

# Aspen Daily News

"If you don't want it printed, don't let it happen."

Tuesday Nov 29th, 2005

Mostly Cloudy

0° F



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## Photo Gallery



**Photo Credit:** Zach Ornitz/ADN  
 The Maroon Bells and Maroon Creek valley are covered in a blanket of light, white, fluff. As of Friday, brave motorists in four-wheel drive vehicles were able to drive to the Bells.  
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## Quick Poll

Should the United States immediately pull out of Iraq?

Yes  
 No

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## Backcountry brouhaha

*Troy Hooper - Aspen Daily News Staff Writer*  
 11/03/2004 02:57 MST

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A winter ago, Andrew Wiltz zoomed his snowmobile along Richmond Ridge, then down the roads that access McFarland's and Wine Tree ski runs on the flipside of Aspen Mountain. A backcountry skier, Wiltz exulted in the serene experience.

But this winter, U.S. Forest Service ranger John Thompson is there to stop him. Ranger Thompson is enforcing a federal directive, first issued in 1985, that basically says snowmobiles and serenity are diametrically opposed - literally a clash between oil and water.

"The fun stuff is off limits," said Wiltz, a 30-year-old retired World Cup snowboarder who works as a ski tuner and photographer in Aspen. "A lot of people are getting shut out and they aren't terribly thrilled about it."

The Forest Service elected to enforce the law this winter after allowing motorized sleds in the wilderness area on the eastern side of Richmond Ridge on a trial basis the last two winters. Rangers aborted the experiment as a result of snowmobilers who interfered with the operations of Aspen Mountain Powder Tours, an Aspen Skiing Co. entity that holds a permit to sell backcountry ski expeditions.

"It wasn't working for them. They were losing a lot of skiable terrain," said Forest Ranger Jim Stark, noting that some snowmobiles were illegally driven off the roads and onto the slopes, spoiling the untracked snow.

Aspen Mountain Powder Tours grooms a handful of roads that its snowcats use on the eastern side of Richmond Ridge to transport paying customers to and from acres of deep champagne powder. The creation of the roads is allowed through the outfit's permit, which tour operators have held under different names since 1970. While the general public is allowed to ski and snowboard down McFarland's, Wine Tree and other runs in the area, federal law requires users to hike or skin their way back out. Tour company drivers are the only ones allowed to utilize the roads.

Motorized vehicles are allowed to use Pitkin County roads such as Richmond Ridge, Midnight Mine, Little Annie's and Upper Hurricane, and snowmobiles can motor through Gold Mine, Hurricane Woods and the western side of Richmond Ridge. Rangers have set up a series of orange signs that mark where machines are allowed.

Murray Cunningham, co-director of Aspen Mountain Powder Tours, said most of the adventurers on Aspen Mountain's backside are respectful of one another.

"I don't have problems with 90 percent of the people who come out there and use the roads. They're friendly, considerate and do what we all want to do: Have a good time, make turns in an outstanding setting and enjoy the sunshine. But there are other people who see the world as their oyster and not other people's oyster," Cunningham said. "That's where I see the conflict."

The Forest Service's budget is lean. So is its manpower. Thus, even though the agency is trying to enforce the rules, there is ample time and opportunity for motorized-vehicle owners to break them. Ranger Thompson only patrols the area for a handful of hours, four days a week. He issues warnings and directs traffic.

"Most people are following the rules," said Thompson, adding that he hasn't yet written a ticket, which could result in a \$75 fine on the first offense. Second offenses require a court appearance before a U.S. magistrate in Grand Junction.

Given the difficulty of catching lawbreakers, and the mostly amicable relationship between Aspen Mountain Powder Tours and backcountry snowmobile users, Forest Service rangers say they'd like to figure out a compromise. "It would be great if everybody could make it work," Stark said.

Anywhere between one and 30 machines, many of them carrying two skiers or snowboarders, are spotted in the area on a typical winter day. "This year there are more snowmobiles back there than I've ever seen," Wilz said.

At Stark's suggestion, Wilz, who takes his four-stroke Yamaha RX-1 Mountain sled behind Aspen Mountain almost daily, organized the Aspen Snowmobile Club, which recently applied for a permit to share the eastern side of Richmond Ridge with Aspen Mountain Powder Tours. The tour company averages approximately 1,000 clients a year.

If a permit is granted, the club would require members to follow a strict set of guidelines so as not to disturb Aspen Mountain Powder Tours, other backcountry users and residents who have homes in the area. Those who violate the rules would be punished or kicked out of the club. A small fee would be needed for the permit.

"We want to make our presence felt as little as possible back there. If everyone is responsible, we can coexist peacefully," Wilz said.

The application is pending. Aspen District Ranger Bill Westbrook said that it would be reviewed within 30 days from the time it was received.

"I'm glad they're starting to get together as a group. That's what it's going to take," Westbrook said. "It's a lot easier to deal with an organized group than a bunch of individuals. This is a real good first step."

Even so, the best prospect to resolve the area's conