be prohibited that are generally conducive to future caribou occupancy. Current management of the Colville National Forest, in combination with this proposal, would not preclude caribou recovery.

### **Grizzly Bear**

#### *Affected Environment*

In 1975, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the grizzly bear as a threatened species in the lower 48 states under the Endangered Species Act. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published a Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan in 1993. This recovery plan outlines six recovery zones, two of which include land on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests. The Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone is in northwest Montana and northeast Idaho and includes 249,714 acres of the forest. The Selkirk Recovery Zone is in northwest Idaho, northeast Washington, and southeast British Columbia and includes 385,401 acres of the forest.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Grizzly bear populations are thought to have been very low in the Selkirk Recovery Zone at the time of federal listing, but the population appears to have steadily increased since the early 1990s. A minimum of 44 individual grizzly bears were identified within the United States portion of the Selkirk Recovery Zone at some point during 2020 (Kasworm et al. 2022b). The most recent population estimate available for the entire Selkirk Recovery Zone (including Canada) was 83 bears (Proctor et al. 2012). However, this estimate is more than 10 years old, and the population has likely increased since then.

Similarly, grizzly bear populations were very low in the Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone at the time of federal listing and likely numbered less than 15 bears (and as few as 5 to 10) when the recovery plan was written in 1993 (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2022). The Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone was most recently estimated to contain approximately 60 to 65 grizzly bears (Kasworm et al. 2022a). The Yaak River portion of the Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone to the north contains a higher density of bears than the Cabinet Mountains portion (separated by the Kootenai River), with an estimated twice as many bears contained in approximately one-third of the recovery zone. The reasons for this difference may have more to do with proximity of the Yaak River bears to grizzly populations in the Canadian Purcells than with habitat quality or mortality patterns (Proctor et al. 2012).

Populations of grizzly bears persist in areas where large expanses of relatively secure habitat exist and where human-caused mortality is low. Grizzly bears are considered habitat generalists, using a broad spectrum of habitats. Use patterns are usually dictated by food distribution and availability combined with a secure environment. Upon emergence from the den, grizzlies move to lower elevations, drainage bottoms, avalanche chutes, and ungulate winter ranges where their food requirements can be met. Spring is considered the most sensitive time for grizzly bears when their fat reserves have been severely depleted and foraging to rebuild energy reserves is their primary focus.

Grizzly bear denning ecology is of particular interest for this project, since over-snow vehicle use temporally overlaps the denning season and often occurs in denning habitat. Low food availability, deep snow, and low ambient temperatures appear to elicit the need for denning in grizzly bears. Grizzly bears appear to have strong affinity for dens and are generally reluctant to leave them during the denning period. Dens are rarely reused, but often bears will den in the same general locations in subsequent years.

Grizzly bears typically excavate dens in secure environments that are well covered with a blanket of deep snow during hibernation, which generally begins in late fall or early winter and extends into late winter or spring. Den entry dates for grizzly bears in the region range from about the middle of October to mid-December, with Selkirk bears entering dens two to four weeks earlier than bears in the Cabinet-Yaak. Males generally enter dens later than females, and female-offspring family groups tend to enter dens later than independent adult females.

Grizzly bears emerge from their dens beginning in late March continuing through mid-May. Exit dates for female grizzly bears range from the third week of March to the third week of May, with most occurring the fourth week in April. In general, males are first to exit dens, followed by single females, with females with cubs exiting last. In the Selkirks, 84 percent of females were still in dens on April 15 (compared to just 42 percent of males). All females with cubs remained in dens until at least April 15 in both ecosystems (Kasworm et al. 2022a, 2022b).

The motorized access direction for the Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak recovery zones (USDA Forest Service 2011b) set April 1 as the beginning of the administrative period when the direction would apply (that is, the end of the denning period). Although some male bears (and the occasional female) in these



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

ecosystems have been documented exiting dens during the month of March, most bears, including nearly all females, begin to exit in April. This supports the continued use of April 1 as the start of the motorized access administrative period for the recovery zones. Prior to the adoption of the motorized access direction, November 15 of each year was considered the end of this administrative period, but additional den entry data from the Cabinet-Yaak recovery zone supported a change to November 30 for this recovery zone. Due to the lack of supporting data to make this change, the end of the administrative period in the Selkirk Recovery Zone remains November 15.

Research has shown that grizzly bears, particularly sows with cubs-of-the-year, remain close to their den sites for a few weeks or more post-emergence and continue to rely on fat reserves during this time. After leaving the den area, grizzly bears typically move to areas where they can take advantage of food sources such as early greening herbaceous vegetation at low elevations, riparian areas, and melted-out avalanche chutes.

While grizzly bear use of habitat is often driven by accessibility to food, another important factor is the availability of large tracts of relatively undisturbed land that provide some level of refuge from human depredation and competitive use of habitat by humans. The Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 1993) indicates that the most important element in grizzly bear recovery is securing adequate effective habitat. This reflects an area's ability to support grizzly bears based on the quality of the habitat and the type and amount of human disturbance imposed on the area. Controlling and directing motorized access is one of the most important tools in achieving habitat effectiveness and managing grizzly bear recovery.

Research demonstrates that grizzly bears tend to avoid open roads, regardless of habitat availability and traffic volume (see, for example, Kasworm and Manley 1990). Grizzly bears often under-use or avoid otherwise preferred habitats that are frequented by people, which can result in a negative association with roads even in the absence of traffic. This avoidance is often strongest in adult grizzly bears (as opposed to subadults). In the case of adult females, persistent displacement from habitats can result in learned avoidance behavior by their cubs—causing long-term underutilization of habitat areas.

Roads provide human access into otherwise remote areas that increase the probability of human/bear encounters. These encounters can result in shooting mortality of grizzly bears that stem from self-defense, mistaken identity (during legal black bear hunting seasons), and poaching or malicious killing. In the Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone, 73 percent of known and probable grizzly bear mortalities between 1980 and 2021 were human-caused, and 64 percent of these (where the location was known) occurred within 500 meters [1,640 feet] of an open road (Kasworm et al. 2022a).

Under existing conditions approximately 351,790 acres (55 percent) within recovery zones on the forest are open to over-snow vehicle use through most or all of the winter. Approximately 644 acres are closed to over-snow vehicle use after March 15, and an additional 10,044 acres are closed after March 31 (all in the Selkirk Recovery Zone). This leaves about 54 percent of Idaho Panhandle National Forests in recovery zones open to over-snow vehicle use after March 31. Within individual recovery zones, about 89 percent of the Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone is open, and about 34 percent is open in the Selkirk Recovery Zone (reduced to 31 percent after April 1).

There are approximately 189,940 acres of likely denning habitat in both recovery zones combined, about 41 percent of which is currently open to over-snow vehicle use during the denning season. While approximately 82 percent of denning habitat in the Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone is open to over-snow



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

vehicle use, only about 15 percent of denning habitat in the Selkirk Recovery Zone is open to over-snow vehicle use due largely to the court injunction closure. After March 31 of each year, another approximately 3,620 acres (3 percent) of predicted denning habitat in the Selkirk Recovery Zone is closed to over-snow vehicle use. Currently, there are about 14 miles (6 miles groomed, 8 miles ungroomed) of designated roads and trails in areas otherwise closed to over-snow vehicle use that intersect predicted denning habitat.

Motorized over-snow vehicle use has the potential to impact grizzly bears by disturbance or displacement from preferred habitats. Direct and indirect impacts from over-snow vehicles to hibernating bears during the denning season are not well documented. The primary concern for grizzly bears with respect to over-snow vehicle use is the potential displacement of females with cubs from the immediate vicinity of the den site after they emerge in the spring. Another concern is the potential for the mother and a young cub to become separated during an encounter with over-snow vehicles after they emerge from the den or near the den.

Motorized access standards in the land management plan (pages 151 to 155) are specific to wheeled motorized vehicles, and do not directly apply to over-snow vehicle use. While there is a wealth of research on the effects of wheeled motorized use on grizzly bears, there is relatively little on potential effects of over-snow vehicle use on the species—most of which is largely anecdotal. However, it is reasonable to assume that motorized use would have similar effects on grizzly bears (and other wildlife) regardless of whether it emanates from wheeled or tracked vehicles. Unlike wheeled vehicles, over-snow vehicle use is not necessarily restricted to established roads and trails (although these roads and trails are almost certainly where most over-snow vehicle use occurs). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2008a) has suggested that effects of over-snow vehicle use on grizzly bears may occur during the denning period, after den emergence, and on spring habitat.

No den abandonment or other deleterious effects on individual grizzly bears as a result of over-snow vehicles has been documented in the Selkirk or Cabinet-Yaak ecosystems or in any other grizzly bear ecosystem in the contiguous United States. However, such effects would be difficult to detect and determine. Nevertheless, it is possible that over-snow vehicle use near a den could have minor effects on individuals.

The potential for disturbance to grizzly bears from over-snow vehicles in spring habitat is unlikely. The very characteristics that make an area attractive as an over-snow vehicle use area or trail in the spring (e.g., retention of snow cover) also makes it unrepresentative of grizzly bear spring habitat (e.g., loss of snow cover, early vegetation green up). Consequently, grizzly bear spring habitat and spring over-snow vehicle use areas are all but mutually exclusive. Once grizzly bears move away from their den sites and toward spring habitats, there is less potential for conflicts with over-snow vehicles.

Disturbance from over-snow vehicles may be most consequential shortly before or after den emergence, particularly for a female with cubs. Late season over-snow vehicle travel into higher-elevation areas could cause disturbance or displacement of grizzly bears and is likely the winter activity that poses the greatest potential to affect grizzly bears by potentially increasing their energy expenditure and mortality risk, particularly to females and young.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

#### *Effects of the Proposed Action*

The effects of existing over-snow vehicle use on grizzly bear, described above under the affected environment, apply to the proposed action and alternative A.

The proposed action would authorize over-snow vehicle use on about 61 percent of recovery zones prior to April 1: reducing allowed use to 74 percent of the Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone and increasing use to 52 percent of the Selkirk Recovery Zone. After March 31, approximately 2,290 acres (0.9 percent) would remain open to over-snow vehicle use until May 31 in the Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone (Moose Lake), and about 1,740 acres (less than 0.5 percent) in the Selkirk Recovery Zone (Roman Nose Lakes) would remain open—once the respective ecosystems meet all motorized access standards (estimated to be 2023 in the Selkirk Recovery Zone and 2028 in the Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone).

Similar to the patterns shown in areas of use, the proposed action would markedly increase the percentage of predicted denning habitat where over-snow vehicle use is allowed during the denning season in the Selkirk Recovery Zone and decrease it somewhat in the Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone. Although the allowed over-snow vehicle use in denning habitat prior to April 1 would increase somewhat in the combined recovery zones, it would be reduced to about 1 percent of predicted denning habitat in both recovery zones after March 31 when potential overlap with emerging bears is most likely. Only about 1.7 miles of designated over-snow vehicle trail (ungroomed) would intersect predicted denning habitat in otherwise closed areas.

In addition, the proposed action would nearly eliminate over-snow vehicle use in denning habitat in Bears Outside Recovery Zone areas after March 31 (about 100 acres of predicted denning habitat in the Pack River Bears Outside Recovery Zone area is included in the Roman Nose Lakes late season use area). As a result, the proposed action would be more protective of grizzly bears than either the existing condition or alternative A.

#### *Effects of Alternative A*

Prior to April 1 of each year, alternative A would be very similar to the proposed action in the extent of over-snow vehicle use allowed (table 11). The only difference would be that over-snow vehicle use would not be authorized on about 8,550 acres in a portion of the upper Pack River that has been closed to this use since 1994. This would result in over-snow vehicle use being allowed on 50 percent of forest lands in the Selkirk Recovery Zone and 59 percent of the combined recovery zones. As with the proposed action, over-snow vehicle use would be allowed on 74 percent of forest lands within the Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone.

The principal differences between the two alternatives would be exhibited after March 31. Alternative A would allow late-season (April 1 to May 31) off-route use in five different areas compared to only two areas under the proposed action. This alternative would also extend the season of off-trail over-snow vehicle use in Bears Outside Recovery Zone areas to April 15 (changed from April 1).

The areas where late-season off-trail use would be allowed include the Roman Nose Lakes and Moose Lake areas described in the proposed action, along with two additional areas in the Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone (Wellington Creek—about 4,380 acres; and Porcupine Creek—about 4,800 acres) and an area adjacent to the Selkirk Recovery Zone (Jeru Ridge—about 7,580 acres).



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Prior to April 1 of each year, the amount of predicted denning habitat in recovery zones open to over-snow vehicle use in alternative A would be similar to the proposed action (table 11), except that about 3,120 fewer acres would be open to over-snow vehicle use in the upper Pack River area. Only about 1.7 miles of designated over-snow vehicle trail (ungroomed) would intersect predicted denning habitat in otherwise closed areas. After March 31, approximately 2,580 acres of predicted denning habitat would be open to over-snow vehicle use in the Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone (about 960 acres at Moose Lake, 950 acres in Wellington Creek, and 670 acres in Porcupine Creek). Predicted denning habitat potentially impacted by over-snow vehicle use after April 1 in the Selkirk Recovery Zone would still be approximately 900 acres. When both recovery zones are combined, allowed over-snow vehicle use after March 31 of each year would occur on less than 2 percent of predicted denning habitat (table 12table 12).

Late-season over-snow vehicle use in the Jeru Ridge area could impact about 2,830 acres of predicted denning habitat. While this is a considerable proportion (29 percent) of this habitat in the Pack River Bears Outside Recovery Zone area, it is immediately adjacent to the Selkirk Recovery Zone where denning habitat is abundant. Less than 1 percent of predicted denning habitat in the Selkirk Recovery Zone would be subject to late-season over-snow vehicle use, and less than half of predicted denning habitat in the Selkirk Recovery Zone would be affected by over-snow vehicle use during the denning season. For context, if the Pack River Bears Outside Recovery Zone area were combined with the Idaho Panhandle National Forests portion of the Selkirk Recovery Zone, less than 3 percent of predicted denning habitat would be subject to over-snow vehicle use after April 15 (approximately 3,740 of 125,840 acres).

Similar to the proposed action, there would be few acres where over-snow vehicle use is restricted in Bears Outside Recovery Zone areas prior to April 1. However, alternative A would allow off-route over-snow vehicle use in these same areas until April 15. Denning chronology data for the Selkirk Recovery Zone and Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone indicate that fewer than half of female grizzly bears have exited dens by the end of the second week of April, and no females with cubs have been documented outside dens prior to this in either ecosystem. In other words, if a grizzly bear were disturbed by over-snow vehicle use prior to April 15, it would almost certainly be a male or single female, and the consequences of such disturbance would be far less severe than if it were a female with cubs.

Alternative A would potentially have greater impacts on grizzly bears than the proposed action, since more areas would be open to off-route use during the den emergence period. However, allowed over-snow vehicle use during the spring would be substantially reduced from the existing condition. Under this alternative, late-season over-snow vehicle use in recovery zones would affect less than 2 percent of predicted denning habitat, or less than 3 percent of predicted denning habitat if recovery zones were combined with the Pack River Bears Outside Recovery Zone area.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

**Table 11. Acres open to over-snow vehicle use by recovery zone (Selkirk, Cabinet-Yaak, and both zones combined) and alternative**

Total acres of Idaho Panhandle National Forests lands within the Selkirk Recovery Zone: 385,401 acres. Total acres of Idaho Panhandle National Forests lands within the Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone: 249,714 acres. Total acres of Idaho Panhandle National Forests lands within the two recovery zones combined: 635,116 acres.

Recovery Zone: Management	Existing Condition	Proposed Action	Alternative A
<b>Combined:</b> Acres open prior to April 1 (percent)	351,787 (55.4)	385,770 (60.7)	377,222 (59.4)
<b>Combined:</b> Acres open after March 31 (percent)	341,142 (53.7)	4,030 (0.6)	13,282 (2.1)
<b>Selkirk:</b> Acres open prior to April 1 (percent)	129,383 (33.6)	200,062 (51.9)	191,514 (49.7)
<b>Selkirk:</b> Acres open after March 31 (percent)	118,739 (30.8)	1,740 (0.5)	1,740 (0.5)
<b>Cabinet-Yaak:</b> Acres open prior to April 1 (percent)	222,403 (89.0)	185,708 (74.4)	185,708 (74.4)
<b>Cabinet-Yaak:</b> Acres open after March 31 (percent)	222,403 (89.0)	2,290 (0.9)	11,542 (4.6)

**Table 12. Acres of predicted denning habitat open to over-snow vehicle use by recovery zone (Selkirk, Cabinet-Yaak, and both zones combined) and alternative.**

Total acres of denning habitat on Idaho Panhandle National Forests lands within the Selkirk recovery zone: 116,145 acres. Total acres of denning habitat on Idaho Panhandle National Forests lands within the Cabinet-Yaak recovery zone: 73,790 acres. Total acres of denning habitat on forest lands within the two recovery zones combined: 189,935 acres.

Recovery Zone: Management	Existing Condition	Proposed Action	Alternative A
<b>Combined:</b> Acres open prior to April 1 (percent)	77,220 (40.7)	99,010 (52.1)	95,892 (50.5)
<b>Combined:</b> Acres open after March 31 (percent)	73,600 (38.8)	1,860 (1.0)	3,479 (1.8)
<b>Selkirk:</b> Acres open prior to April 1 (percent)	16,940 (14.6)	48,058 (41.4)	44,940 (38.7)
<b>Selkirk:</b> Acres open after March 31 (percent)	13,320 (11.5)	903 (0.8)	903 (0.8)
<b>Cabinet-Yaak:</b> Acres open prior to April 1 (percent)	60,280 (81.7)	50,952 (69.1)	50,952 (69.1)
<b>Cabinet-Yaak:</b> Acres open after March 31 (percent)	60,280 (81.7)	957 (1.3)	2,576 (3.5)

### Cumulative Effects

Timber harvest activities are reasonably foreseeable within the project area. Regeneration timber harvest has mixed effects on grizzly bear habitat: it can increase forage quality and quantity as most preferred grizzly bear vegetative food items occur in early seral communities with low forest cover (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2011b) but it can also increase mortality risk by removing hiding cover.

There are a number of private inholdings (mostly industrial timberlands) in or adjacent to recovery zones or Bears Outside Recovery Zone areas in the project area. Except for lands belonging to Stimson Lumber Company, there are few restrictions on over-snow vehicle use on these properties. We assume that these properties would remain open to over-snow vehicle use under the proposed alternatives as long as the surrounding National Forest System lands or access roads and trails are designated as open to such use. Timber harvest, road construction, and other activities occurring on these lands during the post-denning period may impact the distribution, amount, and quality of grizzly habitat within the recovery zones and may impact connectivity between National Forest System lands in the action area. These activities may also impact recurring use within the Bears Outside Recovery Zone areas. Human activities may cause avoidance of these areas, or conversely, increase the potential for grizzly bear mortality.

The Idaho Department of Lands administers nearly 300,000 acres in the Priest Lake, Pend Oreille Lake, and Kootenai Valley Supervisory Areas. The Priest Lake Supervisory Area manages the Priest Lake State Forest, which effectively divides this portion of the forest, occupying nearly all the land from the Selkirk



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Crest west to Priest Lake and the Priest River. We are unaware of any restrictions on over-snow vehicle use on lands administered by the Idaho Department of Lands. The Priest Lake State Forest contains nearly 150 miles of groomed trails that provide ready access to many higher-elevation popular riding areas adjacent to the Idaho Panhandle National Forests. In addition to over-snow vehicle use, the state of Idaho also permits snowmobile tours, cat skiing, and helicopter skiing to a private tour operator based at Schweitzer Resort. Although likely not as concentrated as on this portion of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests, denning habitat is present at higher-elevation areas on the Priest Lake State Forest and is potentially subject to disturbance from late-season over-snow vehicle use. As a result, the substantial reductions in over-snow vehicle use after March 31 proposed under both alternatives take on added importance, because we expect late-season over-snow vehicle use of denning habitat on state-administered lands to continue indefinitely.

Like over-snow vehicle use, other public activities taking place prior to April 1 likely have little effect on grizzly bears. However, after this date, potential conflicts between humans and grizzly bears are much more likely, particularly since grizzly bears can range widely and make use of low-elevation areas where humans may be present during this season. In addition to hiking and antler hunting, many black bear hunters take part in the spring bear hunt (starting April 1 in the area). Black bear hunting has the potential to add cumulatively to the disturbance of grizzly bears. Additionally, hunter encounters with grizzly bears may result in a bear death due to mistaken bear identification, self-defense, or opportunistic poaching. Although relatively few bear hunters use over-snow vehicles to hunt in spring, it is possible that some do. However, under both alternatives most off-route areas would be closed to over-snow vehicle use after March 31, greatly reducing the potential for disturbance or grizzly bear mortality from the existing condition.

Motorized access in recovery zones and Bears Outside Recovery Zone areas are regulated by standards in the land management plan. As a result, road densities would not greatly increase (and may decrease) over the life of the project. Therefore, road construction, decommissioning, and storage activities would make relatively small changes to miles of roads available for over-snow vehicle use and are not expected to considerably change over-snow vehicle use patterns in these areas.

Continued fire suppression would help retain forest cover, further contributing to reduction of foraging habitat for grizzly bears. Fire suppression also has the possibility of causing disturbance to grizzly bears from increased foot, vehicle, and sometimes aircraft use during suppression activities. Conversely, wildfire is generally considered to be beneficial for grizzly bears. Fire increases ecosystem diversity and creates a greater variety of forage items over time. Grizzly bears feed on the lush revegetation of grasses and forbs that occurs relatively quickly after fire, and on ants and other invertebrates that inhabit the dead trees that have fallen to the ground. Since bears are highly mobile and opportunistic, they are able to avoid the harmful aspects of fire (such as injury from flames or falling trees during actual burning) yet make full use of the resulting diversity of burned and unburned habitats for foraging and cover (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2003a). The amount of future fire and level of successful suppression is impossible to predict but would generally result in the effects described.

The Stimson Land Exchange is a proposed project in the area. The three Stimson sections within the forest administrative boundary proposed to be exchanged are currently incorporated into the Kalispell-Granite bear management unit, which is managed to be consistent with land management plan motorized access standards. There would be little (if any) changes to motorized access if this exchange is completed.





## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Both the Colville and the Kootenai National Forests share bear management units with the Idaho Panhandle National Forests in portions of the project area (Salmo-Priest, Sullivan-Hughes and Kalispell-Granite bear management units with the Colville National Forest, and Northwest Peaks and Keno with the Kootenai National Forest). These bear management units are all managed according to motorized access standards outlined in the land management plan, and all authorized activities (regardless of administrative unit) are compliant with these standards.

The Colville National Forest has designated management areas under their revised land management plan where over-snow vehicle use is not permitted, although they have not completed winter travel planning and do not have an over-snow vehicle use map in place. The Kootenai National Forest is in the early stages of over-snow vehicle planning. Currently, the only area along the shared boundary with the Idaho Panhandle National Forests North Zone closed to over-snow vehicle use is in the Scotchman Peaks recommended wilderness (proposed to remain closed under both alternatives). We do not expect activities on these forests to greatly exacerbate, or minimize, the effects of over-snow vehicle use on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests.

## Canada Lynx

### *Affected Environment*

Canada lynx occur in boreal, sub-boreal, and western montane forests and are uncommon or absent from the wet coastal forests of North America. Distribution of lynx is nearly coincident with that of the snowshoe hare, its primary prey. Lynx habitat consists of a variety of forest ages and structural stages, including young regenerating forests and mature multi-storied forests that provide snowshoe hare habitat. Like most wild cats, lynx require cover for security and stalking prey and avoid large open areas. In northern Idaho and northwestern Montana, lynx generally occur in moist, cold habitat types above 4,000 feet elevation.

Relevant direction for managing over-snow vehicle use in lynx habitat comes from the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction, which was subsequently retained in the land management plan. Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction Guideline HU G11 states: "Designated over-the-snow routes or designated play areas should not expand outside baseline areas of consistent snow compaction, unless designation serves to consolidate use and improve lynx habitat. This may be calculated on a Lynx Management Unit (LAU) basis, or on a combination of immediately adjacent LAUs." The "baseline" condition for both designated routes and areas of consistent compaction is "during the period 1998 to 2000."

There are 25 delineated lynx analysis units in the project area, encompassing approximately 612,570 acres, of which about 597,680 are on National Forest System land. Currently, off-route over-snow vehicle use is allowed on about 322,720 acres (53 percent) within lynx analysis units. Prior to the court injunction closure (the circa 2000 condition), more than 84 percent (almost 517,320 acres) of these lynx analysis units were open to unrestricted over-snow vehicle use.

### *Effects of the Proposed Action and Alternative A*

Canada lynx are uniquely adapted for survival in boreal forest environments, with morphological features that are highly specialized for hunting snowshoe hares in deep, fluffy snow. Because of the Canada lynx/snowshoe hare relationship, identified risk factors that can impact lynx populations mainly address



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

alteration of forest habitats, as forest management that reduces stand structure reduces hare abundances and negatively affects the lynx forage base. The proposed alternatives would not authorize any changes in the vegetative condition of lynx habitat.

Although considered a lesser risk than forest alteration, over-snow vehicle use has the potential to negatively impact the species. While lynx appear to tolerate some level of human disturbance and most research indicates that lynx do not alter their behavior to avoid humans, winter recreation activities occurring near diurnal resting sites or maternal dens could compromise their function. Additionally, while there is a lack of evidence that packed snow trails facilitate competition with other predators, there is evidence that competing predators use packed trails, suggesting a potential effect on individual lynx (USDA Forest Service 2007b). Finally, while road density does not appear to affect lynx habitat selection, it is possible that over-snow vehicle use of roads may result in long-term negative impacts to lynx through increased access for trappers.

The proposed action and alternative A propose over-snow vehicle use on 61 percent and 60 percent, respectively, of areas within lynx analysis units. This represents increases in allowed over-snow vehicle use from the current condition in the South Selkirk and Upper Priest analysis areas, but notable decreases from the 2000 condition in the North Selkirk analysis area.

In all but one instance, the percentage of individual lynx analysis units proposed to be open to over-snow vehicle use under each alternative does not exceed the percentage open prior to the injunction. The exception is the Pack River lynx analysis unit under the proposed action, where about 7,130 acres are proposed open to off-route use that were closed to over-snow vehicle use in 2000 (under the 1994 emergency closure for caribou protection). However, when the South Selkirk lynx analysis units (Pack River, Snow, Cascade, and Trout) are combined, nearly 15,000 fewer acres would be available to off-route over-snow vehicle use under the proposed action than in the 2000 condition. At the same time, the North Selkirk area would have about 68,000 fewer acres open to off-route over-snow vehicle use under the proposed action than in 2000. Under alternative A, the amount of every lynx analysis unit where off-route over-snow vehicle use is allowed would be equal to or less than that allowed in 2000.

The forest proposes designating about 178 miles of groomed over-snow vehicle trails within lynx analysis units under the proposed action, and about 176 miles of groomed trails under alternative A. Currently, about 167 miles of trails are approved for grooming in lynx analysis units. In 2000, nearly 184 miles of trail in lynx analysis units were approved for grooming.

“Designated” routes include the groomed trails plus additional “ungroomed” roads and trails mapped or identified as available for over-snow vehicle use by the forest. In 2000, approximately 453 miles of over-snow vehicle routes were identified within lynx analysis units on the Kaniksu Unit. The proposed action and alternative A would designate about 197 and 198 miles, respectively, of over-snow vehicle routes in lynx analysis units prior to April 1. Increases in designated route miles are proposed in only one individual lynx analysis unit (Deer-Skin), and in most lynx analysis units the miles of designated routes would be greatly reduced. The miles of designated routes would be reduced from the 2000 condition in both alternatives when Deer-Skin is considered collectively with the adjacent American-Canuck lynx analysis unit.

There would be no expansion of “play areas” because none would be designated by either alternative. Additionally, there would be no net increase in miles of designated over-the-snow routes in individual lynx analysis units, or groups of adjacent lynx analysis units, under either alternative.



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Although lynx are described as being generally tolerant of humans and anecdotal reports suggest that lynx are not displaced by human presence (Ruediger et al. 2000), the increased noise and activity levels above natural conditions within or in close proximity to lynx habitat could potentially disturb lynx. The probability of this occurring is expected to be low because of the relatively low density of lynx within most of the analysis area and the limited overlap between dense forest habitat preferred by lynx and more open areas preferred by over-snow vehicle users.

The potential for disturbance of lynx using day bedding areas is limited because over-snow vehicle use would not be expected to occur in habitat that comprises high canopy closure areas containing lots of down woody debris (Ruediger et al. 2000). This is not the type of area that over-snow vehicle users select because it is difficult to traverse. While trapping efforts targeting species such as bobcat can result in lynx being inadvertently captured, injured, or killed, this appears to be an uncommon occurrence statewide. In all but the Selkirk analysis areas, the total area available for over-snow vehicle use (and roads within these areas that might be used by trappers) under both alternatives would not increase. Although some research indicates an increased use of deep snow areas by other predators in areas with compacted snow, there is no conclusive evidence of competition between lynx and other predators that resulted in a population-level threat to lynx.

Recent research that simultaneously tracked the movements of lynx and outdoor winter recreationists (both motorized and non-motorized) in an area of Colorado that included some of the highest levels of dispersed winter recreation found in North America (Squires et al. 2019) found that lynx selected environments within their home ranges that “facilitated low overlap with snowmobile recreation.” While a threshold likely exists beyond which lynx become increasingly intolerant of human activity, lynx were able to maintain spatial use of their home ranges even with the existing high levels of dispersed winter recreation in their study area.

#### *Cumulative Effects*

Regeneration timber harvest has the potential to constrain lynx use of home ranges, because they typically do not hunt in large openings. However, the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction guidelines limit stand-initiation activities (regeneration) to 30 percent of an individual lynx analysis unit overall (approximating the size of a lynx home range), and 15 percent of a lynx analysis unit in a 15-year period. Additionally, a relatively small amount of regeneration harvest affects lynx habitat, because most of regeneration harvest on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests occurs below 4,000 feet elevation.

There are a number of private inholdings (mostly industrial timberlands) within and adjacent to lynx analysis units on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests North Zone. It is likely that portions of these lands are capable of supporting lynx habitat, but how much is unknown. Timber harvest occurring on private or state lands may impact the distribution, amount, and quality of lynx habitat included within these lands and may impact connectivity between National Forest System lands in the project area. Similarly, state lands likely contain some quality lynx habitat, particularly on the Priest Lake State Forest that is surrounded on three sides by lynx analysis units. The contribution to lynx habitat from this area is unknown, but likely somewhat less than on National Forest System lands where regulatory mechanisms specific to lynx habitat are in place.

Virtually all public activities taking place in lynx habitat during the winter would be associated with over-snow vehicle use, since these areas are at higher elevations (above 4,000 feet) and would be difficult to



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

access otherwise. Potential effects of these activities (primarily trapping) are discussed under the effects of the alternatives.

Road construction, decommissioning, and storage activities are expected to make relatively small changes to miles of roads available for over-snow vehicle use at the scale of the project area. The extent of effects is difficult to predict but is expected to be minor over the life of the project.

Potential future fire suppression and wildfire likely would have mixed effects on lynx habitat. Since fewer acres would be allowed to burn, fire suppression has the potential to prevent habitat from reaching an early successional structural stage that would support high densities of snowshoe hares in subsequent years but can also preserve potential mature multi-storied stands that similarly support high hare densities. Continued fire suppression in lynx habitat would also help keep potential denning habitat intact, although this habitat component is not thought to be limiting throughout most of lynx range. The amount of future fire and level of successful suppression is impossible to predict but would generally result in these effects.

The three Stimson sections within the forest administrative boundary proposed to be exchanged are currently incorporated into the nearest Sema lynx analysis unit and managed according to the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction guidelines. There would be no additional effects resulting from this exchange.

The forest shares no lynx analysis units with the Colville or Kootenai National Forests, but they are required to manage lynx habitat to promote recovery of the species.

## North American Wolverine

### *Affected Environment*

Wolverines are a low-density, wide-ranging species occurring over a variety of alpine, boreal, and arctic habitats. In the contiguous United States, they are considered to represent a metapopulation and occupy habitat in high alpine patches where they disperse into suitable areas. No systematic population census exists over the entire current range of wolverines in the contiguous United States, so the current population level and trends are not known with certainty. Inman et al. (2013) estimated a population size of 318 wolverines in the currently known breeding range in this region. Male and female wolverines maintain large territories with very little overlap between same-sex adults, but breeding pairs have overlapping territories. Wolverine home ranges vary greatly in size depending on availability and distribution of food and gender and age of the animal.

Year-round habitat for the wolverine is found at high elevations centered near the tree line in conifer forests (below tree line), rocky alpine habitat above tree line, cirque basins, and avalanche chutes that have food sources. Deep, persistent, and reliable spring (mid-April to mid-May) snow cover is the best overall predictor of wolverine occurrence, possibly due to the species' need for deep snow during the denning period. The requirement of cold, snowy conditions means that, in the southern portion of the species' range where ambient temperatures are warmest, wolverine distribution is restricted to high-elevation areas.

Mapping of wolverine habitat in the Northern Region of the Forest Service is based on the work of Inman et al. (2013), which used radio-telemetry data collected in the Yellowstone region of the United States and resource selection function modelling. This work produced four habitat layers: maternal habitat, primary habitat, female dispersal habitat, and male dispersal habitat. The layer for male dispersal habitat is larger



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

(and thus more inclusive) than the female dispersal layer, but also less informative since it covers nearly the entire project area. Therefore, the female dispersal habitat layer will be used when discussing “dispersal” habitat. It is also important to note that maternal habitat is a subset of primary habitat, which in turn is a subset of male or female dispersal habitat.

Maternal and primary habitat is primarily situated at higher elevations with relatively low road densities when compared to dispersal habitat, which occupies lower elevation areas with higher levels of human access. Primary and maternal habitats support a wide range of potential wolverine prey, including small and medium-sized mammals, deer, elk, moose, bighorn sheep, and mountain goat. Table 13 shows the amount of maternal, primary, and female dispersal habitat currently present in the analysis area.

#### *Effects of the Proposed Action and Alternative A*

Human disturbance in the action area associated with over-snow vehicle use and increased human presence is expected to affect prey (e.g., big game) distribution. Big game are likely to avoid areas where over-snow vehicle use is actively occurring, reducing potential foraging opportunities for wolverine in the short term in affected primary and maternal habitat. However, there is little overlap in wolverine primary habitat and winter range for most big game species present (see *Big Game Winter Range* section, below), so this potential effect would likely be inconsiderable. While the distribution of potential prey may temporarily change, it is unlikely that available prey resources would change appreciably at the scale of a wolverine home range.

Researchers have reported that female wolverines may be sensitive to human disturbance near natal and maternal dens and may abandon dens and move their kits a considerable distance if they detect human presence in the area. However, more recent reports indicate that wolverines may be able to tolerate at least some close approach by humans without abandoning their dens. Preliminary results of an ongoing study in central Idaho designed to address whether winter recreational use is compatible with denning wolverines indicate that some wolverines do reside in landscapes that have relatively high levels of winter recreation, and at the home range scale are not excluded from these areas. However, denning female wolverines in highly recreated areas were less active during the day and more active at night compared to females in areas with little recreation. These researchers concluded that indirect habitat loss, particularly to females, could be of concern in areas with higher recreation levels.

Currently, about 44 percent of modeled maternal denning habitat and 39 percent of primary habitat are open to over-snow vehicle use. Both the proposed action and alternative A would increase the miles of roads and trails and acres of open areas in all modeled wolverine habitats from current levels (table 14). Alternative A has about 0.6 additional mile of over-snow vehicle roads and trails when compared to the proposed action (in female dispersal habitat). However, the proposed action has the potential to impact 2 percent more wolverine female dispersal and primary habitat acres than alternative A. There would be no difference between the alternatives in maternal denning habitat acres affected (table 13).

Under both alternatives there would be an increased risk of motorized impacts to wolverine populations during the critical denning season, which in turn would increase the risk of impacts to wolverine productivity. Increasing the risk of motorized impacts during the denning season would be negative for wolverines. However, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service the best scientific and commercial information available indicates that only the projected decrease and fragmentation of wolverine habitat or range due to future climate change is a threat to the continued existence of the species (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2013b). Current information does not indicate that other potential stressors or land



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

management activities such as those proposed under the Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project (or other activities such as timber harvest, infrastructure development, and transportation corridors) pose a threat to the distinct population segment of the North American wolverine.

**Table 13. Total acres of wolverine habitat open to over-snow vehicle use prior to April 1 under the existing condition, the proposed action, and alternative A**

Type of Wolverine Habitat	Total Acres	Currently Open (Acres)	Proposed Action Open (Acres)	Alternative A Open (Acres)
Maternal	105,613	46,858 (44 percent)	54,791 (52 percent)	54,490 (52 percent)
Primary	263,115	103,408 (39 percent)	135,485 (52 percent)	130,445 (50 percent)
Dispersal <sup>1</sup>	692,006	417,614 (60 percent)	463,516 (67 percent)	454,970 (65 percent)

<sup>1</sup>Female dispersal habitat

**Table 14. Total miles of trails and roads open to over-snow vehicle use in wolverine habitat prior to April 1 under the existing condition, the proposed action, and alternative A**

Type of Wolverine Habitat	Existing Trails and Roads (Miles)	Proposed Action Trails and Roads (Miles)	Alternative A Trails and Roads (Miles)
Maternal (Denning)	11.3	12.5	12.5
Primary	28.7	48.0	48.0
Dispersal	148.0	218.6	219.2

### Cumulative Effects

Most ongoing and proposed regeneration timber harvest on the forest takes place below 4,000 feet in elevation, so it would not likely affect wolverine maternal denning or primary habitats. Unlike the other wildlife species analyzed, wolverine are not dependent on specific vegetation structural stages (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2013b), so would be little affected by these changes.

Ongoing activities on private lands in the area that may continue include residential development and occupancy, firewood gathering, recreational activities, timber harvest, vegetation management, and commercial activities. These activities would generally occur at lower elevations (where most private lands are present) outside of primary and maternal habitat; in addition, a portion of these activities are outside modeled dispersal habitat. Those activities that occur in dispersal, primary, and maternal habitat have the potential to disturb wolverine that are passing between suitable habitat patches or that are resident in primary and maternal habitat (the areas generally selected for home range establishment, foraging, and reproduction). As these activities are occurring and are expected to continue in the future, it is unlikely that wolverine would avoid these areas to a greater degree than what may be currently occurring. There is no evidence that human development, infrastructure development, and associated activities are preventing wolverine movements between suitable habitat patches (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2013, USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2018).

The Idaho Department of Lands currently allows over-snow vehicle use on lands they administer, and this is expected to continue. This may reduce the effectiveness of wolverine maternal denning and primary habitat in areas where they occur on these properties, potentially intensifying the effects of over-snow vehicle use on neighboring National Forest System lands.



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Personal use firewood gathering, dispersed camping, wheeled vehicle use, and most forms of non-motorized recreation would have minor impacts on wolverine, because the probability of actual encounters is low. Winter recreation activities are somewhat more likely to impact the species, as they generally are more concentrated in primary and maternal habitat. However, most winter recreational activities in wolverine habitat on the forest are associated with over-snow vehicle use, and the potential effects have been considered.

Road construction, decommissioning, and storage activities would make relatively small changes to miles of roads available for over-snow vehicle use (particularly in wolverine maternal denning and primary habitat) and are not expected to considerably change over-snow vehicle use patterns in these areas.

Wildfire generally improves habitat over time by increasing quality and quantity of forage for a variety of prey species, while fire suppression often has the opposite effect. Fire suppression activities and, to a lesser extent, wildfire itself can create a disturbance effect, particularly when they occur at higher elevations during the summer months. However, given the large home ranges and low population density, chances of actual encounters are low. Additionally, wolverine are highly mobile and would likely move away into less-disturbed habitats. The amount of future fire and level of successful suppression is impossible to predict but would generally result in these effects.

The three Stimson sections within the forest administrative boundary proposed to be exchanged would likely be managed similar to the surrounding areas on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests. There is no wolverine maternal denning or primary habitat within these sections, so any potential effects of over-snow vehicle use in these areas would be minimal.

Similar to the Idaho Panhandle National Forests, forest management activities taking place on adjacent national forests would have minor effects on wolverine because most of these activities would take place below 4,000 feet in elevation, and wolverine habitat selection is generally unaffected by vegetation structure.

## **Big Game Winter Range**

### *Affected Environment*

Big game winter range represents areas where deer, elk, and moose spend the winter months. Winter range habitat exists where elevation, aspect, and vegetation provide animals with food and protection from harsh weather conditions. The term “big game winter range” can refer to a variety of habitats for different species in different locales, including low-elevation areas of dense mature conifer cover used by white-tailed deer, south- or west-facing open slopes and brushfields with low snow accumulation preferred by elk and mule deer, mid-elevation conifer stands and deciduous shrub favored by moose, and high-elevation exposed rocky areas where mountain goats spend much of winter. However, this analysis will focus on the land management plan (page 130) definition of this winter range: “The area available to and used by wildlife (big game) during the winter season (December 1 to April 30). Generally, lands below 4,000 feet in elevation, on south and west aspects, that provides forage and cover.” Potential effects to big game wintering above 4,000 feet elevation (mountain goat and occasionally moose) are also addressed.

Mapping of big game winter range according to the land management plan definition results in approximately 206,570 acres of winter range in the project area. Currently, about 185,800 acres



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

(90 percent) of winter range are open to over-snow vehicle use. There are approximately 104 miles of groomed trails and 96 miles of ungroomed roads and trails that intersect this habitat.

#### *Effects of the Proposed Action and Alternative A*

Winter range is traditionally considered to be a limiting environmental factor for many species of ungulates, as they occupy a much more restricted geographic area with limited forage availability than the other seasons of the year. The presence of deep snow can make preferred forage unavailable and greatly increase the energetic cost of locomotion. Responses by big game to human disturbance can impact the behavior of wintering big game and lead to increases in energy consumption. Depending on the extent of the disturbance and the increase in energy use, it can lead to decreased health of individuals or displacement to less desirable winter habitat. Compacted over-snow vehicle roads and trails and use areas may also allow wolves or other big game predators to take advantage of easier travelling into areas that they would otherwise not likely access.

Ungulates are at their worst body condition at the end of winter, so any exposure to over-snow vehicle disturbance during this time is likely more costly. However, as late winter and early spring progress, over-snow vehicle use is moving higher in elevation as the snow line recedes, while ungulates are keying in on snow-free areas at lower elevations, thereby reducing the potential for disturbance.

It is recognized that all types of recreation, whether motorized or non-motorized, can have disturbance impacts on wildlife, including big game. However, non-motorized activity on the forest away from residential areas is nearly always facilitated by motorized use of a road or over-snow trail system, and generally diminishes with increasing distance from a road or trail. As a result, motorized access greatly influences the distribution of non-motorized use on the forest. The land management plan includes direction to minimize disturbance to big game from management activities, which include over-snow vehicle use.

White-tailed deer are adaptable and prolific and thrive in a variety of habitat types. In winter, they often concentrate in smaller, more confined areas known as critical winter range, which consists of low-elevation areas of dense, mature conifer (often western redcedar-, western hemlock-, or grand fir-dominated stands) overstory that intercepts much of the snowfall and provides both available forage and relative ease of movement. The combination of shallow snowpack and dense vegetation greatly limit the amount of use (and subsequent disturbance) of these areas by over-snow vehicles. Additionally, while white-tailed deer are vulnerable to die-offs during particularly severe winters (such as 1996–1997), the quality of habitat is such that populations rebound relatively quickly from these events. As a result, the effects of over-snow vehicle use on white-tailed deer populations on the forest would be minor.

Moose use a variety of vegetation types and structural stages—especially riparian areas, old harvest units and brushfields. Moose winter habitat is like that of white-tailed deer, except they can tolerate deeper snow and colder temperatures. Preferred moose winter habitat includes a matrix of shrub habitats providing high-quality forage near mature conifer forest that provides cover once snow becomes deep and crusted. The fact that moose are generally widely dispersed and at low densities, along with limited over-snow vehicle use of the mature stands they prefer in midwinter, combine to make moose/over-snow vehicle encounters a relatively uncommon occurrence. While such incidents may be stressful to individual moose, they do not likely cause population-level effects.





## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Mountain goats inhabit relatively few, discreet areas of habitat in the project area. Along with two highly visible locations in the vicinity of Lake Pend Oreille (Scotchman Peak and Bernard Peak), there are several scattered populations in the Selkirk Mountains and occasionally other locations as well. Goats frequent alpine and subalpine habitat in precipitous terrain, usually at timberline or above. In winter, they are often found on steep south-facing slopes, cliffy terrain, south-facing canyon walls, and windblown ridgetops. Human-caused disturbance, especially winter recreation, is identified as a risk factor for the species. Repeated disturbance may result in abandonment of favored habitats, potentially reducing probability of winter survival by increasing both energetic demand associated with feeding and exposure to potential predators.

Virtually all known wintering goat locations in the Idaho Panhandle National Forests portion of the Selkirk Mountains are in areas proposed to be closed to over-snow vehicle use under both alternatives. All documented winter (and summer) goat locations in the Scotchman Peak area are within a year-round over-snow vehicle closure under both alternatives, so the population is unlikely to experience disturbance from over-snow vehicle use. There are no closures proposed around Bernard Peak; however, goats using this area are well-protected from motorized disturbance by the surrounding topography.

The potential effects to elk and mule deer from the proposed alternatives are limited to changes in the amount of disturbance or displacement as measured by the miles of over-snow vehicle roads and trails and over-snow vehicle use areas within mapped big game winter range. Under both alternatives, approximately 171,440 acres (83 percent) of big game winter range would be open to over-snow vehicle use through the winter, a decrease of about 14,360 acres from the existing condition. Both alternatives propose closures specifically designed to limit disturbance of wintering big game along the Hope Face (4,852 acres), Kirby Mountain (1,980 acres), and above the town of Clark Fork (2,645 acres) along the north side of Lake Pend Oreille; as well as in the Granite Creek area (1,610 acres) east of the lake. Additionally, there are areas with concentrations of big game winter range closed to over-snow vehicle use for other reasons.

In general, the landscape features that attract elk and mule deer in winter (brushy, often steep and rocky areas on south and west aspects with shallow snowpack) discourage over-snow vehicle users for the same reasons. As a result, there are many big game winter range areas that would technically be open to over-snow vehicle use but are expected to see little such use. Consequently, topographic and vegetative conditions would effectively minimize potential effects to big game winter range in the absence of actual closures.

#### ***Cumulative Effects***

Regeneration timber harvest on the forest can open areas to over-snow vehicle use that were previously difficult to access due to dense vegetation. Although this affects a relatively small portion of the project area (about 2 percent over an approximately 30-year period), most of this harvest is below 4,000 feet in elevation where big game winter range occurs. However, as discussed above, over-snow vehicle use on winter range areas is uncommon because the very conditions that attract big game (low snowpack) discourage over-snow vehicle use. Additionally, this timber harvest also results in more accessible (open) winter range for big game to use, likely providing more areas where animals can go to avoid over-snow vehicle use.

Lands of other ownership interspersed with Idaho Panhandle National Forests lands typically have fewer restrictions on over-snow vehicle use, but also have more areas of low forest cover due to the emphasis on



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

tree harvest. Once again, the areas within these that provide the best quality winter range (accessibility of forage) also tend to discourage over-snow vehicle use. Much of the historically best quality winter range is found on lands of other ownership in the valley bottoms. Currently within these, winter range is highly variable, due to the level of landowner tolerance of wildlife, and level of public access. Due to this variability, it is difficult to assess the overall benefit of these lands to wintering big game.

Unlike the other species analyzed in detail, public activities on big game winter range during the over-snow vehicle use period can be independent of over-snow vehicle access (antler hunting, for example). Even so, these activities are often facilitated by over-snow vehicle use as well, particularly in more remote areas. These activities may disrupt wintering big game to some extent, but this would likely occur at a small scale relative to the project area. As a result, this activity would not greatly contribute to cumulative effects.

Road construction, decommissioning, and storage activities are expected to make relatively small changes to miles of roads available for over-snow vehicle use at the scale of the project area. The extent of effects is difficult to predict but is expected to be minor over the life of the project.

High-severity wildfire can greatly improve big game habitat by opening areas of previously dense timber, while effective fire suppression would inhibit this effect. The amount of future fire and level of successful suppression is impossible to predict but would generally result in these effects.

The three Stimson sections within the forest administrative boundary proposed to be exchanged would likely see less timber harvest under Forest Service management than they currently do, so big game range quantity may decrease somewhat.

Like the Idaho Panhandle National Forests, the Colville and Kootenai National Forests have requirements in place to minimize effects to big game winter range. As a result, the quality and quantity of this habitat component would likely be maintained similar to current levels on these units.

## **Issue 6. Over-snow vehicle use will negatively affect whitebark pine**

### Issue 6 – Affected Environment

As of January 17, 2023, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed whitebark pine as a threatened species (Federal Register pp. 76882–76916) under the Endangered Species Act based on the 2018 Species Status Assessment (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2018). The assessment led scientists to conclude that after decades of decline, an estimated 51 percent of all standing whitebark pine trees were dead as of 2016. The Service determined that designation of critical habitat is not prudent at this time. The proposed listing included a “4(d) rule,” which allowed the Service to tailor protections and prohibitions pertinent to the specific conservation needs of a threatened species.

Whitebark pine is a five-needle pine species that is a slow-growing, long-lived tree with a lifespan up to 500 years and sometimes more than 1,000 years (Arno and Hoff 1989). It typically occurs on cold and windy sites from timberline down to the upper montane zone (Arno and Hoff 1989). Above tree line, it grows in a krummholz form, with stunted, shrub-like growth caused by high winds and cold temperatures (Arno and Hoff 1989). At higher elevations whitebark pine can occur in pure or nearly pure stands as a climax species.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Whitebark pine starts producing cones between 30 to 60 years of age but is dependent upon good canopy volume for a quality cone crop, which usually occurs between 125 and 250 years of age. Cone crop frequency is approximately every three to five years (Keane et al. 2012). As a keystone or foundation species it provides many valuable ecosystem services, such as stabilizing soils and regulating runoff by providing shade, which slows the rate of snowmelt (Tomback et al. 2016). Its ability to colonize and survive in poor soils and harsh environments can provide habitat that allows for a diversity of other species.

Whitebark pine is an important source of highly nutritious seeds for grizzly bears and many bird and mammal species (Lorenz et al. 2008; Keane et al. 2012). White bark pine seeds are nearly exclusively dispersed by Clark's nutcrackers (*Nucifraga columbiana*) (Hutchins and Lanner 1982; Tomback 1982; Keane et al. 2012), which are consequently major drivers of its distribution and population structure (Tomback and Linhart 1990). Clark's nutcrackers can transport and cache seeds up to a distance of 30 kilometers [18.6 miles] (Lorenz et al. 2008).

Whitebark pine typically occurs within cold forest and subalpine habitat just below alpine zone. It grows in areas with a wide range of precipitation, from about 20 to 100 inches per year (Arno and Hoff 1989). Whitebark pine may occur as a climax species, early successional species, or seral (mid-successional stage) codominant associated with other tree species. It is considered a keystone and foundation species in western North America, where it increases biodiversity and contributes to critical ecosystem functions (Tomback et al. 2001). As a pioneer or early successional species, it may be the first conifer to become established after disturbance, subsequently stabilizing soils and regulating runoff (Tomback et al. 2001). At higher elevations, snow drifts around whitebark pine trees, thereby increasing soil moisture, modifying soil temperatures, and holding soil moisture later into the season (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2018) thus essentially reducing spring flooding at lower elevations.

Because whitebark pine typically occurs on cold and windy high-elevation or high-latitude sites in western North America, many stands are geographically isolated (Arno and Hoff 1989; Keane et al. 2012). The Rocky Mountain distribution ranges from northern British Columbia and Alberta to Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Nevada (Arno and Hoff 1990; Keane et al. 2012), with extensive stands occurring in the Yellowstone ecosystem (McCaughy and Schmidt 2001). The Wind River Range in Wyoming represents the easternmost distribution of the species (Arno and Hoff 1990). Within the Forest Service's Northern Region (Region 1), there are over 5 million acres of potential whitebark pine habitat. In Idaho, there are over 1 million acres of potential whitebark pine habitat with approximately 385,000 acres occurring on National Forest System lands.

Whitebark pine mostly occurs above 4,600 feet in elevation on ridges and peaks in the headwaters of the major river basins. It has a fragmented distribution on narrow ridge-top bands of linear habitat that are challenging to access. Populations of whitebark pine have not been widely recorded and the forest has not established a maintained spatial data layer (Stamm, personal communication, January 25, 2022). Many recorded observations of whitebark pine are secondary and 'incidental' and anecdotal.

Whitebark pine appears to be undergoing a substantial and pervasive decline throughout almost its entire range (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2020). Primary threats include:

- **White pine blister rust**—a disease of five-needle pines caused by a non-native fungus. Its life cycle alternates between a primary host (five-needle pines) and alternate hosts, typically shrubs in the genus *Ribes* (gooseberries and currants). White pine blister rust attacks and kills trees of all



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

ages. Trees infected with white pine blister rust can have their reproductive capacity reduced prior to mortality because the fungus kills cone-bearing branches. An estimated 34 percent of whitebark pine's range is infected with white pine blister rust, a number modeled to rise under every scenario conducted (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2020).

- **Mountain pine beetle**—kills host trees to reproduce and is one of the principal sources of whitebark pine mortality (Arno and Hoff 1989; Logan and Powell 2001; Logan et al. 2010). Beetles preferentially attack large trees (Shanahan et al. 2016). This loss of mature whitebark pine further reduces seed production and reproductive capacity. At epidemic levels, mountain pine beetles can kill enough trees to become stand-replacing events (Gibson et al. 2008).
- **Fire severity**—high fire severity and habitat loss can threaten whitebark pine.
- **Climate change**—can act directly and synergistically with other threats. Climate change may lead to direct habitat loss (Hamann and Wang 2006; Aitken et al. 2008). Predicted increases in temperature may exceed whitebark pine's tolerance and may also make it possible for other conifer species to compete more effectively in habitats that were once too harsh to support them. As temperatures increase, soil moisture availability decreases, which may lead to drought stress. Drought-stressed trees are at risk for higher pine beetle attack than unstressed trees (Bentz et al. 2010). Warmer temperatures also mean increased winter survival of mountain pine beetles (Bentz and Schen-Langenheim 2007; Logan et al. 2010), expansion of their habitat into higher elevations (Gibson et al. 2008; Logan et al. 2010), and a shorter time interval for beetles to complete development (Gibson et al. 2008).

## Issue 6 – Effects Common to All Alternatives

Because alternatives are similar, most of the effects are described in this section. Main differences between alternatives are closure dates, west side of the upper Pack River closed to over-snow vehicle use year-round and eliminating grooming of the Cow Creek route. The varying areas of over-snow vehicle use would result in mostly small differences in degree of potential effects. Therefore, discussion of each alternative's effects includes specific differences and the basis for determinations.

The project area includes approximately 1,046,460 acres of National Forest System lands that would be divided into 10 over-snow vehicle areas. Mapped whitebark pine occurrences, including plus trees<sup>2</sup> and potential habitat are scattered throughout the proposed project areas.

A key consideration for whitebark pine trees in areas of over-snow vehicle use is protecting immature exposed trees so they can develop into cone-bearing individuals capable of sustaining the local population. In areas along edges of roads and trails (groomed and ungroomed) and areas open to off-trail over-snow vehicle use, incidental damage to whitebark pine seedlings and saplings may occur. Incidental impacts to whitebark pine seedlings and sapling would not be expected to cause mortality that would imperil the species' continued existence in the project areas. While such damage on National Forest System lands in the project areas has not been formally investigated, damage that could be attributed to over-snow vehicle use has not been observed in regeneration harvest stands or stands planted following

---

<sup>2</sup> Trees that researchers and foresters have identified as potentially being genetically resistant to blister rust.



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

large wildfires. Overall, areas open to over-snow vehicle use would not contribute to the four primary threats discussed above.

Winter motorized travel on National Forest System lands is subject to federal regulations related to damage of natural features on federally owned lands (Subpart A 36 CFR part 261.9). Additionally, the Forest Service has the authority to issue closure orders for areas where over-snow vehicles have damaged whitebark pine habitat, to prevent further damage, and to cite over-snow vehicle operators who cause such damage.

Over-snow vehicles may directly affect whitebark pine by physical damage (breakage of limbs, running over, abrasion of branches and terminal leader growth). Snow depth is the greatest factor that determines severity of damage. The deeper the snow, the more protected young trees such as seedlings and saplings are (Baker and Buthman 2005). Trees that are taller than the snow base and have live branches above the snow and exposed may result in damage to terminal leaders and potentially prevent them from growing taller or reaching seed-bearing maturity. Damage from over-snow vehicles would not likely create conditions that would contribute to worsening beetle infestations or blister rust infections.

Mountain pine beetle outbreaks often develop in dense stands of trees with close spacing and diameter at breast height greater than 8 inches and older than 80 years (Gibson et al. 2009; Negron et al. 2008). In contrast, blister rust infection occurs in trees of all ages and sizes (Larson 2011). Blister rust is a fungal pathogen that is transmitted to pines from spores produced on infected *Ribes* spp. leaves that infect pine needles in late summer and early fall (Shanahan et al. 2016). When a tree branch is broken, the breakage removes some photosynthetic material from the tree, but it does not increase likelihood of rust infection because spores infect trees by entering stomates on needles, not wounds (Schwandt et al. 2013). Additionally, branches closest to the ground are at greater risk for blister rust infection because environmental conditions are more favorable. Within the project area, over-snow use would occur when whitebark pine branches closest to the ground are below the snow layer.

Even though the project area covers 1,046,460 acres, existing and potential whitebark pine is limited in scale and would not make whitebark pine or its habitat more resistant or resilient to climate change. Whitebark pine trees are hardy, have flexible branches, and survive in harsh climatic conditions, seedling and sapling branches above the snow are unlikely to break if contact is made with an over-snow ski or track. These effects from direct physical damage would be low and not likely be of an intensity or magnitude to damage whitebark stands or result in loss of entire stands. Whitebark pine trees would continue to produce seed and propagate seedlings.

Potential indirect effects to whitebark pine from compaction is most likely to be concentrated in popular areas open to over-snow vehicle use and areas where repeated high marking occurs. Snow compaction could cause small magnitudes of change and result in delayed snowmelt and increased erosion in soils surrounding whitebark pine trees, particularly saplings and seedlings. These changes may affect individual trees but are not expected to affect stands of whitebark pine trees. Natural variations in snow compaction already exist due to severity of the winter and snow depth.

Airborne pollutants from over-snow vehicles would be concentrated along popular areas open to over-snow vehicle use. Whitebark pine trees retain their needles and are capable of photosynthesis and respiration during winter, but these processes are reduced during cold temperatures (Keane et al. 2017). Reduced respiration during winter would result in smaller amounts of airborne pollutants ingested through gas exchange. Pollutants trapped in the snow and released during snowmelt may or may not have



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

adverse and beneficial effects. However, even though the extent and bearing of specific effects is unknown, concentrations are likely to be low enough that water quality would not be impaired and whitebark pine trees would not be affected.

A cumulative effect can result from the incremental effect of the current action when added to effects of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions. Activities that may change landscape structure for whitebark pine trees and contribute to cumulative effects are those that impact seed sources, seed caching sites, pine beetle infestations, blister rust occurrence, shade-tolerant tree species abundance, whitebark pine abundance, and fire.

Cumulative effects analysis for whitebark pine can be challenging because of data describing past distribution and abundance, known stands, and degree of uncertainty from threats. On the Idaho Panhandle National Forests, stands of whitebark pine have not been widely recorded, so not all occurrences are documented. Activities that have cumulatively shaped the present landscape and whitebark pine within the project area include wildfires, fire suppression, fuels management, livestock grazing, mining, timber harvest, road and trail construction and maintenance, and public activities.

Past wildfires, mining, timber harvest, road, trail, and helipad construction and maintenance have created openings conducive to over-snow vehicle use especially in open areas adjacent to groomed roads and trails. Some of these areas have regenerated and would not be susceptible to seedling and sapling damage from over-snow vehicles. Past road and trail construction has provided a network of designated routes and areas accessible by over-snow vehicles.

Past, ongoing, and future action on private lands may also affect whitebark pine and habitat, although the extent of such effects is unknown. On National Forest System lands, there are approximately 18 projects on the Idaho Panhandle National Forest that are in the planning stage and several ongoing actions to be considered. These projects may create additional openings conducive to over-snow vehicle travel. Recent regeneration harvests adjacent to over-snow vehicle trails and roads may experience over-snow vehicle use. Ongoing and future projects would also likely create disturbance conducive to invasive weed spread. However, projects would include design features to reduce risk of weed spread from proposed activities.

Additional information on project effects, including methodology, may be found in the project botany report available in the project record and on the project webpage.

### **Issue 6 – Effects Specific to Proposed Action**

For detailed information of areas, open and closure date management strategies, over-snow vehicle trails and roads, and miles refer to the proposed action section. Within the 10 over-snow vehicle project areas, areas of existing occurrences and acres of potential whitebark pine habitat include:

**Purcells**—This area receives abundant snow, with ridgelines and slopes being a popular destination for snowmobile high marking. The project area is 70,081 acres, with 52,391 acres proposed open to over-snow vehicle use and 17,690 acres proposed closed to over-snow vehicle use. Existing whitebark pine is 3,133 acres (6 percent) and 17,478 acres (33 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat would be open to over-snow vehicle use.

**West Moyie**—This area receives less snow than higher elevations. Over-snow vehicle use is largely confined to forest system roads, except for a few open ridgelines. The project area is 69,665 acres



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

proposed open to over-snow vehicle use. Existing whitebark pine is 50 acres (less than 1 percent) and 4,498 acres (6 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat would be open to over-snow vehicle use.

**Boulder Creek/Katka**—This area is densely forested with over-snow vehicle use occurring on forest system roads, along ridges between Clifty and Katka Mountains and high marking in Boulder Meadows. The project area is 94,331 acres, with 81,933 acres proposed open to over-snow vehicle use and 12,398 acres proposed closed to over-snow vehicle use. Existing whitebark pine is 418 acres (0.5 percent) including plus trees, and 6,557 acres (8 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat would be open to over-snow vehicle use.

**Trestle/Lightning**—This area is a popular destination for over-snow vehicle use with the Moose Lake warming hut as a destination. It is densely forested in the lower elevations and receives large amounts of snow in the high elevations, where it opens to ridgelines and basins. The project area is 117,976 acres, with 82,261 acres proposed open to over-snow vehicle use and 35,716 acres proposed closed to over-snow vehicle use. Existing whitebark pine, is 847 acres (1 percent) including plus trees, and 17,926 acres (22 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat would be open to over-snow vehicle use.

**Bunco**—This area is densely forested in the lower elevations with the majority of use on forest system roads, both groomed and ungroomed. Packsaddle Mountain is a popular destination. The project area is 87,886 acres, with 86,276 acres proposed open to over-snow vehicle use and 1,610 acres proposed closed to over-snow vehicle use. Existing whitebark pine is 24 acres (less than 1 percent) and 745 acres (1 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat would be open to over-snow vehicle use.

**Scattered Lands**—This area is lower elevation and consists of isolated parcels of National Forest System land surrounded by private property. The elevation within the area ranges from 2,057 to 4,970 feet. The project area is 32,366 acres, with 28,692 acres proposed open to over-snow vehicle use and 3,673 acres proposed closed to over-snow vehicle use. There are no existing occurrences or potential habitat for whitebark pine within the Scattered Lands area.

**Lower Priest**—This area is heavily forested and much of the over-snow vehicle use occurs on forest system roads, many of which are part of a groomed route system. The project area is 120,413 acres, with 111,856 acres proposed open to over-snow vehicle use and 8,557 acres proposed closed to over-snow vehicle use. There are no acres of existing whitebark pine and 800 acres (1 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat would be open to over-snow vehicle use.

**Upper Priest**—This area receives abundant snowfall. Much of the area is forested with meadow complexes. The project area is 136,716 acres, with 128,460 acres proposed open to over-snow vehicle use and 8,256 acres proposed closed to over-snow vehicle use. Existing whitebark pine is 44 acres (0.03 percent) and 1,779 acres (1.4 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat would be open to over-snow vehicle use.

**North Selkirks**—This area has a large portion closed to over-snow vehicle use due to recommended wilderness, wild and scenic river, research natural areas, and wildlife habitat. The project area is 193,549 acres, with 33,637 acres proposed open to over-snow vehicle use and 159,913 proposed closed to over-snow vehicle use. There are 671 acres (2 percent) of existing whitebark pine, including plus trees and 9,974 acres (30 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat would be open to over-snow vehicle travel.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

**South Selkirks**—This area has portions closed to over-snow vehicle use due to recommended wilderness, research natural areas, quiet recreation, and wildlife. This area includes the Upper Pack River drainage and Roman Nose Mountain, which are popular destinations for over-snow vehicle use. The project area is 123,476 acres, with 104,014 acres proposed open to over-snow vehicle use and 19,462 acres proposed closed to over-snow vehicle use. There are 4,624 acres (4 percent) of existing whitebark pine, including plus trees and 25,749 acres (25 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat would be open to over-snow vehicle travel.

As discussed in the 10 project areas, acres of existing and potential whitebark pine in areas proposed to be open to over-snow vehicle use are relatively low. Effects on whitebark pine, as described under Effects Common to All Alternatives, may occur. Additionally, miles of trails and roads vary between the alternatives. Under the proposed action, there is 1 additional mile of groomed trails and roads, 770 more miles of ungroomed trails and roads open April 1 to May 31, and no ungroomed trails and roads open only from April 16 to May 31. There are 267,275 acres closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use year-round. Overall, within the 10 project areas open to over-snow vehicle use, there are 9,811 acres (1.3 percent) of existing and 85,506 acres (10 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat.

Under the proposed action, there would be no additional direct and indirect effects to whitebark pine beyond those described in Effects Common to All Alternatives. Areas open to over-snow vehicle use would not create conditions that would contribute to exacerbating whitebark pine stressors such as mountain pine beetle, fire severity, or habitat more resistant or resilient to climate change. Although white pine blister rust is present in whitebark pine in the project area, there are also mapped plus trees. The proposed action may result in loss of some incidental whitebark pine trees, but effects would be low. Overall, threats to whitebark pine are far greater from the four primary stressors than from potential incidental impacts of over-snow vehicle use.

Over-snow vehicle use on National Forest System lands is subject to federal regulations related to damage of natural features on federally owned lands (Subpart A 36 CRF part 261.9). The Forest Service has authority to issue closure orders for areas where whitebark pine damage has been caused by over-snow vehicle use or to prevent damage and cite over-snow vehicle users who cause damage. In addition, riding over trees, near large trees, or traveling over bare ground can cause serious injury to the rider and damage their equipment. This is a risk most riders are unlikely to take. Considering these factors and implementation of design features, the magnitude of potential direct and indirect effects to whitebark pine trees is expected to be immeasurably low and insignificant. For these reasons, the proposed action **may affect, likely to adversely affect** the continued existence of whitebark pine.

### Issue 6 – Effects Specific to Alternative A

Within the 10 over-snow vehicle project areas, areas of existing occurrences, and acres of potential whitebark pine habitat include:

**Purcells**—The project area is 70,081 acres, with 52,391 acres proposed open to over-snow vehicle use and 17,690 acres proposed closed to over-snow vehicle use. Existing whitebark pine is 3,133 acres (6 percent) and 17,478 acres (33 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat would be open to over-snow vehicle use.





## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

**West Moyie**—The project area is 69,665 acres, with 69,661 acres proposed open to over-snow vehicle use. Existing whitebark pine is 50 acres (less than 1 percent) and 4,498 acres (6 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat would be open to over-snow vehicle use.

**Boulder Creek/Katka**—The project area is 94,331 acres, with 81,933 acres proposed open to over-snow vehicle use and 12,398 acres closed to over-snow vehicle use. Existing whitebark pine is 418 acres (0.4 percent) including plus trees, and 6,557 acres (7 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat would be open to over-snow vehicle use.

**Trestle/Lightning**—The project area is 117,976 acres, with 82,260 acres proposed open to over-snow vehicle use and 35,716 acres proposed closed to over-snow vehicle use. Existing whitebark pine is 847 acres (1 percent) including plus trees, and 17,926 acres (22 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat would be open to over-snow vehicle use.

**Bunco**—The project area is 87,886 acres, with 86,276 acres proposed open to over-snow vehicle use and 1,610 acres proposed closed to over-snow vehicle use. Existing whitebark pine is 24 acres (less than 1 percent) and 745 acres (1 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat would be open to over-snow vehicle use.

**Scattered Lands**—The project area is 32,366 acres, with 28,692 acres proposed open to over-snow vehicle use and 3,673 acres proposed closed to over-snow vehicle use. There are no existing occurrences or potential habitat for whitebark pine within the Scattered Lands area.

**Lower Priest**—The project area is 120,413 acres, with 111,856 acres proposed open to over-snow vehicle use and 8,557 acres proposed closed to over-snow vehicle use. There are no acres of existing whitebark pine and 800 acres (1 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat would be open to over-snow vehicle use.

**Upper Priest**—The project area is 136,716 acres, with 128,459 acres proposed open to over-snow vehicle use and 8,256 acres proposed closed to over-snow vehicle use. Existing whitebark pine is 44 acres (0.03 percent) and 1,779 acres (1.4 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat would be open to over-snow vehicle use.

**North Selkirks**—The project area is 193,549 acres, with 33,637 acres proposed open to over-snow vehicle use and 159,913 proposed closed to over-snow vehicle use. There are 671 acres (2 percent) of existing whitebark pine, including plus trees, and 9,974 acres (30 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat would be open to over-snow vehicle travel.

**South Selkirks**—The project area is 123,476 acres, with 96,517 acres proposed open to over-snow vehicle use and 26,959 acres proposed closed to over-snow vehicle use. There are 2,481 acres (3 percent) of existing whitebark pine, including plus trees, and 19,963 acres (21 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat would be open to over-snow vehicle travel.

As discussed in the 10 project areas, acres of existing and potential whitebark pine in areas open to over-snow vehicle use are relatively low. Under alternative A, there is 1 less mile of groomed trails and roads, 772 less miles of ungroomed trails and roads open April 1 to May 31, and 647 miles of ungroomed trails and roads open only from April 16 to May 31. There are 275,823 acres closed to off-route over-snow vehicle use year-round. Overall, within the 10 project areas open to over-snow vehicle use, there are 7,668 acres (1 percent) of existing and 79,720 acres (10 percent) of potential whitebark pine habitat.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Besides these differences, there would be no additional direct and indirect effects to whitebark pine beyond those described in Effects Common to All Alternatives. Areas open to over-snow vehicle use would not create conditions that would contribute to exacerbating whitebark pine stressors such as mountain pine beetle, fire severity, or habitat more resistant or resilient to climate change. Although white pine blister rust is present in whitebark pine in the project area, there are also mapped plus trees. Alternative A may result in loss of some incidental whitebark pine trees, but effects would be low. Overall, threats to whitebark pine are far greater from the four primary stressors than from potential incidental impacts of over-snow vehicle use.

Over-snow vehicle use on National Forest System lands is subject to federal regulations related to damage of natural features on federally owned lands (Subpart A 36 CRF part 261.9). The Forest Service has authority to issue closure orders for areas where whitebark pine damage has been caused by over-snow vehicle use or to prevent damage and cite over-snow vehicle users who cause damage. In addition, riding over trees, near large trees, or traveling over bare ground can cause serious injury to the rider and damage to their equipment. This is a risk most riders are unlikely to take.

Considering these factors and implementation of design features, the magnitude of potential direct and indirect effects to whitebark pine trees is expected to be immeasurably low and insignificant. For these reasons, alternative A **may affect, likely to adversely affect** the continued existence of whitebark pine.

## Law, Regulation, and Policy Consistency

### **National Forest Management Act – Land Management Plan Consistency**

We developed the Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation project to be consistent with the 2015 Idaho Panhandle National Forests' Revised Land Management Plan. The proposed action and alternative A were developed by an interdisciplinary team guided by management direction, recommendations, forest leadership intent, additional data, local knowledge, on-the-ground field verification, and internal and external scoping.

The land management plan allocated lands to management areas. The project area includes lands within wilderness; recommended wilderness; primitive lands; eligible wild and scenic rivers; botanical, geological, pioneer, recreational, or scenic areas; research natural areas; experimental forests; backcountry; general forest; and primary recreation management areas. Additionally, the land management plan retained the Inland Native Fish Strategy, Grizzly Bear Access Amendment, and Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction.

The pertinent specialists have reviewed the proposed action and alternative A including design features and found the project is consistent with the standards and guidelines in the land management plan. Where needed, we incorporated land management plan management direction into the purpose and need and design features (*Appendix A – Design Features*) to ensure the project is consistent with the land management plan. We prepared a land management plan consistency checklist to document consistency with the 2015 Idaho Panhandle National Forests' Revised Land Management Plan. This checklist is included in the project record.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

### **Travel Management Rule (36 CFR 212)**

In 2005, the U.S. Forest Service adopted the Travel Management Rule, which requires national forests to designate roads, trails, and areas for motor vehicle use. The objective of the Travel Management Rule is not to unnecessarily limit access to the forest, but to protect it from unmanaged use. The Forest Service must strike a balance in managing all types of recreational activities. To this end, a designated system of roads, trails, and areas for motor vehicle use, established with public involvement, will enhance public enjoyment of the national forests while maintaining other important values and uses on National Forest System lands. The *Introduction* and *Proposed Action: What are we proposing to do?* sections of this document describe the Travel Management Rule further.

To inform the decision, the project interdisciplinary team completed travel analysis. Travel analysis assesses the current forest transportation system and identifies issues and assesses benefits, problems, and risks to inform decisions related to designation of roads, trails and areas for motor vehicle use per 36 CFR Part 212.51. Travel analysis is not a decision-making process. Rather, travel analysis informs decisions relating to administration of the forest transportation system and helps to identify proposals for changes in travel management direction. For more information and details on the travel analysis completed for this project, see the travel analysis process report available in the project record and on the project webpage.

As described in the *Proposed Action: What are we proposing to do?* section, to ensure compliance with the Travel Management Rule's designation requirements, the project interdisciplinary team completed a minimization criteria screening exercise. Documentation of this screening exercise is available for public comment on the project webpage.

### **Endangered Species Act**

Table 15 summarizes effect determinations for species listed as threatened, endangered, proposed, or candidate under the Endangered Species Act. For detailed analysis, see *Issue 5. Over-snow vehicle use will negatively affect wildlife* and *Issue 6. Over-snow vehicle use will negatively affect whitebark pine* and the project wildlife report and botany report, available in the project record and on the project webpage.

The Idaho Panhandle National Forests has engaged in early coordination with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and will complete consultation under section 7 of the Endangered Species Act prior to implementation.

### **Sensitive Species (Forest Service Manual 2670)**

#### **Botany**

Forest Service sensitive species determinations for botanical species are the same for the proposed action and alternative A. Determinations were drawn from considering available information about species distribution, biology and life history; plant communities and habitats within the proposed action area; expected effects and scope of proposed activities; design features incorporated into the project; issues identified with scoping; cumulative effects within the analysis area; and relevant laws, regulations, and policies.

Sensitive botanical species that occur in areas open to over-snow vehicle use on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests may be directly or indirectly affected. However, the magnitude of direct and indirect effects is expected to be low enough that they would not cause significant negative impacts to sensitive



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

botanical species. The proposed action and alternative A may impact individuals but is not likely to result in a trend toward federal listing or loss of viability for the following botanical sensitive species:

*Andromeda polifolia*, *Asplenium trichomanes*, *Betula pumila* v. *glandulifera*, *Blechnum spicant*, *Botrychium ascendens*, *Botrychium crenulatum*, *Botrychium lanceolatum* var. *lanceolatum*, *Botrychium lineare*, *Botrychium minganense*, *Botrychium montanum*, *Botrychium paradoxum*, *Botrychium pedunculatum*, *Botrychium pinnatum*, *Botrychium simplex*, *Buxbaumia aphylla*, *Buxbaumia viridis*, *Carex buxbaumii*, *Carex chordorrhiza*, *Carex comosa*, *Carex flava*, *Carex leptalea*, *Carex magellanica* ssp. *irrigua*, *Cicuta bulbifera*, *Cypripedium fasciculatum*, *Cypripedium parviflorum* var. *pubescens*, *Drosera intermedia*, *Dryopteris cristata*, *Epilobium palustre*, *Epipactis gigantea*, *Eriophorum viridicarinatum*, *Gaultheria hispidula*, *Grimmia brittoniae*, *Hookeria lucens*, *Hypericum majus*, *Iris versicolor*, *Lycopodiella inundata*, *Lycopodium dendroideum*, *Meesia longiseta*, *Orobancha pinorum*, *Phegopteris connectilis*, *Polystichum braunii*, *Rhizomnium nudum*, *Rhynchospora alba*, *Salix candida*, *Salix pedicellaris*, *Scheuchzeria palustris*, *Schoenoplectus subterminalis*, *Sphagnum mendocinum*, *Streptopus streptopoides*, *Symphytotrichum boreale*, *Thelypteris nevadensis*, *Triantha occidentalis* ssp. *brevistyla*, *Trichophorum alpinum*, *Trientalis arctica*, and *Vaccinium oxycoccos*.

For more information, see the project botany report available in the project record and on the project webpage.

### Wildlife

We conducted a preliminary analysis for each potentially affected wildlife species and their habitat to determine the scope of project analysis. We identified and categorized potential effects, by relevant species, based on habitat relationships, scientific literature on effects associated with motorized access and the proposed alternatives. The Council on Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1502.2) directs agencies to discuss impacts in proportion to their significance. Some wildlife species require a detailed analysis and discussion to determine effects. Others may not be impacted, impacted at a level that is inconsequential, or impacts are adequately avoided or mitigated through the design of the project. Generally, these elements do not require a detailed discussion and analysis.

Most of the wildlife Regional Forester Sensitive Species on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests were dismissed from further analysis due to lack of expected effects: the species would not be present or would be inactive during the period of over-snow vehicle use proposed. A no impact determination was made for: American peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus anatum*), black swift (*Cypseloides niger*), common loon (*Gavia immer*), flammulated owl (*Otus flammeolus*), harlequin duck (*Histrionicus histrionicus*), pygmy nuthatch (*Sitta pygmaea*), fringed myotis (*Myotis thysanodes*), Townsend's big-eared bat (*Corynorhinus townsendii*), Coeur d'Alene salamander (*Plethodon vandykei idahoensis*), and western toad (*Bufo boreas*).

Other sensitive wildlife may be affected at a level that does not increase risk to the species, or effects have been adequately mitigated by altering the design of the project. It was determined that the proposal may impact individuals but is not likely to result in a trend toward federal listing or loss of viability for bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), black-backed woodpecker (*Picoides arcticus*), fisher (*Martes pennanti*), and gray wolf (*Canis lupus*). See the wildlife report (available in the project record and on the project webpage) for a brief analysis and discussion of these, as well as rationale for no impact determinations. Sensitive species determinations for wildlife species are the same for the proposed action and alternative A.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

**Table 15. Threatened, endangered, proposed or candidate species and critical habitat effect determinations**

Species/Habitat	Status	Proposed or Designated Critical Habitat Present?	Determination	Brief Rationale (or refer to other project documentation)
Whitebark pine	Threatened	No	LAA	See botany report in the project record
Southern mountain caribou distinct population segment	Endangered	Yes	NLAA	See wildlife report in the project record
Grizzly bear	Threatened	No	LAA	See wildlife report in the project record
Canada lynx	Threatened	Yes	NLAA	See wildlife report in the project record
Yellow-billed cuckoo	Threatened	No	NE	See wildlife report in the project record
North American wolverine	Proposed Threatened	No	No Jeopardy	See wildlife report in the project record
White sturgeon	Endangered	No	NE	See fish report in project record
Bull trout	Threatened	Yes	NE	See fish report in project record

NE – no effect; NLAA – may affect, not likely to adversely affect; LAA – may affect, likely to adversely affect; No Jeopardy - not likely to jeopardize the continued existence or adversely modify critical habitat.

### Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act

The Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act of 1940, as amended, prohibits anyone, without a permit issued by the Secretary of the Interior, from “taking” bald eagles, including their parts, nests, or eggs. The act defines “take” as “pursue, shoot, shoot at, poison, wound, kill, capture, trap, collect, molest or disturb.” Disturb means “to agitate or bother a bald or golden eagle to a degree that causes, or is likely to cause, based on the best scientific information available, (1) injury to an eagle; (2) a decrease in its productivity, by substantially interfering with normal breeding, feeding, or sheltering behavior; or (3) nest abandonment, by substantially interfering with normal breeding, feeding, or sheltering behavior.”

Golden eagles are relatively uncommon in the project area, and we are unaware of any golden eagle nest locations.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service developed National Bald Eagle Management Guidelines (U.S. Department of the Interior 2007) to advise landowners, land managers, and others when and under what circumstances the protective provisions of the act may apply to their activities. A variety of human activities can potentially interfere with bald eagles, affecting their ability to forage, nest, roost, breed, or raise young. The guidelines are intended to help people minimize such impacts to bald eagles, particularly where they may constitute “disturbance.”

Within the project area, bald eagles may take part in nest building, egg laying and incubation, and hatching and rearing young activities during the time period over-snow vehicle use is authorized. None of the proposed activities would authorize alteration of habitat in any way. Potential effects would be limited to disturbance of nesting or roosting individuals. The proposed activities fall under guidelines for



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

“Category D – Off-road vehicle use (including snowmobiles),” and recommend no operation of off-road vehicles within 330 feet (100 meters) of a nest during the breeding season and increasing this distance to 660 feet (200 meters) in “open areas.”

Within the project area, all currently known bald eagle nests on National Forest System lands are on the shores of Priest Lake, Lake Pend Oreille, or along the Kootenai River. They are generally well-protected on the landward side by dense timber (with open water on the “open area” side). These sites are usually difficult (or impossible) to reach via over-snow vehicle because of existing vegetation and often steep slopes leading down to the water’s edge that do not retain deep snow. As a result, the nests are naturally buffered by more than 100 meters (330 feet) in every instance. Since over-snow vehicle use would be consistent with the recommended guidelines for bald eagle nest protection, this proposal complies with the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act.

### **Migratory Bird Treaty Act and Executive Order 13186, Migratory Birds**

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act, as amended, made the taking, killing, or possessing of migratory birds unlawful. Executive Order 13186 of 2001 clarified the responsibilities of federal agencies regarding migratory bird conservation and directed agencies to evaluate the effects of federal actions on migratory birds with an emphasis on species of conservation concern. The Executive order also directed federal agencies to develop a memorandum of understanding with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding their role with respect to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

In December 2008, the Forest Service entered into a memorandum of understanding with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that further clarified the responsibility of the Forest Service to protect migratory birds (U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of the Interior 2008). The memorandum of understanding was most recently extended indefinitely on December 15, 2022. In the memorandum of understanding the Forest Service agreed to consider the most up-to-date U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service list of Birds of Conservation Concern (U.S. Department of the Interior 2008b) when developing or amending land management plans, and to evaluate the effects of agency actions on migratory birds within the NEPA analysis process, focusing first on species of management concern along with their priority habitat and key risk factors. For the Idaho Panhandle National Forests, the bird species of management concern include those species designated as sensitive species.

We do not expect considerable effects to migratory birds from the proposed activities (or over-snow vehicle use in general) because they would rarely be present in the planning area when this use takes place. There may occasionally be resident individuals of migratory bird species present during the winter months (such as Canada geese), or migrating individuals present in the area during the late-season over-snow vehicle use period. However, habitats used by these individuals are generally open water or bare ground where it is unlikely over-snow vehicle use would be occurring at these times.

The memorandum of understanding discussed previously requires the Forest Service to “consider approaches, to the extent practicable, for identifying and minimizing take that is incidental to otherwise lawful activities, including such approaches as: 1. altering the season of activities to minimize disturbances during the breeding season;...and 4. giving due consideration to key wintering areas, migration routes, and stop-overs.” Since late-season (after March 31) over-snow vehicle use would be greatly restricted from the current condition, disturbance of nesting birds would be minimized during the early portion of the nesting season. The Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project is compliant with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

### **National Historic Preservation Act – Section 106 Review**

The National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, directs all federal agencies to take into account the effects of their undertakings (actions, financial support, and authorizations) on properties included in or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

There are 493 known listed, eligible, and unevaluated sites within the area of potential effect that have been identified as potentially above snow and could be impacted by over-snow travel. Historic habitations, mining sites, and bridges are the largest categories of sites that could be above snow level. Over-snow vehicle travel could impact sites if portions of sites above the snow are traveled by over-snow vehicles or used as play structures. Currently, public over-snow vehicle use occurs in the project area in areas without existing closures or other prohibitions. Both the proposed action and alternative A would reduce effects to heritage resources by limiting over-snow vehicle use to designated trails and open areas. Requiring groomed trails to have 14 inches of snow before grooming would also reduce potential impacts to sites.

Through a “good faith effort” (36 CFR 800.4(b)(1)) of the analysis of known heritage properties within the proposed project area, potential adverse effects to those properties were identified and mitigated through project redesign. Therefore, there would be no adverse effects to historic properties (36 CFR 800.5(b)). The forest will complete consultation with the Idaho, Montana, and Washington State Historic Preservation Officers, and tribes as required by the National Historic Preservation Act.

More detailed information on potential impacts to cultural resources is included in the project heritage resources report available in the project record.

### **Inventoried Roadless Areas**

In 2001 the Forest Service adopted the Roadless Area Conservation Rule (2001 Roadless Rule; 36 CFR 294) to protect and conserve inventoried roadless areas on National Forest System lands. The rule prohibits road construction, reconstruction, and timber harvest in inventoried roadless areas.

The 2008 Idaho Roadless Rule (36 CFR 294 Subpart C) designated 250 Idaho Roadless Areas and established five management themes that provide prohibitions with exceptions or conditioned permissions governing road construction, timber cutting, and discretionary mineral development. The 2008 Idaho Roadless Rule superseded the 2001 Roadless Rule for National Forest System lands in the State of Idaho. The Idaho Roadless Rule does not affect existing roads or trails in Idaho Roadless Areas and decisions concerning the future management of existing roads or trails shall be made during the applicable travel management process (36 CFR 294.26(a)).



*Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

**Table 16. General trend of over-snow vehicle management within each inventoried roadless area under the proposed action and alternative A as compared to the existing condition**

<b>Inventoried Roadless Area</b>	<b>Existing Condition</b>	<b>Proposed Action</b>	<b>Alternative A</b>	<b>Proposed Action and Alternative A are More or Less Restrictive?</b>
Beetop	Open to over-snow vehicle travel	Closes western edge and adds seasonal restriction	Closes western edge and adds seasonal restriction. Less restriction in upper portion.	More restrictive than existing
Blacktail Mountain #122	Open to over-snow vehicle travel except research natural area is closed	Seasonal restriction and research natural area closed to over-snow vehicle travel	Seasonal restriction and research natural closed to over-snow vehicle travel	More restrictive than existing
Blacktail Mountain #161	Open to over-snow vehicle travel	Open to over-snow vehicle travel	Open to over-snow vehicle travel	Stable
Buckhorn Ridge	Open to over-snow vehicle travel	Closed except for northern most portion open with seasonal restriction.	Closed except for northern most portion open with seasonal restriction.	More restrictive than existing
Continental Mountain	Closed to over-snow vehicle travel	Closed to over-snow vehicle travel	Closed to over-snow vehicle travel	Stable
Hellroaring	Open to over-snow vehicle travel	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel. Longer season than proposed action	More restrictive than existing
Katka Peak	Open to over-snow vehicle travel	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel	More restrictive than existing
Kootenai Peak	Open to over-snow vehicle travel except small western portion closed	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel with a small portion open longer	More restrictive than existing
Magee	Open to over-snow vehicle travel	Open to over-snow vehicle travel	Open to over-snow vehicle travel	Stable
Willard – Lake Estelle	Open to over-snow vehicle travel except research natural area is closed	Entirely closed except for mapping discrepancies resulting in a few acres still open along the road	Entirely closed except for mapping discrepancies resulting in a few acres still open along the road	More restrictive than existing
Packsaddle	Open to over-snow vehicle travel	Open to over-snow vehicle travel	Open to over-snow vehicle travel	Stable
Saddle Mountain	Closed to over-snow vehicle travel	Southern half open seasonally, remaining half closed to over-snow vehicle travel	Southern half open seasonally, remaining half closed to over-snow vehicle travel	Less restrictive than existing
Salmo-Priest	Closed to over-snow vehicle travel	Closed to over-snow vehicle travel	Closed to over-snow vehicle travel	Stable





Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Inventoried Roadless Area	Existing Condition	Proposed Action	Alternative A	Proposed Action and Alternative A are More or Less Restrictive?
Schafer Peak	Open to over-snow vehicle travel	Open to over-snow vehicle travel except small southwest portion closed year-round	Open to over-snow vehicle travel except small southwest portion closed year-round	More restrictive than existing
Scotchman Peaks	About one-third of the inventoried roadless area (IRA) is open to over-snow vehicle travel	Closes a portion of the IRA along the southwest IRA boundary, which is outside the recommended wilderness	Closes a portion of the IRA along the southwest IRA boundary, which is outside the recommended wilderness.	More restrictive than existing
Selkirk	Almost entirely closed to over-snow vehicle travel except portions on northeast edges and southern end	Seasonally opens areas that were previously closed along the north end and near Kootenai Peak. Closes northwest edges to over-snow vehicle travel.	Seasonally opens areas that were previously closed along the north end and near Kootenai Peak. Closes northwest edges to over-snow vehicle travel.	Stable
Trestle Peak	Open to over-snow vehicle travel	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel except very small area closed	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel with extended season except very small area closed.	More restrictive than existing
Upper Priest	Mostly closed to over-snow vehicle travel	Seasonally opens half of inventoried roadless area to over-snow vehicle travel. Remaining area closed to over-snow vehicle travel.	Seasonally opens half of inventoried roadless area to over-snow vehicle travel. Remaining area closed to over-snow vehicle travel.	Less restrictive than existing
White Mountain	Open to over-snow vehicle travel	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel	More restrictive than existing
Grassy Top	Mostly closed to over-snow vehicle travel except small portion along eastern edge is open	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel except small area closed near Granite Falls trailhead	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel except small area closed near Granite Falls trailhead	Less restrictive than existing
Little Grass Mountain	Approximately half of inventoried roadless area is closed to over-snow vehicle travel	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel	Less restrictive than existing
Northwest Peaks	Open to over-snow vehicle travel	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel	More restrictive than existing



Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Inventoried Roadless Area	Existing Condition	Proposed Action	Alternative A	Proposed Action and Alternative A are More or Less Restrictive?
Hungry Mountain	Open to over-snow vehicle travel	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel, with extended season in southern portion	More restrictive than existing
South Fork Mountain	Open to over-snow vehicle travel except sliver on western edge is closed	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel	Seasonally open to over-snow vehicle travel	More restrictive than existing

There are 24 inventoried roadless areas, totaling approximately 327,519 acres, within the project area. The following inventoried roadless areas are located within the project area: Beetop, Blacktail Mountain #122, Blacktail Mountain #161, Buckhorn Ridge, Continental Mountain, Grassy Top, Hellroaring, Hungry Mountain, Katka Peak, Kootenai Peak, Little Grass Mountain, approximately 18 acres of Magee, Northwest Peaks, Packsaddle, Saddle Mountain, Salmo-Priest, Schafer Peak, Scotchman Peaks, Selkirk, South Fork Mountain, Trestle Peak, Upper Priest, White Mountain, and Willard – Lake Estelle. Refer to appendix C of the land management plan for a comprehensive description of each inventoried roadless area.

Table 16 summarizes the general trend of over-snow vehicle management within each inventoried roadless area under the proposed action and alternative A as compared to the existing condition. Over-snow vehicle travel would have no effect to a negligible effect on the undeveloped character of roadless areas, no effect on the manageability of the roadless expanse or future wilderness character, and no effect on unique geological or scenic features. Individual plants and animals may be impacted by over-snow vehicle travel in roadless areas; however, we expect an overall stable trend for these populations under the proposed action and alternative A. The effects from the proposed action and alternative A on soil, water, and sources of public drinking water would not create a declining trend for the natural quality of future wilderness potential. There would be no effect to air quality. Both the proposed action and alternative A would sustain a stable trend in the natural attribute for future wilderness potential. Over-snow vehicle use within roadless areas would result in an overall stable trend in opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation under both the proposed action and alternative A.

Both the proposed action and alternative A would result in a stable trend for wilderness attributes. The shift of seasons between alternatives makes a negligible difference on impacts to the naturalness or primitive and unconfined recreation. Over-snow vehicle use within roadless areas would result in short-term impacts to primitive recreation opportunities; however, this would not preclude future recovery of this attribute for possible wilderness designation.

For more information, see the roadless areas report available in the project record and on the project webpage.



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

### **Special Management Areas**

The project area includes approximately 88,858 acres of designated or recommended wilderness, including the Salmo-Priest Wilderness Area and the Salmo-Priest, Scotchman Peaks, and Selkirk recommended wilderness areas. The land management plan does not allow over-snow vehicle use within wilderness or recommended wilderness (MA1a-STD-AR-02, MA1b-STD-AR-02).

The project area includes 12,433 acres of river segments identified as eligible (but not designated) for inclusion as part of the Wild and Scenic Rivers System under the authority granted by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, as amended. Eligible wild river segments within the project area include Upper Priest River segment 1, Hughes Fork segment 1, and Long Canyon Creek segment 1. Eligible recreational river segments within the project area include Pack River segment 1, Hughes Fork segment 2, and Kootenai River segment 6. The land management plan states that additional routes and areas should not be designated for motor vehicle use in eligible wild river segments (MA2b-GDL-AR-01).

The project area includes 10,064 acres of special areas (botanical, geological, pioneer, and scenic areas). These areas include Bath Creek Gorge Geological Area, Hanna Flats Botanical Area, Huff Lake Botanical Area, Roosevelt Cedar Groves/Granite Falls Scenic Area, Upper Priest Lake Scenic Area, and Upper Priest River Botanical Area within the Priest Lake Ranger District and Copper Falls Geological Area and Northwest Peaks Scenic Area within Bonners Ferry Ranger District. The land management plan does not allow over-snow vehicle use within botanical, geological, pioneer, or scenic areas (except the Northwest Peaks Scenic Area) (MA3-STD-AR-02).

The project area includes 9,652 acres of research natural areas and 4,987 acres of experimental forest. Research natural areas in the project area include Binarch Creek, Bottle Lake, Canyon Creek, Kaniksu Marsh, Potholes, Round Top Mountain, Snowy Top, Tepee Creek, Upper Priest River, and Wellner Cliffs within Priest Lake Ranger District, Hunt Girl Creek, Smith Creek, and Three Ponds within Bonners Ferry Ranger District, and Scotchman #2 within Sandpoint Ranger District. The land management plan does not allow over-snow vehicle use within research natural areas (MA4a-STD-AR-01). The Priest River experimental forest is located within the project area and over-snow vehicle use is limited to designated roads and trails (MA4b-STD-AR-01).

The project would comply with all special management area requirements, see table 17 for rationale.



### Clean Air Act

The Clean Air Act of 1970, as amended, regulates air emissions from stationary and mobile sources and authorizes the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to establish national ambient air quality standards to protect public health and welfare and to regulate emissions of hazardous air pollutants. The Environmental Protection Agency has established national ambient air quality standards for six criteria pollutants, lead, ozone, carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide, and particulate matter (particulate matter smaller than 10 microns in diameter [PM<sub>10</sub>] and particulate matter smaller than 2.5 microns in diameter [PM<sub>2.5</sub>]). Additionally, the Clean Air Act requires that state, local, federal, and tribal governments implement the act in partnership. States and tribes submit recommendations to the Environmental Protection Agency as to whether an area is attaining the national ambient air quality standards for criteria pollutants. Areas that meet or exceed the national standard for a pollutant are designated as “attainment” areas for that pollutant. Areas that do not meet the national standard for a pollutant are designated as “nonattainment” areas for that specific pollutant. To improve air quality, states must draft a state implementation plan to improve air quality in nonattainment areas. Once a nonattainment area meets the standards and additional redesignation requirements in the Clean Air Act, the Environmental Protection Agency designates the area as a “maintenance area.” Nonattainment and maintenance areas are further classified as “marginal,” “moderate,” “severe,” or “extreme.”

Table 17. Special management area compliance determinations

Management Area Type	Applicable Law / Regulation to Demonstrate Compliance With	Rationale for Compliance
Wilderness and recommended wilderness	Wilderness Act	Neither the proposed action nor alternative A propose over-snow vehicle use in wilderness or recommended wilderness.
Eligible wild and scenic rivers	Wild and Scenic Rivers Act	Neither the proposed action nor alternative A would designate additional over-snow vehicle trails or areas beyond the existing condition in eligible wild and scenic river corridors. The project would not significantly impact the outstandingly remarkable values of these eligible river segments. See individual resource analysis and reports for analysis of impacts to recreation, wildlife, vegetation, and hydrology.
Botanical, geological, pioneer, and scenic areas	National Forest Management Act	Neither the proposed action nor alternative A propose over-snow vehicle use in botanical, geological, or pioneer areas. The Northwest Peaks Scenic Area is the only scenic area in which over-snow vehicle use is proposed, in accordance with the land management plan.
Research natural areas	National Forest Management Act; 36 CFR 251.23	Neither the proposed action nor alternative A propose over-snow vehicle use in research natural areas.
Experimental forest	National Forest Management Act; 36 CFR 251.23	Both the proposed action and alternative A propose over-snow vehicle use in the Priest River experimental forest on designated trails and roads. Off-route travel would be prohibited in the experimental forest.



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Section 176(C) of the Clean Air Act prohibits federal agencies from carrying out, funding, or permitting any activity in a nonattainment or maintenance area “which does not conform to an implementation plan after it has been approved or promulgated” (42 U.S.C. 7506). This is known as the General Conformity rule; under General Conformity, federal agencies must work with state, tribal, and local governments in nonattainment and maintenance areas to ensure that federal actions conform to established air quality implementation plans. Federal actions that result in the emission of air pollutants in attainment areas or undesignated areas are not subject to the requirements of the General Conformity rule.

The criteria air pollutants produced by over-snow vehicles are carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, PM<sub>10</sub>, PM<sub>2.5</sub>, and sulfur dioxide in small amounts and hazardous air pollutants. The burning of fossil fuels also produces volatile organic compounds that are precursor compounds and under certain conditions when combined with nitrogen dioxide produce ozone. The Sandpoint maintenance area is located inside the project area in Bonner County, and the Shoshone County maintenance area is adjacent to the southeast portion of the project area in Shoshone County. Both areas are classified as moderate for the 1987 PM<sub>10</sub> standard and they are currently in maintenance status. The rest of the project area is at attainment for all criteria air pollutants.

The amounts of criteria air pollutants produced by over-snow vehicles in the project area are insignificant when compared to all other sources. Over-snow vehicle use in the project area would neither significantly affect the status of the nonattainment areas nor increase the likelihood that new areas would be classified as nonattainment. Over-snow vehicle emissions are captured in the national emissions inventory for the nonattainment areas, and therefore, the project emissions would comply with the Clean Air Act and General Conformity requirements.

For more information, see the air quality analysis available in the project record and on the project webpage.

## **Clean Water Act**

The 2022 Idaho Integrated Report (IDEQ 2022) was developed by the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality and approved by the Environmental Protection Agency in 2022. This document identifies the water quality status of every stream and lake in the project area, and identifies whether it is impaired or not, and if so, which pollutants are present. A subset of the waterbodies in the project area is identified as category 4a waters, which indicate a total maximum daily load has been completed. The total maximum daily load assigns load reduction targets to lands managed by the Forest Service to restore and protect beneficial uses. Most waterbodies within the project area are not impaired and have high water quality. Of the subset of waterbodies that are impaired, the most common impairments and total maximum daily loads found in project area waterbodies address water temperature, sediment, and a few streams impaired by heavy metals from past mining activities.

The temperature total maximum daily loads for streams in the project area identifies the streamside potential natural vegetation providing shade to the creeks and identifies where shade may be lacking. Preserving or improving riparian shade and restoring natural channel widths are recommended as the primary activities for implementation of the temperature total maximum daily load.

Sediment total maximum daily loads specify load reductions that typically come from ground-disturbing activities, such as native surface roads or other land uses that can increase erosion.



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

No waterbodies within the project area are known to be listed as impaired, nor have total maximum daily loads been developed due directly or indirectly to over-snow vehicle use.

The project would be consistent with the requirements of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act as amended by the Clean Water Act, 33 U.S.C. 1251. Water temperature would not increase in the temperature total maximum daily load stream segments in the project area because of implementation of any alternative or any of the foreseeable actions. Continued over-snow vehicle use is not expected to significantly reduce shade-providing riparian vegetation. The areas along project area streams identified as shade deficit segments in the total maximum daily loads would continue to grow and mature thus providing additional shade over time.

Continued over-snow vehicle use is not expected to increase erosion or sediment delivery because over-snow vehicles operate on a protective blanket of snow and do not disturb ground cover. We assume the majority of over-snow vehicle use would occur during periods of sufficient snow depth because the vehicles do not operate properly without sufficient snow depth and the expensive machines are prone to damage when they strike rocks, stumps, and other obstacles not covered by snow. While some riders may operate over-snow vehicles in areas with insufficient snow where the machine could directly impact soils and vegetation, we assume this would be relatively infrequent and would not disturb a large enough area to lead to significant sediment contributions to area waterbodies. As discussed in the hydrology analysis document (available in the project record), the lack of ground disturbance from continued over-snow vehicle use is not expected to increase sediment delivery in any project area waterbody, which would comply with all sediment total maximum daily loads applicable to project area waters.

For more information see the hydrology analysis available in the project record and on the project webpage.

### **Pertinent Executive Orders**

The responsible official and applicable specialists determined the proposed action and alternative A comply with the following Executive orders, which were deemed pertinent based on the nature of the project:

#### **Executive Order 11988, Floodplain Management**

Executive Order 11988 requires that federal agencies “avoid to the extent possible the long- and short-term adverse impacts associated with the occupancy and modification of floodplains and to avoid direct or indirect support of floodplain development wherever there is a practicable alternative.” The project does not propose modification or development within floodplains and is thus in compliance with Executive Order 11988.

#### **Executive Order 11990, Protection of Wetlands**

Executive Order 11990 directs federal agencies to “minimize the destruction, loss or degradation of wetlands, and to preserve and enhance the natural and beneficial values of wetlands.” The project is not expected to adversely impact wetlands and would thus comply with Executive Order 11990.



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

### **Executive Order 12898, Environmental Justice**

Executive Order 12898, issued in 1994, requires federal agencies to identify and address any adverse human health and environmental effects of agency programs that disproportionately impact minority and low-income populations.

Four of the counties in the project area have a greater percentage of people below the poverty rate than for their respective states. Boundary County, Idaho, stands out with 20.4 percent of people living in poverty, compared to the 11.9 percent average in Idaho (U.S. DOC 2022). For purposes of this analysis, an environmental justice population is a county with rates of minorities or people living in poverty greater than five percentage points above the rates for their respective states. Based on the poverty data presented above, Boundary County, Idaho, is considered an environmental justice population. There are no environmental justice communities based on minority status.

Poor communities often rely on forest products for food and firewood to heat their homes. The restrictions to over-snow vehicle use after April 1 under the action alternatives only limit off-route travel in some areas. There are still roads and trails open to over-snow vehicle use after March 31. By April, lower-elevation roads and trails are readily accessible by wheeled vehicle and while medium-elevation roads and trails may be difficult to drive with a wheeled vehicle, they are likely even more difficult to access by over-snow vehicle due to inconsistency of snow cover. For firewood and game collection, a wheeled vehicle is often preferred over a snowmobile. Most edible game species are found below the snowpack in spring and are not legally hunted during this time. Therefore, subsistence use of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests would not be affected under the action alternatives. If anything, the poor communities would benefit from the action alternatives, as they propose more miles of groomed trails than the existing condition, making it easier to access food and firewood from the forest. Therefore, there are likely no adverse human health and environmental effects that disproportionately impact the minority or low-income populations.

More information on environmental justice can be found in the socioeconomics analysis available in the project record and on the project webpage.

### **Executive Order 13007, Indian Sacred Sites**

Executive Order 13007, issued in 1996, directs federal land management agencies to accommodate access to and use of Indian sacred sites, to avoid affecting the physical integrity of such sites wherever possible, and, where appropriate, to maintain the confidentiality of sacred sites. Federal agencies are required to establish a process to assure that the affected Indian tribes are provided reasonable notice of proposed Federal actions or policies that may affect Indian sacred sites.

The area within the project effects boundary contains no established sacred sites, nor has the forest received any requests for consultation on sacred sites.

### **Executive Order 13175, Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments**

Executive Order 13175, issued in 2000, states there should be a process to ensure meaningful and timely input in the development of regulatory policies that have tribal implications.

The Idaho Panhandle National Forests sent letters, dated February 22, 2022, to the Coeur d'Alene Tribe, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Indian Reservation, Kalispel Tribe of Indians,



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

and Kootenai Tribe of Idaho inviting consultation on the project. Additionally, forest staff discussed the project at several meetings with the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho. Tribal consultation is ongoing.

#### **Executive Order 13112, Invasive Species**

Executive Order 13751 was signed on December 5, 2016, to amend Executive Order 13112 to “to prevent the introduction, establishment, and spread of invasive species, as well as to eradicate and control populations of invasive species that are established” and “refrain from authorizing, funding, or implementing actions that are likely to cause or promote the introduction, establishment, or spread of invasive species in the United States unless, pursuant to guidelines that it has prescribed, the agency has determined and made public its determination that the benefits of such actions clearly outweigh the potential harm caused by invasive species; and that all feasible and prudent measures to minimize risk of harm will be taken in conjunction with the actions.”

For all alternatives, the proposed project carries an overall low risk of spreading or introducing non-native invasive plants. Low risk means existing weed infestations or susceptible habitat are not likely affected. In the project area, non-native invasive plants are already present and habitat vulnerability and non-project weed vectors carry a moderate risk. Habitat alteration is not expected, and increased weed spread from this project is low.

For more information, see the non-native invasive plant risk assessment (appendix A in the project botany report) available in the project record and on the project webpage.

## Other Findings

### **Climate Change**

On January 9, 2023, the Council on Environmental Quality published interim “National Environmental Policy Act Guidance on Consideration of Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Climate Change” in the Federal Register (88 FR 1196–1212). The Council on Environmental Quality grants agencies the discretion to decide whether to apply the guidance to NEPA analyses that were in progress when the guidance was issued. The interim Council on Environmental Quality guidance was published late in the development process for the Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation project, and therefore, this environmental assessment will primarily rely on earlier Council on Environmental Quality guidance on considering climate change in NEPA (CEQ 2016). For example, this analysis does not include all new recommendations such as applying social cost of greenhouse gas estimates to the incremental metric tons of each individual type of greenhouse gas emissions expected from the proposed action and its alternatives. However, this project does analyze the two fundamental considerations required by current and former iterations of Council on Environmental Quality climate change guidance: (1) the potential effects of a proposed action on climate change, and (2) the effects of climate change on the proposed action and its environmental impacts (see resource specialist reports).

Carbon sequestration for the forest was programmatically analyzed in the forest carbon assessment for the Idaho Panhandle National Forests (Dugan et al. 2022). This assessment concludes that the biggest influences on current carbon dynamics on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests are root disease, white pine blister rust, timber harvest, and the substantial decline in acres burned since 1940. The science used in the forestwide assessment remain the most current assessments of carbon pools and influence of disturbance to carbon. While over-snow vehicle use proposed in this project may contribute to





## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations, this would not be at a scale that would alter the current trend described in the forestwide carbon assessment. Over-snow vehicles emit greenhouse gases; however, the emissions associated with the proposed action and alternative A are not expected to differ substantially from the existing condition.

## Scenery

Neither the proposed action nor alternative A would affect scenic integrity or scenic character because there are no visible management activities being proposed. All roads and trails proposed for over-snow vehicle use are existing on the landscape and no new roads or trails would be constructed. No modification of vegetation nor disturbance of soil is proposed. The presence of groomed trails and over-snow vehicle use are fleetingly visible on the landscape and quickly obscured by new fallen snow or the snow melting process.

## Agencies and Persons Consulted

The Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project was first published to the schedule of proposed actions on January 2, 2018. In 2021, the North Idaho Working Group formed. This is a collaborative group facilitated by the National Forest Foundation and made up of representatives from diverse, interested parties and local and state government agencies. Their intent was to develop a stakeholder-based proposal balancing over-snow vehicle travel, various forms of winter recreation, and protection of forest resources and wildlife habitat. The Idaho Panhandle National Forests presented information on the travel management planning process at several working group meetings in the spring of 2022. On March 1, 2022, we issued a news release announcing that we had begun travel management planning for snowmobiles and other over-snow vehicles on the north zone of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests.

On August 16, 2022, we sent a scoping letter announcing the project via email or U.S. mail to over 1,225 people, government officials, agencies, organizations, and individuals on forest mailing lists and those who had subscribed for electronic updates on Forest Service projects. A full list of the agencies we contacted is included in the project record. We posted the proposed action and maps to the project webpage and requested that commenters provide their feedback within 30 days. We received 148 comment letters, including 135 unique comment letters. The interdisciplinary team and responsible official reviewed and considered the comments and used them to modify the proposed action, consider alternatives to the proposed action, and focus the environmental analysis (see the *Changes to the Proposed Action Since Scoping*, *Alternatives to the Proposed Action: Are there other ways to meet the purpose and need?*, and *Issues Considered for Analysis* sections).

A 30-day comment period legal notice was published in the *Coeur d'Alene Press* on March 29, 2023. All people, government officials, agencies, organizations, and individuals on forest mailing list and those who had subscribed for electronic updates on Forest Service projects were notified. A full list of the agencies contacted regarding the comment period is in the project record. We received 170 form letters and 259 unique letters during the comment period. We used these comments to finalize the proposed action and to help inform the decision. All comments were responded to and can be found in the project record.



## Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

The finding of no significant impact documents the reasons why an action, not otherwise excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement in accordance with 40 CFR 1508.4, will not have a significant effect on the human environment and for which an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. When determining the potential significance of a proposed action, both context and intensity must be considered. The finding of no significant impact discussion here takes into consideration all information included in the environmental assessment (hereby incorporated by reference in accordance with 40 CFR 1501.6(b)), including the potentially affected environments, as well as documentation included in the project record. Pertinent specialist have reviewed the proposal and based on their input, the reasonable official made the following determinations with regards to the degree of potential effects for the context and intensity factors considered for a finding of no significant impact.

### Context

For the proposed action and alternatives, the context of the environmental effects is based on the environmental analysis in the environmental assessment. For the proposed action and alternative A, the environmental effects are confined to the project area, and more overly, to the localized area in which project activities are occurring. I realize that while project activities are underway, especially during times of ideal snowfall, there will be impacts. Project design criteria and best management practices limits direct effects to areas open and adjacent to areas open for over-snow vehicle travel and are of relatively short duration (several months when snow conditions are adequate). The impacts brought forward in the analysis are well known, as many over-snow vehicle designation projects have occurred on other forests within the western United States. Known and potential environmental effects would not be measurable at a regional or larger scale. The proposed over-snow vehicle use designation project would be consistent with the Idaho Panhandle National Forests' Revised Land Management Plan standards and guidelines for the area, as well as comply with other State and Federal permitting requirements.

### Intensity

Intensity is a measure of the severity, extent, or quantity of effects, and is based on information from the effects analysis of this environmental assessment and the references in the project record. The effects of this project have been appropriately and thoroughly considered with an analysis that is responsive to concerns and issues raised by the public. The agency has taken a hard look at the environmental effects using relevant scientific information and knowledge of site-specific conditions gained from field visits. My finding of no significant impact is based on the contest of the project and intensity of effects using the ten factors identified in 40 CFR 1508.27(b).

- 1. Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on the balance the effects will be beneficial.*

The interdisciplinary team identified beneficial effects and negative effects but did not identify any significant adverse effects that would preclude the use of the decision notice and finding of no significant. I have evaluated the effects of the proposed action and determined that the impacts are not significant and would be within the standards set forth by the forest plan and consistent with applicable environmental laws.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

#### 2. *The degree to which the proposed action affects public health of safety.*

Criteria air pollutants have the potential to negatively impact human health. Under both the proposed action and alternative A, the annual amounts of over-snow vehicles, annual miles traveled, and hours of operation are not expected to change as compared to the existing condition. Except for the potential for higher concentrations of criteria air pollutant emissions from over-snow vehicles in parking and staging areas, or in areas where large numbers of vehicles are allowed to idle, there should be no exceedances of the national ambient air quality standards. Human exposure to potentially unhealthy criteria air pollutant emissions in the parking and staging areas and from idling should be of a short duration and result in minimal health effects to vehicle operators and passengers.

Open areas and designated trails could receive use by both tracked over-snow vehicles under and over 50 inches wide and untracked over-snow vehicles. Tracked vehicles may create deep rutting; over-snow vehicle skis can get stuck in these ruts, potentially creating a safety issue. Tracked over-snow vehicles generally operate at much slower speeds than un-tracked over-snow vehicles. The potential for adverse effects due to concurrent use by varying vehicle classes is confined primarily to groomed trails. Grooming of identified trails produces an evenly compacted base that improves trail durability and reduces the effects of traffic from varying vehicle classes. Off groomed trails, over-snow vehicle users of all classes expect uneven travel surfaces and varying snow conditions.

Other safety concerns include potential conflicts between non-motorized and motorized recreationists and between various classes of motor vehicles. See the Issue 1. Seasonal closure dates for over-snow vehicle use may reduce over-snow vehicle access to popular locations for riding during popular times of the snow season, creating an increase in user conflicts section for more information on user conflicts. Project design features Recreation 1 through 4, Recreation 6, and Transportation 1 through 5 would reduce potential conflicts and improve public safety.

#### 3. *Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park land, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.*

The proposed project boundary includes eligible wild and scenic rivers, botanical geological, pioneer, and scenic areas, research natural areas, and an experimental forest. Neither the proposed action nor alternative A designate over-snow vehicle trails or areas beyond the existing condition most of these areas. However, the Northwest Peaks Scenic Area is the only scenic area in which over-snow vehicle use is proposed, in accordance with the land management plan, and both the proposed action and alternative A propose over-snow vehicle use in the Priest River experimental forest on designated trails and roads. Off-route travel would be prohibited in the experimental forest.

Cultural sites exist within the project area. The forest has worked extensively with local Tribes to design the project outside of areas of concern for the Tribe. Although some culturally sensitive areas will have continued over-snow vehicle use, it is expected that the effects will be the same or less than existing use.

Some wetlands and alpine sites do occur in the project area. The application of design criteria will produce no adverse effects in these areas.

The expected use in these geographic areas that include over-snow vehicle use is not expected to be any greater than current use. Impacts are expected to be similar to current impacts or less impacts due to certain areas being limited to over-snow vehicle use on designated trails and roads only.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

4. *The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.*

The proposed action and alternative A are designed to provide the greatest benefit to the public with the least degree of effects. The project's intent is to designate over-snow open areas and trails and roads to help focus the over-snow vehicle use traffic to areas that have been analyzed and determined to have the least impact on forest resources. The Forest was challenged with a variety of public interests including those who advocate for no or limited over-snow vehicle use due to potential impacts to the environment, those that want greater access to all areas of the forest for an enhanced off-road recreational experience, and those that want to recreate in the forest without the noise of over-snow vehicles degrading their experience. As such, the degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment vary depending on the public that is recreating.

Designating over-snow vehicle use helps to mitigate the controversies by creating areas for safe and numerous over-snow vehicle opportunities, while protecting habitat for plant and wildlife species, and creating plenty of quiet recreation opportunities on the forest.

5. *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.*

The proposed action and alternative A and the design features are similar in scope and scale to other over-snow project in the western United States. However, during the analysis, the degree of the effects of climate change and greenhouse gas emissions to resources within the project area was discussed to a greater extent with this project than others that have been analyzed. Climate change is a highly uncertain or potentially unknown risk to the human environment. Greenhouse gas emission modeling has been conducted and the results vary depending on the worldwide outcomes of these emissions in the coming years. The results for the next 100 years show anything from a slight rise in impacts from climate change to a sharp rise in impacts. For the sake of this project, there is a 20-year implementation period prior to requiring the plan to be revised. Modeling shows that there could be a flat to slight rise in the potential impacts to wildlife and plant habitat, and also to the amount of snowfall during this 20-year time period could slightly decrease. A slight rise in greenhouse gas emissions could result in some changes to the over-snow vehicle use experience. See the environmental assessment and the decision notice for more potential effects of climate change on the resources and human environment.

6. *The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.*

The proposed action and alternative A is consistent with the Idaho Panhandle National Forests' Land Management Plan and will not set for establish and precedent for future actions with significant effects or represent a decision in principle about a future condition.

7. *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulative significant impacts.*

The purpose of the proposed action and alternative A is to designate areas for over-snow vehicle use. There are no similar projects on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests'. The Kootenai National Forest adjacent to the Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Designated Use area is considering and analyzing their own over-snow vehicle project that is anticipated to be implemented in mid-late 2024. This project may be considered cumulatively with that project's analysis.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Cumulative effects for each issue and resource can be found in the environmental assessment above, or in the project record under each resource analysis. Cumulative effects for the proposed action will have individually insignificant impacts and cumulative insignificant impacts as they relate to past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions.

8. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.*

There are 493 known listed, eligible, and unevaluated sites within the area of potential effect that have been identified as potentially above snow and could be impacted by over-snow travel. Historic habitations, mining sites, and bridges are the largest categories of sites that could be above snow level. Over-snow vehicle travel could impact sites if portions of sites above the snow are traveled by over-snow vehicles or used as play structures. Currently, public over-snow vehicle use occurs in the project area in areas without existing closures or other prohibitions. Both the proposed action and alternative A would reduce effects to heritage resources by limiting over-snow vehicle use to designated trails and open areas. Requiring groomed trails to have 14 inches of snow before grooming would also reduce potential impacts to sites.

Through a “good faith effort” (36 CFR 800.4(b)(1)) of the analysis of known heritage properties within the proposed project area, potential adverse effects to those properties were identified and mitigated through project redesign. Therefore, there are no adverse effects to historic properties (36 CFR 800.5(b)).

9. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.*

It was determined that no significant impacts will occur to threatened or endangered species or their critical habitat that would preclude the decision notice being signed, or that would require the preparation of an environmental impact statement. A biological assessment and biological evaluation were prepared for threatened, endangered, candidate, proposed species as well as sensitive wildlife and plant species. The analysis concluded there would be a may affect, likely to adversely affect determinations for individual grizzly bear and whitebark pine. The Forest consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Service released a biological opinion back to the Forest. The biological assessment and evaluation and the resultant biological opinion are found in the project record and are hereby incorporated by reference in accordance with 40 CFR 1501.6(b)). A summary of the analysis for these species as well as determinations can also be found in the Law, Regulation, and Policy Consistency section of this document.

Please note that although the determination for these species is a may affect, likely to adversely affect under the Endangered Species Act due to the potential effects to *individuals* of the species, the National Environmental Policy Act considers the effects to the *populations* of species as a whole. Since this project will likely impact only individuals of the species and not the entire population, the forest found that there are no significant impacts to threatened or endangered species or their critical habitat that would require the preparation of an environmental impact statement.

10. *Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.*



*Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

The following finding show the action does not violate federal, state, or local law requirements imposed for the protection of the environment and has been reviewed by federal and state agencies. The action is consistent with the Idaho Panhandle National Forests' Land Management Plan and all other Federal, State, and local law and requirement imposed for the protection of the environment. See the Law, Regulation, and Policy Consistency analysis in the environmental assessment above.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

# Decision Notice

Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project

USDA Forest Service

Bonniers Ferry, Coeur d'Alene River, Priest Lake, and Sandpoint Ranger Districts, Idaho Panhandle National Forests

Bonner, Boundary, and Kootenai Counties, Idaho; Lincoln and Sanders Counties, Montana; and Pend Oreille County, Washington

The Decision Notice incorporates all previous information in the environmental assessment and finding of no significant impact (FONSI), as well as information included in the project record.

## Final Decision

I have reviewed the environmental impacts and factors considered for degree of effects and determined that no significant impacts will occur as a result of the proposed activities. My determination takes into consideration all design criteria included as part of the proposed action, as well as any modifications identified during environmental analysis and review of regulatory compliance. I have weighted the long-term benefits and short-term negative impacts of the proposed action on all resources. The Travel Management Rule (36 CFR 212) requires the Forest Service to designate roads, trails, and areas on National Forest System lands where over-snow vehicle use is allowed (36 CFR 212 Subpart C).

The attached Final Environmental Assessment is hereby incorporated by reference in this decision in accordance with 40 CFR 1501.6(b). Please refer to the Final Environmental Assessment for all project activities with the exception of the modifications, clarifications, and errata listed below. I have decided to authorize the activities as described in the *Purpose and Need: Why do we need to act?* and *Proposed Action: What are we proposing to do?* sections, including design criteria in appendix A and the implementation plan in appendix C, with the following modifications, clarifications, and errata that were identified during environmental analysis, review of regulatory compliance, and to address objections received during the project administrative review.

## Modifications

Please note that these modifications are not updated in the environmental assessment (with one exception noted below) but are updated in the individual specialist reports whose resources are impacted by the modifications.

Impacts of these modification do not require added analysis and therefore are not updated in the environmental assessment text. However, the individual specialists' reports for the impacted resources have been updated, where necessary, to reflect the modifications. Please refer to the recreation, fish, wildlife, American Indian Rights and Interests, and botany specialists' reports for more information regarding these modifications.

## Minerva Peak and Bernard Peak

During the environmental analysis and comment period, the local Tribes identified two areas proposed as open to over-snow vehicle travel along two ridgelines as potentially damaging, impacting, or impairing



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

access to areas of critical tribal concern (see the American Indian Rights and Interest Effects Analysis prepared for this assessment). The proposed action was already revised between the scoping and comment period to remove the south end of Lake Pend Oreille ridgelines from the project to prevent potential impacts to areas identified as critical for snow rest. I decided to further modify this proposed action to close 8,291 acres along the ridgeline area of Minerva Peak (see figure 8, insert 1-A and figure 9, insert 2-A) and 2,893 acres along the ridgeline of Bernard Peak (see figure 8, insert 2-B and figure 9, insert 2-B) to off-route over-snow vehicle travel pre-April 1 and post-March 31 for the same reasons.

### Snow-Bike Trail

I am modifying the proposed action to exclude the use of 2.5 miles of the groomed snow-bike trail 120 (see figure 8, insert 1-C). I decided to remove this section of trail because the county-maintained section of the access road ends at the private property boundary. The section of the access road on National Forest System land is not maintained during the winter. As such, the average users will have difficulty accessing the trailhead and trail during the winter and spring months. The lack of easy access forces the public to park and travel on private lands, creating potential user conflicts between forest users and private property landowners.

### Over-Snow Vehicle Management Strategies

In the section of the proposed action that describes the five over-snow vehicle management strategies, the opening date on page 4 of the environmental assessment was inadvertently omitted. This modification to the proposed action adds a November 16 opening date to this strategy. The change in text reads as follows.

- Original text of strategy number 1: *Open to over-snow vehicle use prior to May 3.*
- Modified text of strategy number 1: Open to over-snow vehicle use **from November 16** to May 3.

### White Sturgeon and Bull Trout

These two species were added to table 15 of the environmental assessment. The white sturgeon is listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act and the bull trout is listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. They were omitted from the original analysis due to an oversight. Neither of these two species are affected by the implementation of the proposed action (see fish report in the project record). For this reason, the proposed action will have a **no effect** determination for the continued existence of both species.

### Priest Lake Snowmobile Trail Added

An approximately 1.3-mile trail listed as a groomed snowmobile trail on the Caribou closure map was inadvertently omitted from the proposed action (Figure 10 in blue circle). This trail leaves from the Priest Lake Info Center and connects into the larger trail system on Idaho Department of Lands property and is currently approved for grooming. This trail leads to a large bridge posted with signs designating it as a snowmobile only bridge and is not currently on the Forest's Motor Vehicle Use Map. As such it was considered a trail and why it was omitted from the original proposed action.

The section on National Forest System Lands is in close proximity (within approximately 200 feet) of a heavily used county road connecting the communities of Dickensheet and Coolin. Adding this route to the proposed action (about 1 mile in the Lower Priest analysis area) would have a minor (and discountable)





## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

effect on existing wildlife species and will have no effect on the existing project analysis. In addition the trail does not pass through nor effect any Forest Service Northern Region potential or existing whitebark pine habitat nor the existing whitebark pine analysis.

It is my decision to include this trail in the final project as it will not have added effects to plants or wildlife species and is already a heavily used groomed snowmobile route. No additional effects are expected to occur with the addition of this trail for designated over-snow vehicle use.

## Clarifications

### Wolverine

This project is Not Likely to Jeopardize the currently proposed North American wolverine. After the wolverine becomes a threatened species on January 2, 2024, the Forest will reinitiate consultation on this project with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Project activities will not lead to jeopardy to wolverine because: 1) project activities will not contribute to the identified primary or secondary threats to the wolverine distinct population segment; 2) none of the proposed activities are considered a threat to the distinct populations segment; 3) wolverines are able to adjust to, and co-exist with, moderate levels of disturbance; and 4) the best scientific and commercial information available indicates that only the projected decrease and fragmentation of wolverine habitat or range due to future climate change is a threat to the continued existence of the species. See the biological assessment (hereby incorporated by reference in accordance with 40 CFR 1501.6(b)) for a more elaborate explanation on the rationale for the determination of no jeopardy on the wolverine.

## Errata to the Environmental Assessment

### Whitebark Pine U.S. Fish and Wildlife Determination Correction

Table 15 of the final environmental assessment contains the incorrect U.S. Fish and Wildlife determination for the threatened whitebark pine. The determination in the final environmental assessment is Not Likely to Adversely Affect (NLAA). The correct determination for whitebark pine is Likely to Adversely Affect (LAA). See corrected table 15 listing below. The determination is listed correctly in the botany report.

Errata	Species/Habitat	Status	Proposed or Designated Critical Habitat Present?	Determination	Brief Rationale (or refer to other project documentation)
Incorrect Determination	Whitebark pine	Threatened	No	NLAA	See botany report in the project record
Correct Determination				LAA	

### Literature Cited Added to the Project Record

In addition, I am adding the following citation to the project record for reference regarding the white-bark pine core area nomination process. This document can be found in the project record:



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Karau, E. 2023. National Whitebark Pine Restoration Plan R1/R4 Core Area Nomination Working Group: Whitebark Pine R1 Core Area Nomination Workflow Procedure Version 2.12.21.

### Noise Impact Analysis

In response to the public's concern regarding the effects of over-snow vehicle generated noise impacts to non-motorized recreation and to wildlife, I decided to add the following analysis:

#### *Effects of Noise on Non-Motorized Recreation*

The sounds associated with the recreational use of over-snow vehicles may be viewed as a negative impact on users seeking quiet forms of recreation and lead to an increased in user conflicts. Sound is a physical phenomenon, a vibration in the air that can be measured. Noise is an interpretation of sound, or a sound that has characteristics that may irritate or annoy a listener, interfere with a listener's activity, or in some other way be distinguished as unwanted (Harrison et al. 1980).

The acoustic impact of sound can be determined by measuring the inherent characteristics of the sound and considering that in conjunction with the setting in which the sound is heard and the individual attributes of the listener. Whether sounds are determined to be acceptable or are interpreted as noise depends on the values and desires of the person making the judgement (Harrison et al. 1980).

Research shows that natural soundscapes assist "in providing a deep connection to nature that is restorative and even spiritual for some visitors. When recreationists have these expectations, the mechanical noise of snowmobiles in otherwise quiet areas can result in a substantial diminution in non-motorized users' recreation experience. This often negatively impacts the experience of the recreationist. Creates conflict. And ultimately leads to displacement (Switalski et al. 2016).

Visitors recreating in a multiple-use environment would likely experience these conditions. Within the project area, this is compounded by the fact that no high mountain passes exist across the Selkirk Mountain Range. Visitors seeking backcountry skiing/snowboarding opportunities often combine motorized and non-motorized forms of recreation to reach popular over-snow vehicle areas (above 4,000 feet in elevation).



# Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

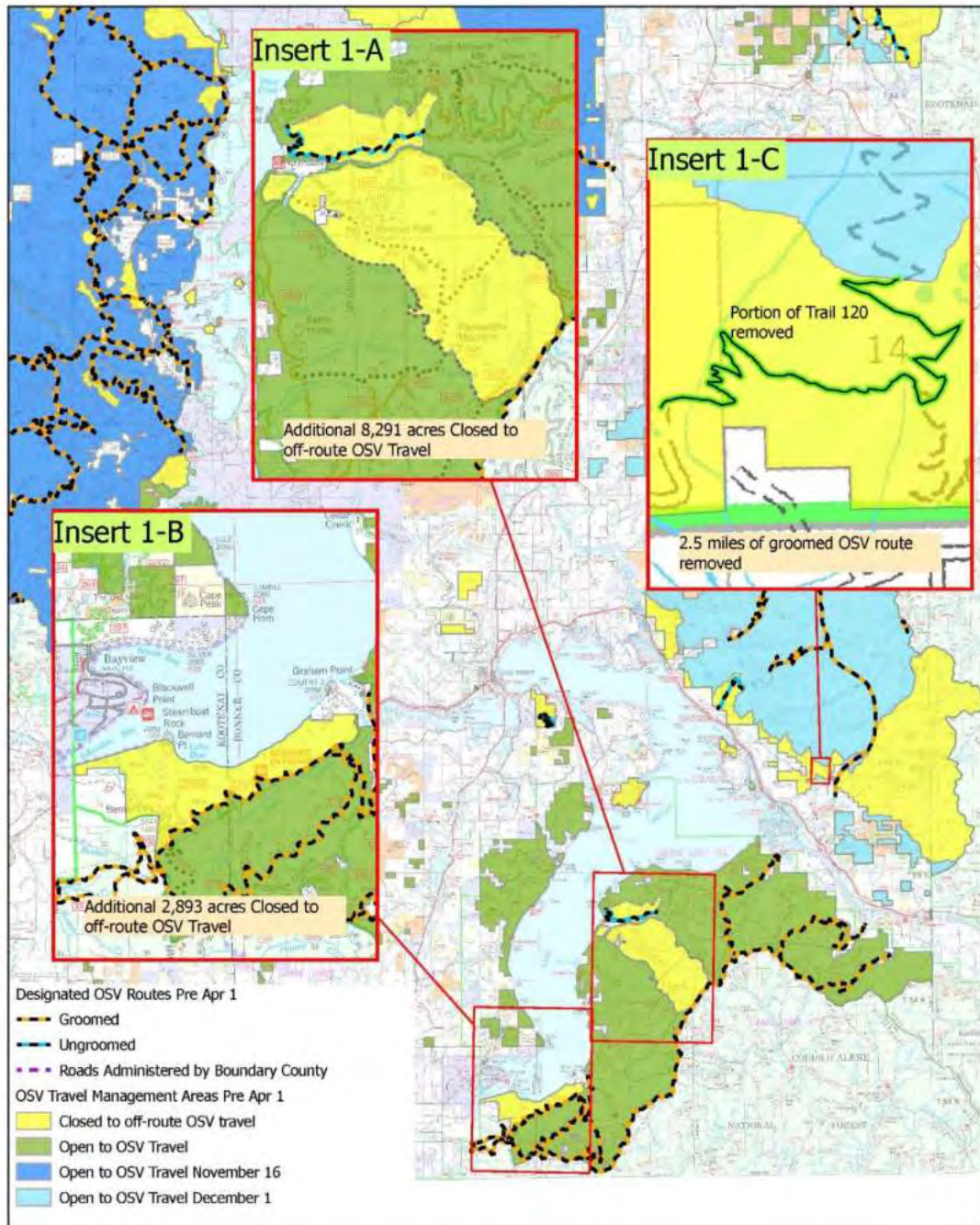


Figure 8. Designated over-snow vehicle travel management areas pre-April 1 designated as closed to off-route over-snow vehicle travel with the modified proposed action. Also insert 1-C shows the 2.5 miles of groomed over-snow vehicle route that is removed from the proposed action.



Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

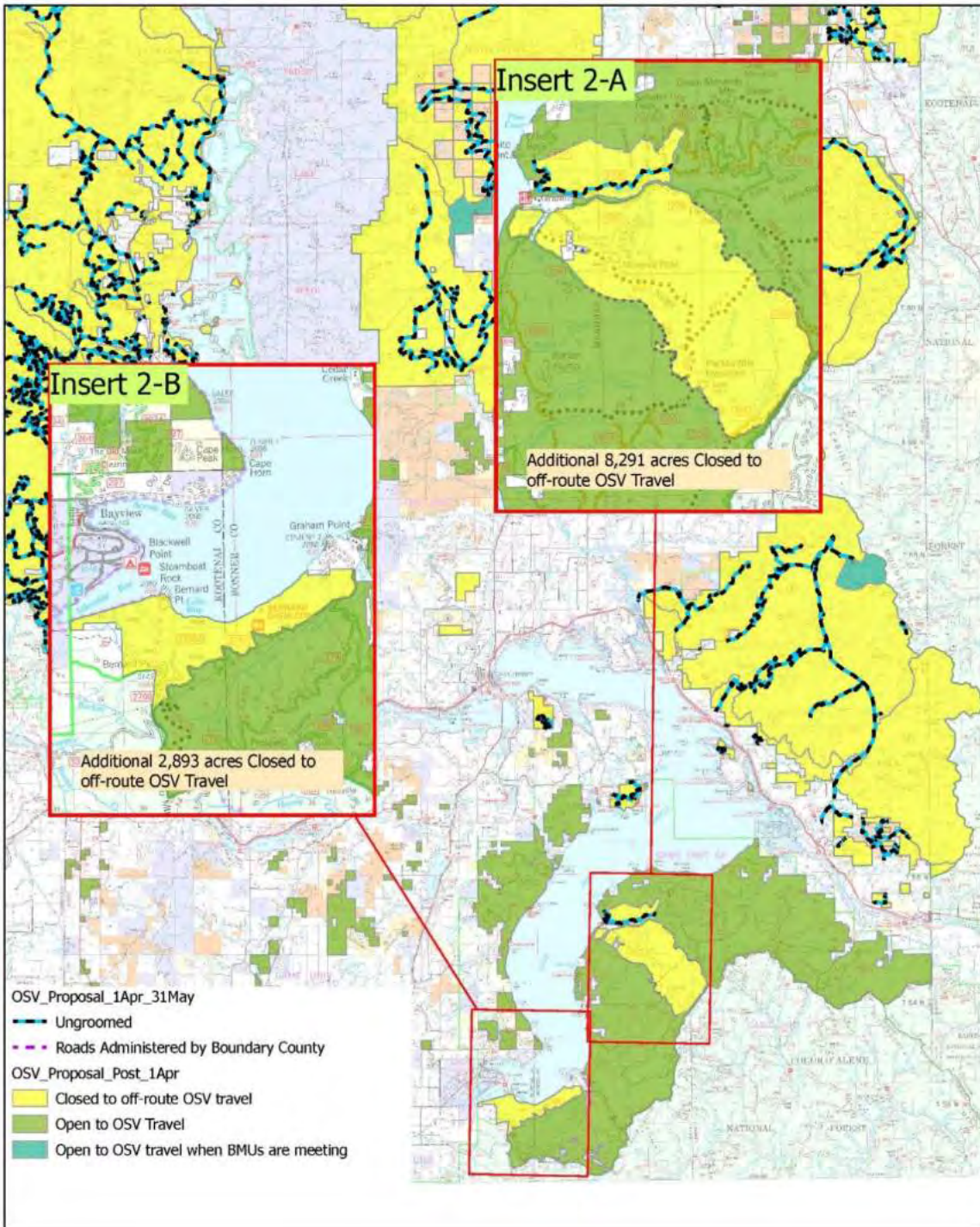


Figure 9. Designated over-snow vehicle travel management areas post March 31 designated as closed to off-route over-snow vehicle travel with the modified proposed action.



# Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



## Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

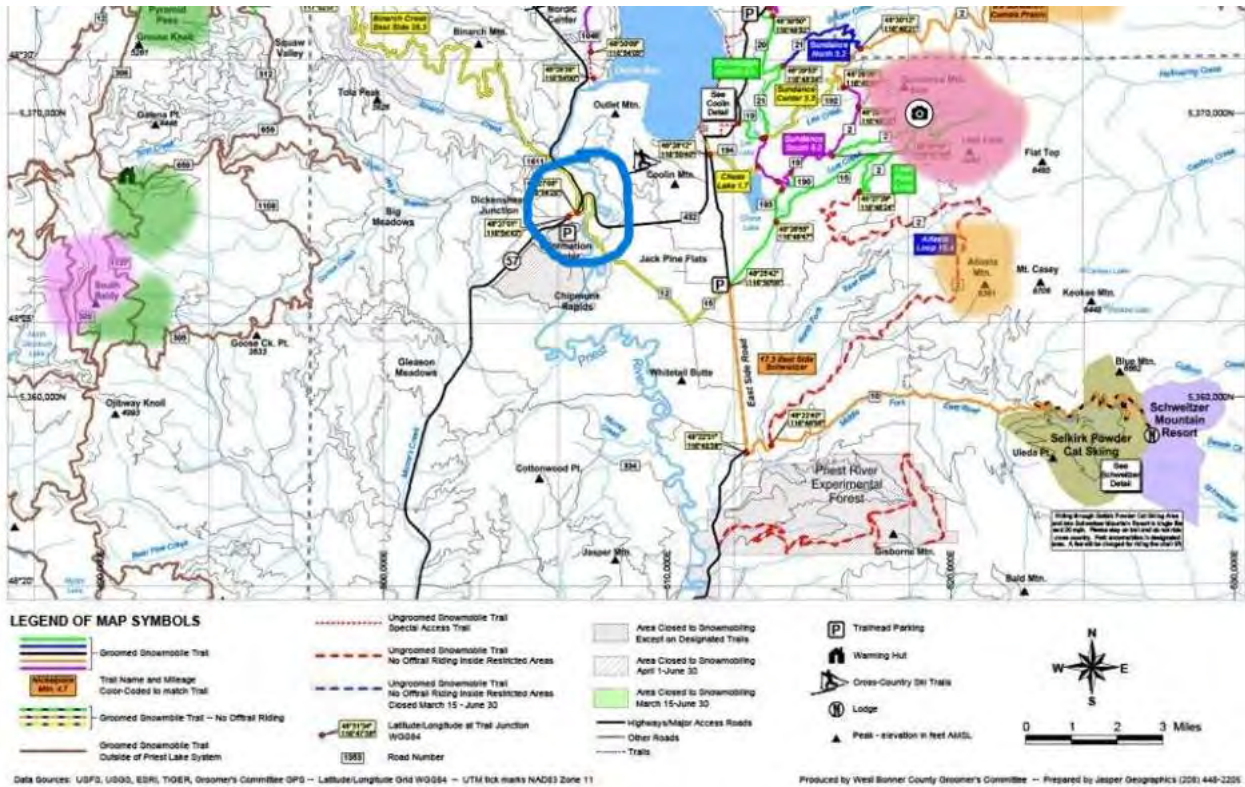


Figure 10. Southern portion of the Priest Lake Snowmobile Trail Map. Trail added is located within the blue circle on the map.

### Sound Propagation

Sound is measured by amplitude (decibels, dB) that determines loudness, frequency (Hertz, Hz) that determines pitch, and duration of the sound.

As sound waves travel away from the source, they lose energy (amplitude decreases). Several factors influence how far the sound would travel. Spherical spreading loss refers to the fact that a sound's loudness decreases as the distance between the source and the listener increases. Atmospheric absorption loss refers to sound waves being transferred to or absorbed by the atmosphere. This varies with air temperature, elevation, relative humidity, vegetation, and ground cover. Long distance loss refers to refraction of sound due to varying air temperatures or wind directions and diffraction or scattering of sound waves around a barrier (Harrison et al. 1980).

Within the state of Idaho over-snow vehicles are required to have a muffler that passes at 96 db. at 1.64 feet, SAE J1287 (Idaho Code 67-7125). The potential of sound to travel is affected by topography, air temperature, elevation, relative humidity, vegetation, and ground cover. The following table presents maximum sound levels/distances as they would occur without any other factors reducing the sound levels of a single over-snow vehicle.

The sound attenuation formula used to calculation these distances is as follows:

$$SPL_2 = SPL_1 - 20 \log (R_2/R_1)$$



Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Where:

- SPL<sub>1</sub>- Sound pressure level at point 1:
- SPL<sub>2</sub> – Sound pressure level at point 2:
- R<sub>1</sub> – Distance from the sound source to point 1: and
- R<sub>2</sub> –Distance from the sound source to point 2.

Table 18. Estimated sound attenuation of an over-snow vehicle (see figure 11).

Sound Pressure at point 1 (SPL <sub>1</sub> )(DB)	Distance from source to point 1 (R <sub>1</sub> ) (ft)	Distance from source to point 2 (R <sub>2</sub> )(ft)	Sound Pressure at point 2 (SPL <sub>2</sub> )(DB)	Miles
96	1.64	100	60.29687696	
96	1.64	200	54.27627705	
96	1.64	300	50.75445187	
96	1.64	400	48.25567713	
96	1.64	500	46.31747687	
96	1.64	600	44.73385195	
96	1.64	700	43.39491616	~ 1/8 Mile
96	1.64	800	42.23507722	
96	1.64	900	41.21202677	
96	1.64	1000	40.29687696	
96	1.64	1200	38.71325204	
96	1.64	1300	38.01800991	~ ¼ Mile
96	1.64	1400	37.37431625	
96	1.64	1500	36.77505178	
96	1.64	1600	36.21447731	
96	1.64	1700	35.68789853	
96	1.64	2640	31.86479842	~ 1/2 mile
96	1.64	5280	25.84419851	~ 1 mile



Table of sound levels <i>L</i> and corresponding sound pressure and sound intensity			
Examples	Sound Pressure Level <i>L<sub>p</sub></i> dB SPL	Sound Pressure $\rho$ N/m <sup>2</sup> = Pa	Sound Intensity <i>I</i> W/m <sup>2</sup>
Jet aircraft, 50 m away	140	200	100
Threshold of pain	130	63.2	10
Threshold of discomfort	120	20	1
Chainsaw, 1m distance	110	6.3	0.1
Disco, 1 m from speaker	100	2	0.01
Diesel truck, 10 m away	90	0.63	0.001
Kerbside of busy road, 5 m	80	0.2	0.0001
Vacuum cleaner, distance 1 m	70	0.063	0.00001
Conversational speech, 1m	60	0.02	0.000001
Average home	50	0.0063	0.0000001
Quiet library	40	0.002	0.00000001
Quiet bedroom at night	30	0.00063	0.000000001
Background in TV studio	20	0.0002	0.0000000001
Rustling leaf	10	0.000063	0.00000000001
Threshold of hearing	0	0.00002	0.000000000001

Figure 11. Table of sound levels, *L*, and corresponding sound pressure and sound intensity.

**Literature Cited Added to the Project Record**

Harrison, R.T., R.N. Clark, and G.H. Stankey. 1980. Predicting impact of noise on recreationists. ED&T Project No. 2688: Noise Pollution Prediction Methods. USDA Forest Service, Equipment Development Center, San Dimas, CA, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/t-d/pubs/pdfimage/80231202.pdf>

Switalski, Adam. 2016. Journal of Conservation Planning Vol 12 (2016) 21-28. Snowmobile Best Management Practices for Forest Service Travel Planning. <https://winterwildlands.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Snowmobile-BMPs-recreational-use-conflict.pdf>

**Effects of Noise on Wildlife**

The Travel Management rule makes only a single mention of the issue of vehicle noise in section 212.55 (“minimization criteria”): “Compatibility of motor vehicle use with existing conditions in populated areas, taking into account sound, emissions, and other factors.” With regard to effects on wildlife, the rule directs units to designate routes and areas “...with the objective of minimizing...Harassment of wildlife and significant disruption of wildlife habitats.” While vehicle-generated noise certainly can cause potential harassment or habitat disruption, other stimuli contributing to wildlife reaction to motor vehicle use (visual, olfactory, or in some cases the mere presence of roads or trails regardless of vehicle traffic) are capable of producing similar effects.

Attempting to disentangle and quantify the potential effects of over-snow vehicle-generated noise from other disturbance effects of over-snow vehicle use is a speculative exercise that has limited support in the



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

available science. It is well-documented that anthropogenic noises can have negative effects on wildlife (see Buxton et al. 2017, Kok et al. 2023); and over-snow vehicles do, in fact, make noise – Federal standards direct that snowmobiles produced after 1975 are required to emit no more than 78 decibels (dB) from a distance of 50 feet while traveling at full throttle, and Idaho State Parks and Recreation requires a snowmobile to emit no more than 96 dB at one-half meter distance. However, a review of existing literature indicates that there is a wide range of biological responses to noise both among species and between individuals of a species, and the effects of noise are undoubtedly confounded by other effects of motorized use.

As an example, Shannon et al. (2016) conducted a review of nearly 25 years of published scientific literature on the topic. The authors summarize that terrestrial wildlife showed effects at noise levels as low as 40 decibels (dB), which has been compared to “a quiet office”. However, the studies were heavily weighted toward avian species, and focused mainly on impacts to vocal communication. Otherwise, Shannon et al. (2016) report that terrestrial mammals exhibited increased stress levels and decreased reproductive efficiency at noise levels between 52 and 68 dB (60 dB has been described as “a normal conversation between two people sitting at a distance of about one meter”).

Given that a snowmobile can emit up to 96 dB, it is feasible that a machine some unspecified distance away could produce noise sufficient to disrupt normal activities of terrestrial wildlife. Still, species that are more reliant on vocalizations for communication (songbirds, sciurids, and many amphibians) or navigation (bats) are more likely to be affected, and a substantial majority of these would be either absent or inactive during most of the over-snow vehicle use period. Even when the activity period of these taxonomic groups temporally overlaps the over-snow vehicle use period (late spring), spatial overlap is minimized since recently arrived migrants and hibernators would congregate in places with less snow cover, while over-snow vehicle users would generally be displaced to higher elevations where a deep snowpack lingers.

Of the numerous studies cited by Shannon et al. (2016), only two (Brown et al. 2012 and Maier et al. 1998) directly address wildlife species discussed in detail for the Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle project (further discussion of both studies below). None of the wildlife species considered to be of greatest risk from over-snow vehicle use in the Kaniksu project area (Canada lynx, grizzly bear, and North American wolverine) are exceptionally dependent on auditory cues for foraging or intraspecific communication, so any disruption caused by noise would likely be in the form of disturbance or displacement.

While noise is often mentioned when discussing effects of vehicular use on wildlife, it is generally in the context of “noise and disturbance” with no attempt to separate the often-intertwined effects of the two. We could find no published research of the singular effects of noise on either Canada lynx or wolverine. Loud machines in close proximity (particularly in winter) likely have a powerful effect on individuals of these species, but the potential effects of anthropogenic noises emanating from some distance away are unknown. In the absence of scientifically derived thresholds of noise (dB) levels at which individuals of these species may be affected, it is of questionable value to attempt to model potential effects of the noise generated by over-snow vehicle use on these species at various distances. Nor is there research documenting population-level effects of noise on either species. Additionally, Heinemeyer et al. (2019) report that female wolverines showed strong avoidance of both motorized and non-motorized recreation, implying that avoidance encompasses factors other than sound.





## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

As discussed in the grizzly bear section of the Wildlife Report, the excellent insulative properties of snow greatly reduces any noise perceived by a denning bear (along with limiting smells and virtually eliminating visual cues). Instead, potential disturbance from over-snow vehicle use (noise or other stimuli) is likely to occur during the post-denning period. As with lynx and wolverine, we found no published research or empirical data identifying amount or types of noise that produces harmful effects to individuals or populations. The one study we did identify (Parsons et al. 2020) calculated a “perceptual” zone of influence of human disturbance on grizzly bears that incorporated both visual and auditory stimuli. However, like many of the studies attempting to quantify wildlife responses to anthropogenic noise, the source of this noise was roads. Open roads – particularly paved ones – tend to produce a nearly constant disturbance effect, compared to all but the busiest over-snow vehicle routes, where this disturbance is more ephemeral. Also, it is unfortunate that an attempt to model grizzly bear “perception” would not include arguably the species’ most highly developed sense: smell. Finally, as discussed in the project wildlife report, grizzly bears sometimes avoid roads even in the absence of traffic – suggesting factors other than noise are at play.

Similarly, Brown et al. (2012) documented ungulate (elk and pronghorn) response to anthropogenic noise emanating from a busy road segment. Unexpectedly, they found that ungulates were actually less responsive to increasing levels of vehicle traffic and, presumably, increased noise. Whether due to habituation or a perceived decreased risk of predation in areas with greater human-caused noise, noise levels themselves had relatively little effect on ungulate behavior in this study.

Conversely, Maier et al. (1998) found that caribou, particularly females with young calves, were quite sensitive to human-caused noise during multiple seasons. However, the source of noise was low-altitude overflights by jet aircraft consistently emitting noise levels in excess of 90 dB on the ground, comparing poorly to the types of disturbance that would be produced by this proposal.

In 2009, a product was developed to “provide researchers and land managers at universities and public agencies an accessible sound propagation model that can be implemented with standard GIS software.” The program (SPreAD-GIS) (Reed et al. 2012) attempted to spatially apply an existing model developed by the U.S. Forest Service and Environmental Protection Agency to predict the acoustic impacts of recreational activity in wildland settings by using a GIS environment. However, the tool appears to be computationally intensive and time consuming; and while it was designed to use polygon, line, or point features, the examples given all use point features in the analysis (as opposed to lines or polygons, which are exactly the features we would like to model: trails and areas). Additionally, there is a large number of combinations of wind, weather, temperature, and other criteria that could be adjusted in the model that would presumably lead to a similarly broad range of results.

When Idaho Panhandle National Forests’ GIS Coordinator Greg Harris reached out to “Sasha” Keyel (one of the developers), he was told “the program was developed using ArcGIS 10.4 and will not work on recent versions of ArcGIS and definitely won't work on ArcGIS Pro. Changes were continuously being made that broke the validation tests for consistent outputs and the developers could not keep up with the changes, and eventually funding ran out. There are no plans to update this tool.” Given the uncertain future availability of the tool and the fact that it would be difficult (if not impossible) to run on software currently utilized by the Idaho Panhandle National Forests’, we did not use it in our analysis.

Moreover, the actual utility of model results for the Kaniksu over-snow vehicle Designation project would be questionable. There would be little value in determining how an individual area could be affected by



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

noise emanating from a nearby trail when the area itself could be subject to legal off-trail over-snow vehicle use. It would seem the main benefit of such a model would be to estimate how much noise would penetrate into areas where over-snow vehicle use is not allowed from adjacent areas where it is. Even if this knowledge could be obtained, it does not answer the larger question: from which portions of the landscape not open to off-trail over-snow vehicle use could we expect various wildlife species to be displaced? The developers themselves raise this very issue: "...data on auditory sensitivity and frequency weights are currently available for only a small proportion of species, making this an important area for future research in bioacoustics" (Reed et al. 2012).

It is possible that individual animals may occasionally be disturbed by over-snow vehicle-generated noise at some unknown (and possibly unknowable) distance within areas where over-snow vehicle use is not allowed due to noise from use in an adjacent area. As discussed above, the extent of this effect would be difficult to model or quantify in the absence of documented noise levels above which individuals of the species analyzed are likely to be displaced, and with the wide range of environmental factors that affect how sound travels across the landscape. Conversely, there would be areas where off-trail over-snow vehicle use is legally allowed that experience little or no such use or associated noise levels due to dense vegetation, difficult access, topography, or other limiting factors. Species with primarily nocturnal activity patterns may rarely if ever experience negative effects of over-snow vehicle noise.

For these reasons, the analysis of effects assumes that any wildlife present and active during this time period could be disturbed or displaced by over-snow vehicles in any area or immediately adjacent to any trail where this use is allowed. There are a number of relatively small (less than two square mile) areas closed by Forest Plan direction that may offer wildlife limited protection from encroaching over-snow vehicle noise due to their small size/narrow shape and proximity to popular routes or areas (e.g., Huff Lake, Potholes, Binarch Creek and Copper Falls RNAs). Other areas, while similarly small in size, likely suffer less from noise encroachment due to their location where either access is difficult or there are no established over-snow vehicle routes in the vicinity (e.g., Bath Creek Gorge Special Area, Three Ponds Research Natural Area).

Because of concerns with the effectiveness of small areas in providing undisturbed habitat during the over-snow vehicle use period, most areas specifically identified by this project where off-trail over-snow vehicle use is not allowed are large, contiguous blocks. Larger areas provide more effective closures because, in addition to having more undisturbed acres, they have a larger area to perimeter ratio which reduces the relative amount of habitat within the closure where the effects of over-snow vehicle use in adjacent areas could be felt. Under the proposed action, more than 90 percent of the total area where off-trail over-snow vehicle use would be limited prior to April 1 approach ten square miles or larger in size (i.e., blocks >6,200 acres), and 93 percent of the closed area is in blocks larger than five square miles (blocks >4,200 acres). Within these, only a few routes partially penetrate the interior of the 90,000-acre North Selkirks closure, and a single route enters the nearly 80,000-acre closure in the eastern Selkirks (none of the remaining large closure areas have designated routes into their interior).

Starting April 1, substantially more of the project area would be closed to off-trail over-snow vehicle use (over 902,000 acres or 86 percent) – nearly all of which would be in blocks 8,000 acres (12.5 square miles) or larger in size. While over-snow vehicle use would still be allowed on designated routes within these areas, any routes designated would also be open to wheeled motorized use at this time, and it is assumed an ambient level of noise/disturbance would be present on these routes regardless of over-snow vehicle use.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

While admittedly simplistic, the methodology used to analyze wildlife species provides an objective and reasonable depiction of potential effects from over-snow vehicle use. Attempting to model and predict effects of over-snow vehicle noise across the project area is problematic for several reasons: there is a profound lack of information on noise levels known to cause negative reactions by the various species analyzed; a variety of environmental factors (temperature, topography, weather, forest cover, time of day, etc.) can influence how sound carries on both different portions of the landscape, and in the same place at various times; and different over-snow vehicles can have vastly different sound outputs, which may well change in significant ways during the expected life of this project. Therefore, this modelling approach would be of limited value and would not likely lead to a more informed decision.

#### Literature Cited Added to the Project Record

- Brown, C.L., A.R. Hardy, J.R. Barber, K.M. Fristrup, K.R. Crooks, and L.M. Angeloni. 2012. The effect of human activities and their associated noise on ungulate behavior. *PLoS ONE* 7(7): e40505.  
<https://sites.warnercnr.colostate.edu/soundandlightecologyteam/wp-content/uploads/sites/146/2020/11/plosone2012.pdf>
- Buxton, R.T., M.F. McKenna, D. Mennitt, K. Fristrup, K. Crooks, L. Angeloni, and G. Wittemyer. 2017. Noise pollution is pervasive in U.S. protected areas. *Science* 356:531–533.  
<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aah4783>
- Keyel, A.C., S.E. Reed, M.F. McKenna, and G. Wittemyer. 2017. Modeling anthropogenic noise propagation using the Sound Mapping Tools ArcGIS toolbox. *Environmental Modeling and Software*. 97 (2017) 56-60.  
<https://usfs.app.box.com/file/1389360419249?s=mhhpk32ce5ois0wx3gk54egeq3evjtd>
- Kok, A.C.M., B.W. Berkhout, N.V. Carlson, N.P. Evans, N. Khan, D.A. Potvin, A.N. Radford, M. Sebire, S. Shafiei Sabet, G. Shannon and C.A.F. Wascher. 2023. How chronic anthropogenic noise can affect wildlife communities. *Front. Ecol. Evol.* 11:1130075.  
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fevo.2023.1130075>
- Maier, J. A., S.M. Murphy, R.G. White, and M.D. Smith. 1998. Responses of caribou to overflights by low-altitude jet aircraft. *The Journal of Wildlife Management* 62:752–766.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3802352.pdf>
- Parsons, B.M., N.C. Coops, G.B. Stenhouse, A.C. Burton, and T.A. Nelson. 2020. Building a perceptual zone of influence for wildlife: delineating the effects of roads on grizzly bear movement. *European Journal of Wildlife Research* 66:53. 16 pp.  
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10344-020-01390-1>
- Reed, S.E., J.L. Boggs, and J.P. Mann. 2012. A GIS tool for modeling anthropogenic noise propagation in natural ecosystems. *Environmental Modelling and Software* 37. 5 pp.  
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1364815212001399?via%3Dihub>
- Shannon, G., M.F. McKenna, L.M. Angeloni, K.R. Crooks, K.M. Fristrup, E. Brown, K.A. Warner, M.D. Nelson, C. White, J. Briggs, S. McFarland, and G. Wittemyer. 2016. A synthesis of two decades of research documenting the effects of noise on wildlife. *Biol Rev* 91:982–1005.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/brv.12207>



## Climate Change Effects to Wildlife Species

During the administrative review, there was a request to extrapolate the existing climate change analysis for wildlife and botany species and consolidate them in the decision. All of the analysis in this section is currently outlined in the respective specialist report. Additional information regarding the effects to wildlife and botany from climate change can also be found in the biological assessment for the project (hereby incorporated by reference in accordance with 40 CFR 1501.6(b)). As such, I decided to include the consolidated climate change analysis here:

### *Mountain Caribou*

The potential effects of climate change on mountain caribou cannot be ignored. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service states that the southern mountain caribou distinct population segment could be directly impacted by changes in climate in three ways: 1) a reduction in the abundance, distribution, and quality of caribou habitat; 2) a limited ability of caribou to move between seasonal habitats; and 3) a limited ability to avoid predation (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2019).

Southern mountain caribou movements are dependent upon changes in snow depth and consolidation of the snowpack (Kinley et al. 2007). Snowpack depth helps determine both the height at which arboreal lichens occur on trees, and the height at which caribou are able to access lichens in the winter. During low snow years, Kinley et al. (2007) found that mountain caribou in deep snowfall regions made more extensive use of low-elevation sites during late winter. Consistently lower snowpacks at higher elevations may alter the height of lichen growth on trees which may affect seasonal caribou movement patterns. Thus, caribou may remain at higher elevations throughout winter under various climate change scenarios.

Furthermore, climate projection models suggest that subalpine forests may be almost completely lost in the Pacific Northwest by the end of the 21st century (Rogers et al. 2011), which would be detrimental to the southern mountain caribou distinct population segment given their reliance on these habitats for forage of arboreal lichens during the late winter. In addition, climate variability also threatens overall lichen availability since lichen physiology is closely linked to precipitation and temperature. As a result, habitat in the southern extent of the southern mountain caribou distinct population segment may become unsuitable and restrict the southern range of the species.

Over-snow vehicle use may have compounded the effects of the various risk factors discussed on caribou in the past and could possibly in the future. However, the reasons for the ultimate extirpation of the Selkirk Mountains woodland caribou almost certainly stem from changing predator and prey dynamics conspiring with increased human presence and possibly climate effects. It is likely the recovery of the species on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests will require addressing a combination of these limiting factors.

### *Grizzly Bear*

Climate change could have varied impacts on grizzly bears and their habitats, especially when combined with fire (or fire suppression), insects, and disease effects on habitat. Past fire suppression has led to an increase in fuels, denser forests that are more susceptible to insects and disease, and forests that are less resilient and sustainable. Large, stand-replacing disturbance would be more likely and may be exacerbated as the climate changes. Large-scale disturbances could convert a large area of grizzly habitat from forested to open in one event. This would alter the availability of bear foods and cover, potentially changing how bears use the landscape.



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

### *Canada Lynx*

Climate change would have the potential to alter the amount and distribution of lynx habitat on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests and adjacent ownerships. Coupled with past fire suppression, climate change can increase the impact of insects and disease and change the amount of habitat available for lynx. One of the primary constituent elements of lynx critical habitat is light, deep, snow. Climate change may influence the availability of this primary constituent element in the future, and it is outside the control of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests to dictate the location of this primary constituent element on the landscape. This primary constituent element may be located higher in elevation with patches separated by greater distances over time if the climate becomes warmer.

Lynx and snowshoe hare are adapted to life in the deep snow. Changes in snow patterns due to a warming climate would put snowshoe hares at a disadvantage, and as a prey species for lynx the tight relationship between hares and lynx may dissolve as each species responds differently to climate change (McKelvey and Buotte 2018). Lynx habitat may shift upward in elevation and north in latitude as the climate warms, and peninsular extensions of habitat may become fragmented (Carroll 2007, McKelvey and Buotte 2018, USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2009). If a warming climate leads to less snowfall and warmer temperatures, snowshoe hare populations may decline as lynx predation efficiency increases. Gonzales et al. (2007) modeled the potential shift in boreal forest and areas that have continuous winter snow coverage for at least four months a winter. They predicted a potential decline of up to two-thirds of potential habitat in the lower 48 United States by the year 2100. Lynx habitat may shift northward as much as 125 miles. Areas that could lose potential lynx habitat in the long-term (around the year 2100) include the Idaho Panhandle National Forests (Gonzales et al. 2007).

### *Whitebark Pine*

Climate change may lead to direct habitat loss (Hamann and Wang 2006; Aitken et al. 2008). Predicted increases in temperature may exceed whitebark pine's tolerance and may also make it possible for other conifer species to compete more effectively in habitats that were once too harsh to support them. As temperatures increase, soil moisture availability decreases which may lead to drought stress. Drought-stressed trees are at risk for higher pine beetle attack than unstressed trees (Bentz et al. 2010). Warmer temperatures also mean increased winter survival of mountain pine beetles (Bentz and Schen-Langenheim 2007; Logan et al. 2010), expansion of their habitat into higher elevations (Gibson et al. 2008; Logan et al. 2010), and a shorter time interval for beetles to complete development (Gibson et al. 2008).

Even though the project area covers 1,046,460 acres, existing and potential whitebark pine is limited in scale and would not make whitebark pine or its habitat more resistant or resilient to climate change. Whitebark pine trees are hardy, have flexible branches, and survive in harsh climatic conditions, seedling and sapling branches above the snow are unlikely to break if contact is made with an over-snow ski or track. Because of these effects from direct physical damage would be low and not likely be of an intensity or magnitude to damage whitebark stands or result in loss of entire populations. Whitebark pine trees would continue to produce seed and propagate seedlings.

### *Recreation*

A climate change vulnerability assessment for the Forest Service Northern Rockies Region (Halofsky et al. 2018a) including the Idaho Panhandle National Forests indicates that temperature is projected to increase throughout the 21st century. Snowfall is projected to decrease in the Northern Rockies region, particularly in relatively warm locations such as mid- to low-elevation locations (Klos et al. 2014, Luce et

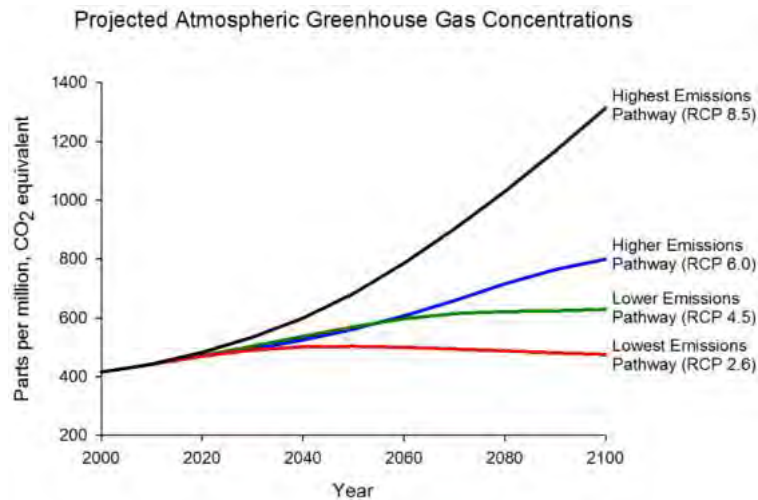


al. 2014). As described in Halofsky et al. 2018b, climate change is expected to have a generally negative effect on snow-based winter activities, although a wide range of effects at local scales is possible because of variations across the region in site location and elevation. Warmer projected winter temperatures for the region are expected to reduce the proportion of precipitation as snow, even if the total amount of precipitation does not deviate significantly from historical norms.

**Climate Change Trend Impact**

During the administrative review, it was pointed out that the environmental assessment and supporting documentation was unclear whether climate predictions above 4,000 feet in elevation (where the majority of the proposed action would take place) would impact wildlife, botany, or recreational users in the next 20 years (the duration of the project). See the Air Quality modeling outlined in the Air Quality Report and the individual resource reports for impacts to these species from increased carbon emissions and climate change (hereby incorporated by reference in accordance with 40 CFR 1501.6(b)).

Because it is difficult to project far-off future emissions and other human factors that influence climate scientists use a range of scenarios with various assumptions about future economic, social, technological, and environmental conditions. Figure 11 shows the projected atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations scenarios that are generally accepted as plausible outcomes (Representative Concentration Pathways Database (Version 2.0.5) <http://www.iiasa.ac.at/web-apps/tnt/RcpDb>):



**Figure 12. Projected atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations.**

The top pathway assumes that greenhouse gas emissions will continue to rise throughout the current century. The bottom pathway assumes that emissions reach a peak between 2010 and 2020, declining thereafter. Depending on which scenario proves to be the correct one forecasted, in 20 years from the implementation of this project it is anticipated that impacts due to increased greenhouse gas emissions to wildlife, botany, and recreation will be similar to slightly elevated from the effects outlined in the current analyses but should not increase the effects to the level that significance is reached for any resources. The Forest will reevaluate the impacts of climate change to affected resources at the end of the project’s 20-year duration, and if impacts from climate change do change the level of significance at any time during project implementation, revised environmental analysis will be conducted.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

### Summary of Public Involvement

The Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project was first published to the schedule of proposed actions on January 2, 2018. In 2021, the North Idaho Working Group formed. This is a collaborative group facilitated by the National Forest Foundation and made up of representatives from diverse, interested parties and local and state government agencies. Their intent was to develop a stakeholder-based proposal balancing over-snow vehicle travel, various forms of winter recreation, and protection of forest resources and wildlife habitat. The Idaho Panhandle National Forests presented information on the travel management planning process at several working group meetings in the spring of 2022. On March 1, 2022, we issued a news release announcing that we had begun travel management planning for snowmobiles and other over-snow vehicles on the north zone of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests.

On August 16, 2022, we sent a scoping letter announcing the project via email or U.S. mail to over 1,225 people, government officials, agencies, organizations, and individuals on forest mailing lists and those who had subscribed for electronic updates on Forest Service projects. A full list of the agencies we contacted is included in the project record. We posted the proposed action and maps to the project webpage and requested that commenters provide their feedback within 30 days. We received 148 comment letters, including 135 unique comment letters. The interdisciplinary team and responsible official reviewed and considered the comments and used them to modify the proposed action, consider alternatives to the proposed action, and focus the environmental analysis.

A 30-day comment period legal notice was published in the *Coeur d'Alene Press* on March 29, 2023. Project record location: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=53091>. All letters and comments received on the proposed project can be found in the project record. We received 170 form letters and 259 unique letters during the comment period. Our response to these comments can also be found in the project record.

A list of agencies, organizations and persons consulted regarding this proposal is provided in the *Agencies and Persons Consulted* section.

### Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

Findings required by other laws and regulations applicable to the proposal can be found in the *Environmental Impacts: How would our management actions affect the environment?* Section.

***This project is Not Likely to Jeopardize the currently proposed North American wolverine. After the wolverine becomes a threatened species on January 2, 2024, the Forest will reinitiate consultation on this project with the U.S. Fish and wildlife Service..***

### Implementation Date

Pursuant to 36 CFR 218.12, I may sign the decision notice five (5) business days after the close of the objection review period. Implementation may begin immediately after this decision notice is signed. There is no requirement to publish notification of the decision.

### Administrative Review and Objection Opportunities

This decision notice was subject to administrative review and objection pursuant to 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and B. The legal notice announcing the opportunity to object to the draft decision was published in the



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

*Coeur d'Alene Press* newspaper on July 14, 2023. Ten timely objections were received during the subsequent 45-day objection filing period, and seven met the standing to object requirements and were responded to according to 36 CFR 218. As a result of the review of these objections, the forest decided to take many of the objector's recommendations into consideration and the resulting changes are documented above in this Final Decision Notice section.

## Contact

For additional information concerning this decision, contact:

Doug Nishek, Environmental Coordinator, Bonners Ferry Ranger District, 6286 Main Street, Bonners Ferry, ID 83805, 208-267-6765 or Jessie Berner, District Ranger, Sandpoint Ranger District, 1602 Ontario St., Sandpoint, ID 83864, 208-263-5811.

**TIMOTHY  
GILLOON**

Digitally signed by TIMOTHY  
GILLOON  
Date: 2023.12.28 15:02:54  
-08'00'

\_\_\_\_\_  
Timothy D. Gilloon  
Forest Supervisor  
Idaho Panhandle National Forests

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date





*Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

This page intentionally left blank



## References

- Arno, S.F.; Hoff, R.J. 1989. Silvics of whitebark pine (*Pinus albicaulis*). General Technical Report. INT-GTR-253. Ogden, Utah: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Intermountain Research Station.
- Baker E.; Buthmann, E. 2005. Snowmobiling in the Adirondack Park. Environmental and social impacts. St. Lawrence University Department of Biology: 1–47.
- Brown, C.L., A.R. Hardy, J.R. Barber, K.M. Fristrup, K.R. Crooks, and L.M. Angeloni. 2012. The effect of human activities and their associated noise on ungulate behavior. PLoS ONE 7(7): e40505. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0040505
- Buxton, R.T., M.F. McKenna, D. Mennitt, K. Fristrup, K. Crooks, L. Angeloni, and G. Wittemyer. 2017. Noise pollution is pervasive in U.S. protected areas. *Science* 356:531–533. <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aah4783>
- Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ). 2005. Guidance on the consideration of past actions in cumulative effects analysis.
- CEQ. 2016. Final guidance for federal departments and agencies on consideration of greenhouse gas emissions and the effects of climate change in National Environmental Policy Act reviews.
- Dugan, A.; McKinley, D.; Campbell, A.; Stamm, E. 2022. Forest carbon assessment for the Idaho Panhandle National Forests in the Forest Service’s Northern Region. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service.
- Farnes, P.E. 1990. SNOTEL and snow course data describing the hydrology of whitebark pine ecosystems. In Schmidt, W.C., McDonald, K.J., comps. Proceedings- Symposium on whitebark pine ecosystems: Ecology and management of a high-mountain resource. General Technical Report. INT-270. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Intermountain Research Station, Ogden, Utah.
- Gibson, K.; Kegley, S.; Bentz, B. 2009. Mountain pine beetle. Forest insect and disease leaflet 2. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Region, Portland, Oregon.
- Halofsky, J.E.; Peterson, D.L.; Dante-Wood, S.K.; Hoang, L.; Ho, J.J.; Joyce, L. A., eds. 2018a. Climate change vulnerability and adaptation in the Northern Rocky Mountains. General Technical Report RMRS-GTR-374. Fort Collins, Colorado: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station. Part 1. pp. 1–273.
- Halofsky, J.E.; Peterson, D.L.; Dante-Wood, S.K.; Hoang, L.; Ho, J.J.; Joyce, L. A., eds. 2018b. Climate change vulnerability and adaptation in the Northern Rocky Mountains. General Technical Report RMRS-GTR-374. Fort Collins, Colorado: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station. Part 2. pp. 275–475.
- Harrison, R.T., R.N. Clark, and G.H. Stankey. 1980. Predicting impact of noise on recreationists. ED&T Project No. 2688: Noise Pollution Prediction Methods. USDA Forest Service, Equipment Development Center, San Dimas, CA, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/t-d/pubs/pdfimage/80231202.pdf>



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

- Heinemeyer, K.S.; Squires, J.R. 2013. Wolverine - winter recreation research project: investigating the interactions between wolverines and winter recreation. 2013 Progress Report. Round River Conservation Studies, Salt Lake City, Utah, and U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station, Missoula, Montana.
- Heinemeyer, K.S.; Squires, J.R.; Hebblewhite, M.; O’Keefe, J.J.; Holbrook, J.D.; Copeland, J. 2019. Wolverines in winter: indirect habitat loss and functional responses to backcountry recreation. *Ecosphere* 10: 1–23.
- Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (IDEQ). 2022. Idaho Integrated Report. Idaho Department of Environmental Quality.
- Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG). 2014. Management plan for the conservation of wolverines in Idaho. Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Boise, Idaho.
- Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation. 2018. 2018-2022 Idaho Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation.
- Inman, R.M.; Brock, B.L.; Inman, K.H.; Sartorius, S.S.; Aber, B.C.; Giddings, B. 2013. Developing priorities for metapopulation conservation at the landscape scale: Wolverines in the Western United States. *Biological Conservation* 166: 276–286.
- Karau, E. 2023. National Whitebark Pine Restoration Plan R1/R4 Core Area Nomination Working Group: Whitebark Pine R1 Core Area Nomination Workflow Procedure Version 2.12.21.
- Kasworm, W.F.; Manley, T.L. 1990. Road and trail influences on grizzly bears and black bears in northwest Montana. *Bears: Their Biology and Management* 8: 79–84.
- Kasworm, W.F.; Radandt, T.G.; Teisberg, J.E.; Vent, T.; Proctor, M.; Cooley, H.; Fortin-Noreus, J. 2022a. Cabinet-Yaak grizzly bear recovery area 2021 research and monitoring progress report. U.S. Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Missoula, Montana.
- Kasworm, W.F.; Radandt, T.G.; Teisberg, J.E.; Vent, T.; Proctor, M.; Cooley, H.; Fortin-Noreus, J. 2022b. Selkirk Mountains grizzly bear recovery area 2021 research and monitoring progress report. U.S. Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Missoula, Montana.
- Keane, R.E.; Holsinger, L.M.; Mahalovich, M. M.; Tomback D. 2017. Restoring whitebark pine ecosystems in the face of climate change. General Technical Report. RMRS-GTR-361. Fort Collins, Colorado: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station.
- Keyel, A.C., S.E. Reed, M.F. McKenna, and G. Whittemyer. 2017. Modeling anthropogenic noise propagation using the Sound Mapping Tools ArcGIS toolbox. *Environmental Modeling and Software*. 97 (2017) 56-60.
- Klos, P.Z.; Link, T.E.; Abatzoglou, J.T. 2014. Extent of the rain-snow transition zone in the western U.S. under historic and projected climate. *Geophysical Research Letters* 41: 4560–4568.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

- Kok, A.C.M., B.W. Berkhout, N.V. Carlson, N.P. Evans, N. Khan, D.A. Potvin, A.N. Radford, M. Sebire, S. Shafiei Sabet, G. Shannon and C.A.F. Wascher. 2023. How chronic anthropogenic noise can affect wildlife communities. *Front. Ecol. Evol.* 11:1130075.  
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fevo.2023.1130075>
- Kolbe, J.A.; Squires, J.R.; Pletscher, D.H.; Ruggiero, L.F. 2007. The effect of snowmobile trails on coyote movements within lynx home ranges. *Journal of Wildlife Management* 71: 1409–1418.
- Larson, E.R. 2011. Influences of the biophysical environment on blister rust and mountain pine beetle, and their interactions, in whitebark pine forests. *Journal of Biogeography*. 38: 453–470.
- Luce, C.H.; Lopez-Burgos, V.; Holden, Z. 2014. Sensitivity of snowpack storage to precipitation and temperature using spatial and temporal analog models. *Water Resources Research* 50: 9447–9462.
- Maier, J. A., S.M. Murphy, R.G. White, and M.D. Smith. 1998. Responses of caribou to overflights by low-altitude jet aircraft. *The Journal of Wildlife Management* 62:752–766.
- Negron, J.F.; Allen, K.; Cook, B.; Withrow J.R. 2008. Susceptibility of ponderosa pine, *Pinus ponderosa*, to mountain pine beetle, *Dendroctonus ponderosae* attack in uneven-aged stands in the Black Hills of South Dakota and Wyoming USA. *Forest Ecology and Management* 254: 327–334.
- Parsons, B.M., N.C. Coops, G.B. Stenhouse, A.C. Burton, and T.A. Nelson. 2020. Building a perceptual zone of influence for wildlife: delineating the effects of roads on grizzly bear movement. *European Journal of Wildlife Research* 66:53. 16 pp.
- Proctor, M.F.; Paetkau, D.; McLellan, B.N. [et al.]. 2012. Population fragmentation and inter-ecosystem movements of grizzly bears in western Canada and the northern United States. *Wildlife Monographs* 180:1–46.
- Reed, S.E., J.L. Boggs, and J.P. Mann. 2012. A GIS tool for modeling anthropogenic noise propagation in natural ecosystems. *Environmental Modelling and Software* 37. 5 pp. <http://purl.oclc.org/spread-gis>
- Ruediger, B.; Claar, J.; Gniadek, S. [et al.]. 2000. Canada lynx conservation assessment and strategy. Second edition. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, and U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and National Park Service, Missoula, Montana.
- Seip, D.R.; Johnson, C.J.; Watts, G.S. 2007. Displacement of mountain caribou from winter habitat by snowmobiles. *Journal of Wildlife Management* 7: 1539–1544.
- Selkirk Caribou International Working Group (SCITWG). 2018. South Selkirk Caribou Management Plan. Prepared for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Boise, Idaho.
- Shannon, G., M.F. McKenna, L.M. Angeloni, K.R. Crooks, K.M. Fristrup, E. Brown, K.A. Warner, M.D. Nelson, C. White, J. Briggs, S. McFarland, and G. Wittemyer. 2016. A synthesis of two decades of research documenting the effects of noise on wildlife. *Biol Rev* 91:982–1005.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/brev.12207>



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

- Simpson, K.; Terry, E. 2000. Impacts of backcountry recreation activities on mountain caribou – management concerns, interim management guidelines and research needs. Wildlife Working Report Number WR-99. British Columbia Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks, Wildlife Branch, Victoria, British Columbia.
- Squires, J.R.; Decesare, N.J.; Kolbe, J.A.; Ruggiero, L.F. 2010. Seasonal resource selection of Canada lynx in managed forests of the northern Rocky Mountains. *Journal of Wildlife Management* 74: 1648–1660.
- Squires, J.R.; Olson, L.E.; Roberts, E.K.; Ivan, J.S.; Hebblewhite, M. 2019. Winter recreation and Canada lynx: reducing conflict through niche partitioning. *Ecosphere* 10: e02876. DOI: 10.1002/ecs2.2876.
- Switalski, Adam. 2016. *Journal of Conservation Planning* Vol 12 (2016) 21-28. Snowmobile Best Management Practices for Forest Service Travel Planning. <https://winterwildlands.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Snowmobile-BMPs-recreational-use-conflict.pdf>
- Tomback, D.F.; Clary, J.K.; Koehler, J.; Hoff, R.J.; Arnos, S.F. 1995. The effects of blister rust on post-fire regeneration of whitebark pine: the Sundance burn of northern Idaho. *Conservation Biology* 9: 654–664.
- Tomback, D.F.; Anderies, A.A.; Carsey K.S.; Powell, M.L.; Brown, S.M. 2001. Delayed seed germination in whitebark pine and regeneration patterns following the Yellowstone fires. *Ecology* 82: 2587–2600.
- Tomback, D.F.; Resler, L.M.; Keane, R.E.; Pansing, E.R.; Andrade, A.J.; Wagner A.C. 2016. Community structure, biodiversity, and ecosystem services in treeline whitebark pine communities: potential impacts from a non-native pathogen. *Forests* 7: 1–22.
- USDA Forest Service. 2007a. Northern Rockies lynx management direction record of decision. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, National Forests in Montana, and parts of Idaho, Wyoming, and Utah.
- USDA Forest Service. 2007b. Northern Rockies lynx management direction: Final environmental impact statement (vols. 1 and 2). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, National Forests in Montana, and parts of Idaho, Wyoming, and Utah.
- USDA Forest Service. 2011a. Forest Service Manual 2900–Invasive Species Management. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, National Headquarters, Washington DC.
- USDA Forest Service. 2011b. Record of decision: Forest plan amendments for motorized access management within the Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak grizzly bear recovery zones. Kootenai, Lolo, and Idaho Panhandle National Forests. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service.
- USDA Forest Service. 2015. Revised land management plan Idaho Panhandle National Forests. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Northern Region, Missoula, Montana.
- USDA Forest Service. 2019. National Visitor Use Monitoring Report for Idaho Panhandle National Forests. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. 2022. Report Generator 2.0. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, National Water and Climate Center. <https://wcc.sc.egov.usda.gov/reportGenerator/> Accessed on December 12, 2022.
- U.S. Department of Commerce. 2022. Census Bureau, American Community Survey Office, Washington, D.C. Accessed via [www.headwaterseconomics.org](http://www.headwaterseconomics.org) on December 13, 2022.
- USDA Forest Service and U.S. Department of Interior (USDI) Fish and Wildlife Service. 2008. Memorandum of understanding between the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to promote the conservation of migratory birds (Forest Service Agreement number 08-MU-1113-2400-264).
- USDI Fish and Wildlife Service. 1985. Selkirk Mountain caribou management plan. U.S. Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Portland, Oregon.
- USDI Fish and Wildlife Service. 1993. Grizzly bear recovery plan. U.S. Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service.
- USDI Fish and Wildlife Service. 2007. National bald eagle management guidelines. U.S. Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service.
- USDI Fish and Wildlife Service. 2008a. Biological opinion on the effects of the “Winter Motorized Recreation Forest Plan Amendment for the Flathead National Forest” (“A24”) on Grizzly Bears. U.S. Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana Ecological Services Field Office, Helena, Montana.
- USDI Fish and Wildlife Service. 2008b. Birds of conservation concern 2008. U.S. Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service.
- USDI Fish and Wildlife Service. 2013a. Biological opinion on the revised forest plan for the Idaho Panhandle National Forests Chapter II Grizzly Bear. U.S. Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Idaho Fish and Wildlife Office, Northern Idaho Field Office, Spokane Valley, Washington.
- USDI Fish and Wildlife Service. 2013b. Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Threatened Status for the Distinct Population Segment of the North American Wolverine Occurring in the Contiguous United States; Establishment of a Nonessential Experimental Population of the North American Wolverine in Colorado, Wyoming, and New Mexico; Proposed Rules. Federal Register Vol. 78, No. 23, Monday, February 4, 2013, pages 7864–7890.
- USDI Fish and Wildlife Service. 2018. Species status assessment report for the North American wolverine (*Gulo gulo luscus*). Version 1.2. U.S. Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Mountain-Prairie Region, Lakewood, Colorado.
- USDI Fish and Wildlife Service. 2020. Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Threatened Species Status for *Pinus albicaulis* (Whitebark Pine) With Section 4(d) Rule. Federal Register, Vol. 85, No. 232, Wednesday, December 2, 2020.



*Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

USDI Fish and Wildlife Service. 2022. Amended Biological opinion addressing the effects of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests' Land and Resource Management Plan on the grizzly bear. 01EIFW00-2022-E-00420. U.S. Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Idaho Fish and Wildlife Office, Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.



*Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

This page intentionally left blank





## Appendix A – Design Features

### Hydrology Design Features

#### Hydrology 1

Over-snow vehicle use is prohibited on any open surface water.

**Source:** National Core Best Management Practices Rec-4, Rec-5, and Rec-7.

**Applies to Location:** Entire project area.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.

#### Hydrology 2

Provide public education on the hazards of running over-snow vehicles on thin ice.

**Source:** National Core Best Management Practices Rec-7.

**Applies to Location:** Entire project area.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.

### Botany Design Features

#### Botany 1

Provide public education to over-snow vehicle users about whitebark pine (identification, ecology, importance, Federal protection, conservation measures, damage avoidance, recovery efforts, and the reality of potential penalties or closures related to resource damage). Incorporate general whitebark pine habitat information into any maps produced for the project area for users.

**Source:** Land management plan FW-DC-VEG-09, FW-GDL-VEG-07; Endangered Species Act Section 7(a)(2).

**Applies to Location:** Areas with known whitebark pine occurrences and suitable habitat.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.

#### Botany 2

Provide public education for invasive species and encourage cleaning of over-snow vehicles, towing vehicles, and trailers prior to entering public lands to remove soil particles, debris, plant parts, and material that may carry weed seeds.

**Source:** Forest Service Manual (FSM) 2900; Executive Order 13751; land management plan FW-OBJ-VEG-02, FW-DC-VEG-10.

**Applies to Location:** Entire project area.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.



### **Botany 3**

The forest will consider monitoring options to assess potential over-snow vehicle damage to whitebark pine within the project area. Specifically, monitoring would try to assess potential over-snow vehicle impacts to whitebark pine and high-value, cone-bearing individuals in targeted areas within the project area.

**Source:** Endangered Species Act.

**Applies to Location:** Areas with known occurrences or suitable habitat for whitebark pine.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.

## **Heritage and Cultural Resource Design Features**

### **Heritage 1**

Heritage properties (National Historic Preservation Act listed, eligible for listing, or not yet evaluated for National Historic Preservation Act eligibility) within the project area will be protected as follows:

- Physical barriers where appropriate.
- Designation of trails away from the physical location of heritage properties to avoid adverse effect to both the surface and subsurface site constituents.
- Critical Heritage Properties near over-snow vehicle trail routes and active non-trail use areas will be added to the annual heritage monitoring plan to review for inadvertent adverse effects.
- Other protections may include upon consultation with the heritage program professional, appropriate state historic preservation officer(s) and tribal historic preservation officer(s): physical enclosures around Heritage Property area(s), closure of specific trails until a no adverse effect action can be reached, etc.

**Source:** National Historic Preservation Act.

**Applies to Location:** Entire project area.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.

### **Heritage 2**

Any heritage properties identified in the future will be analyzed for potential adverse effects based on the over-snow vehicle use plan and may require appropriate protection measures on a case-by-case basis.

**Source:** National Historic Preservation Act.

**Applies to Location:** Entire project area.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

### Heritage 3

Traditional Cultural Properties (TCPs) and sacred sites within the project area will be protected. Designation of trails away from the physical location of TCP(s) to avoid adverse effect to both the surface and subsurface site constituents.

- TCPs near over-snow vehicle routes and active non-trail use areas will be added to the annual heritage monitoring plan to review for inadvertent adverse effects. Any potential adverse effects will be consulted upon with the appropriate tribal historic preservation officer(s) to define future protection measures.
- Any TCPs identified in the future will be analyzed for potential adverse effects in consultation with the appropriate tribal historic preservation officer(s) based on the over-snow vehicle use plan and may require appropriate protection measures on a case-by-case basis.
- As per the Tribal governments identify and negotiate management and protection with the Forest Service those areas of religious and spiritual concern on public lands.
- Currently, no official sacred sites are managed within the project area, however several are currently in consultation for designation to define management needs and requirements. None of these designated areas are within areas of common over-snow vehicle use and are not expected to be an issue going forward.
- Any sacred sites identified by the Tribal governments in the future will be analyzed for management needs through Tribal consultation – including potential adverse effects as based on the over-snow vehicle use plan – and may require appropriate protection measures on a case-by-case basis.

**Source:** American Indian Religious Freedom Act; Executive Order 13007 – Indian Sacred Sites; Executive Order 13175 – Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments.

**Applies to Location:** Entire project area.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.

## Recreation Design Features

### Recreation 1

The Forest Service may temporarily prohibit over-snow vehicle use of trails for other types of management activities such as contracted timber or vegetation management or other resource concerns.

**Source:** FSM 2353.2.

**Applies to Location:** Entire project area.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.

### Recreation 2

Within the state of Idaho, over-snow vehicle users must comply with Idaho state laws governing the use of snowmobiles. As defined in Idaho State Law 67-7101: “Snowmobile” means any self-propelled vehicle



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



### Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

under two thousand (2,000) pounds unladen gross weight, designed primarily for travel on snow or ice or over natural terrain, which may be steered by tracks, skis, or runners.

**Source:** Idaho State Law Title 67, Chapter 71.

**Applies to Location:** National Forest System lands within the state of Idaho.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.

### **Recreation 3**

Within the state of Montana, over-snow vehicle users must comply with Montana state laws governing the use of snowmobiles. As defined in Montana Code Title 61, Chapter 1, Part 1, Section 72: "Snowmobile" means a self-propelled vehicle of an overall width of 48 inches or less, excluding accessories, that is designed primarily for travel on snow or ice, that may be steered by skis or runners, and that is not otherwise registered or licensed under the laws of the state of Montana.

**Source:** Montana Code 23, Chapter 2, Part 6.

**Applies to Location:** National Forest System lands within the state of Montana.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.

### **Recreation 4**

Within the state of Washington, over-snow vehicle users must comply with Washington state laws governing the use of snowmobiles. As defined in the Revised Code of Washington Title 46, Chapter 46.04: "Snowmobile" means a self-propelled vehicle that is capable of traveling over-snow or ice that (1) utilizes as its means of propulsion an endless belt tread or cleats, or any combination of these or other similar means of contact with the surface upon which it is operated, (2) is steered wholly or in part by skis or sled type runners, and (3) is not otherwise registered as, or subject to, the motor vehicle excise tax in the state of Washington.

**Source:** Revised Code of Washington Title 46, Chapter 46.10.

**Applies to Location:** National Forest System lands within the state of Washington.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.



## **Recreation 5**

Trailheads and constructed features at trailheads shall comply with the applicable technical provisions of the Forest Service Outdoor Recreation Accessibility Guidelines (FSORAG) and Architectural Barriers Act Accessibility Standards (ABAAS). Routes connecting those facilities are to comply with the Forest Service Trail Accessibility Guidelines (FSTAG) outdoor recreation access route specifications.

**Source:** FSORAG; ABAAS; FSTAG.

**Applies to Location:** Entire project area.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.

## **Recreation 6**

Where over-snow vehicle trails intersect or travel across trails designated for Nordic skiing, over-snow vehicles shall yield to non-motorized users.

**Source:** FSH 2309.18.

**Applies to Location:** Entire project area.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.

## **Recreation 7**

Routes maintained (groomed) for over-snow vehicle use on National Forest System lands shall comply with both existing trail management objectives and the trail design parameters listed in FSH 2309.18.

**Source:** FSH 2309.18; Standard Specification for Construction and Maintenance of Trails (EM-7720-103).

**Applies to Location:** Entire project area.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.

## **Transportation Design Features**

### **Transportation 1**

Use the standards and guidance contained in the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (FSM 7108.21) for all signs and traffic control devices on National Forest System roads. Post route markers on routes designated for over-snow vehicle use and identification signs in areas designated for over-snow vehicle use as soon as practicable. Information on route markers and signs must correspond to the information shown on the corresponding over-snow vehicle use map. Signs must comply with applicable Forest Service guidelines (FSM 2353.03, para. 11, and 7160; EM 7100-15).

**Source:** FSM 7108.21; FSM 7731.16; FSM 7716.42; FSM 2353.03; FSM 7160; EM 7100-15; Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 7709.55.32.2.

**Applies to Location:** Entire project area.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.



## Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

### Transportation 2

An “over-snow vehicle Trail Crossing” sign may be used where over-snow vehicle trails cross a road designated for motorized mixed use.

**Source:** FSM 7731.16; FSM 7716.42; FSM 7160; FSH 7709.55.32.2.

**Applies to Location:** Entire project area.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.

### Transportation 3

Additional or modified signing may be needed when there will be a change in use. Timber sale contracts, road use permits authorizing commercial hauling, incidental noncommercial use related to ownership or occupancy of isolated parcels of private land served by a National Forest System road, may require plowing of groomed or ungroomed over-snow vehicle routes.

**Source:** FSM 7731.16; FSM 7716.42; FSM 7160; FSH 7709.55.32.2.

**Applies to Location:** Entire project area.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.

### Transportation 4

The designation of a National Forest System Road or National Forest System trail as open to over-snow vehicle use does not override prohibitions in 36 CFR 261.12, including those incorporating State motor vehicle size and weight limits.

**Source:** 36 CFR 261.12; FSM 7731; FSM 7716.11.

**Applies to Location:** Entire project area.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.

### Transportation 5

Implement requirements regarding operation and maintenance of bridges on National Forest System roads to assure road user safety as found in FSM 7736.

**Source:** FSM 7736; FSM 7733.03.

**Applies to Location:** Entire project area.

**Applies to Alternatives:** All.



Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

# Appendix B – Activities Considered for Cumulative Effects

Table 19. Summary of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable activities considered in cumulative effects analysis

Action	Past	Present	Reasonably Foreseeable	Additional Information
Timber harvest and fuels reduction on non-Federal lands	Yes	Yes	Yes	See Idaho Panhandle National Forests map for the various ownerships including State of Idaho, Bureau of Land Management, and private lands scattered across the project area. Available on the forest website at <a href="https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/ipnf/maps-pubs">https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/ipnf/maps-pubs</a>
Timber harvest and fuels reduction on Federal lands	Yes	Yes	Yes	Current and proposed timber, recreation, and aquatic improvement projects are listed on the forest website at <a href="https://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/ipnf/landmanagement/projects">https://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/ipnf/landmanagement/projects</a>
Private land development	Yes	-N/A	N/A-	N/A-
Tree planting on Federal and non-Federal lands	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A
Public activities: firewood cutting, driving roads, camping, snowmobiling, hunting, horseback riding, hiking, skiing, and berry picking	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A
Road construction & road decommissioning / storage	Yes	Yes	Yes	Current and proposed timber, recreation, and aquatic improvement projects are listed on the forest website at <a href="https://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/ipnf/landmanagement/projects">https://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/ipnf/landmanagement/projects</a>
Road maintenance activities	Yes	Yes	Yes	Current and proposed timber, recreation, and aquatic improvement projects are listed on the forest website at <a href="https://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/ipnf/landmanagement/projects">https://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/ipnf/landmanagement/projects</a>
Fire suppression	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A
Wildfires	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A
Trail and recreation site maintenance	Yes	Yes	Yes	Current and proposed timber, recreation, and aquatic improvement projects are listed on the forest website at <a href="https://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/ipnf/landmanagement/projects">https://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/ipnf/landmanagement/projects</a>



Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

Action	Past	Present	Reasonably Foreseeable	Additional Information
Habitat restoration	Yes	Yes	-	Current and proposed timber, recreation, and aquatic improvement projects are listed on the forest website at <a href="https://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/ipnf/landmanagement/projects">https://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/ipnf/landmanagement/projects</a>
Grazing management	Yes	Yes	Yes	-
Precommercial timber stand improvement	Yes	Yes	Yes	Current and proposed timber, recreation, and aquatic improvement projects are listed on the forest website at <a href="https://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/ipnf/landmanagement/projects">https://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/ipnf/landmanagement/projects</a>
Clearing brush and trees to maintain helispots	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A
Stimson Land Exchange	N/A	N/A	Yes	The Stimson Land Exchange has not been finalized or decided. If and when land comes under management by the Idaho Panhandle National Forest, over-snow vehicle management will be applied on the concept of adjacency, to be managed in a manner similar to the National Forest System parcels adjacent to the acquired land.
Chloride Gold Project	N/A	N/A	Yes	Located on the Sandpoint Ranger District. Published to the forest Schedule of Proposed Actions, currently developing proposal.
Black Ram Project	N/A	Yes	N/A	The Kootenai National Forest signed a decision on the Black Ram project on June 21, 2022. The project is located on the Three Rivers Ranger District directly adjacent to the Northwest Peaks Scenic Area. Project activities include timber harvest; mechanical and hand piling of fuels; wildlife and aquatic habitat improvement such as prescribed burning and stream restoration work; and trail and other recreation improvements. Additional project information can be found at: <a href="https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=52784">https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=52784</a>





*Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

<b>Action</b>	<b>Past</b>	<b>Present</b>	<b>Reasonably Foreseeable</b>	<b>Additional Information</b>
Knotty Pine Project	N/A	Yes	N/A -	The Kootenai National Forest signed a decision on the Knotty Pine project on March 24, 2022. The project is located on the Three Rivers Ranger District, northwest of Troy Montana, adjacent to the Kaniksu over-snow vehicle project Purcells and Boulder Creek/Katka analysis areas. Project activities include timber harvest, fuel treatments, and recreation improvements to the Cougar Ridge Cross Country Ski Area. Additional project information can be found at: <a href="https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=57657">https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=57657</a>



## **Appendix C – Implementation Plan**

### Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Travel Management Implementation Plan

As stated in the Service's revised 2020 Land and Resource Management Plan Biological Opinion, the Idaho Panhandle National Forest (the Forest) shall complete and implement a Winter Travel Plan by the end of calendar year 2023. The Service interprets this to mean that the Forest will complete an over-snow motorized travel plan that includes: 1) considerations for post-den emergent grizzly bears, 2) a map that depicts closure areas used for purposes of consultation, and 3) an implementation plan. that outlines any future on-the-ground activities and timelines through collaboration with the Forest. The Forest has completed the Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Travel Plan analysis designating over-snow vehicle trails and open areas and are in the process of producing over-snow vehicle use maps to be available to the general public. This document satisfies the requirement for an implementation plan and includes a general outline of outreach, monitoring and enforcement actions. The implementation plan can be modified in the future to incorporate changes in technology or other factors affecting monitoring and enforcement in collaboration with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service).

The Forest currently conducts monitoring and enforcement of over-snow vehicle activities prior to the completion of the Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Travel Plan. The Forest intends to continue these activities into the foreseeable future. Examples of Forest activities include, but are not limited to:

- Forest Staff meeting bi-weekly from November to mid-May with the groomer board for all over-snow vehicle related activities occurring on Bonner and Boundary Counties. The Groomer Board includes representatives from the Idaho Department of Lands and the Priest Lake Groomer Committee, Forest Service representative, Idaho Parks and Recreation, Bonner County Parks and Recreation, U.S. Border Patrol and representative from the Bonner County Commissioners.
- Applying for funds for a snow ranger program in the North Zone to perform registration enforcement, wilderness boundary patrol, provide information/education/enforcement of authorized trails and areas, monitor impacts to wildlife and whitebark pine trees, train maintenance, and general environmental education.
- Participating in the Challenge Cost Share agreement with Bonner County for the groomed snowmobile trails program with the boundaries of State Designated Snowmobile Areas, West Bonner County Area #9A, East Bonner County Area #9B and Boundary County Area #11.

## **General Monitoring and Enforcement**

The Forest agrees to complete the following tasks by November 16, 2024, or by the date specified for that action. The Forest will:

### **Signage**

- Install temporary signage and maps at over-snow vehicle parking areas and other access points depicting open trails and areas along with dates these are open by February 1, 2024. This includes Priest Lake (Nordman), Pack River, Snow Creek, Smith Creek, Deer Creek, Trestle Creek, and Bunco parking areas. Also signs at Moose Lake and Roman Nose Lake warming huts with information on late-season open areas. Permanent signs will be installed by November 16, 2024.



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

### **Enforcement**

- Provide two snow rangers to regularly patrol trailheads and trails and contact and educate users as funding allows. Each of the nine trailheads listed above should be visited at least every 2 weeks to conduct snowmobile user counts beginning February 1, 2024. Moose & Roman Nose Lakes should have at least 2 visits each in April (conditions permitting) once they are opened for late season use.
- The Forest will also develop a standardized snowmobile trailhead monitoring form by February 1, 2024, which will be used by the snow rangers.
- Report information about unauthorized use annually by July 1st to the Service as part of the annual report.
- Visit warming huts after May 31 to assure food storage order is adhered to and take actions to remedy the situation if it is not.

### **Media Outreach**

- Conduct Media outreach prior to March 15, 2024, and prior to winter 2024-2025 on news and social media to inform over-snow vehicle users of new plan and restrictions.
- Develop snowmobile brochures by March 15, 2024, to raise awareness of over-snow vehicle restrictions. Distribute brochures to local businesses, District offices, etc.
- Update the Forest website by February 1, 2024, to include information on snowmobile closures.

## **Specific Monitoring and Enforcement for Endangered Species Act Listed Species**

The Forest will conduct the following activities for grizzly bear, caribou, Canada lynx, and whitebark pine:

### **Grizzly Bear**

- By November 16 each year, prioritize closure areas for signage installation and Forest and law enforcement personnel presence based on previous year's usage data and patterns.
- Install temporary signage by February 1, 2024, and permanent signage by November 16, 2024. Signs will provide information on how to stay safe when encountering bears and how to report bear encounters.
- Incorporate late-season aerial monitoring by the Service's Grizzly Bear Recovery Office to determine: 1) extent of late-season use near denning habitat; 2) changes/trends in den exit dates over time; and 3) any movement from dens during the denning period by collared bears.
- Establish enforcement presence in late season over-snow vehicle use areas (Roman Nose and Moose Lake) by April 1, 2024, to ensure compliance with adjacent closures.

### **Caribou**

- Re-initiate consultation if caribou individuals are observed in or within 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) of the project area.



## *Kaniksu Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation Project*



Final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Decision Notice

### **Canada Lynx**

- Report any changes in routes authorized for grooming and assure compliance with Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction.

### **Whitebark pine**

- Prioritize signage installation at over-snow vehicle parking areas accessing existing whitebark pine habitat by November 16, 2024.
- Develop signage for public education on whitebark pine that encourage users to avoid vegetation protruding above snow line and remind recreationists that it is their responsibility to not damage resources. Signs will be installed by November 16, 2024
- Establish enforcement presence in areas of reported resource damage to whitebark pine.
- Investigate and monitor areas with reported OSV resource damage to whitebark pine.

### **Reporting**

The Forest shall complete a report with the information listed above and submit it to the Service's Idaho Field Office by July 1 of each year starting in 2024. The report will contain information on routes and dates groomed, areas monitored and when they were monitored, trailheads signed, number of over-snow vehicle users contacted and estimates of use by area during dates rangers present, violations documented, any citations or warnings issued, and any brochures or online info developed during the previous year. This report will also include any documented observations of unauthorized use in closed areas, changes to routes approved for grooming, and any reported conflicts with grizzly bears, den abandonment, or disturbance following den emergence. and any damage to individual whitebark pine directly caused by over-snow vehicle use. This includes seedlings and saplings, mature cone producing trees not specifically identified as Plus/elite trees and identified Plus or elite trees.

The Service recommends that the Forest contact the Service if any of the following events occur to determine whether the Implementation Plan needs to be revised.

- Changes in grizzly bear den emergence timing.
- Repeated unauthorized use of restricted areas.
- Repeated damage to whitebark pine individuals
- Any damage to identified plus or elite trees.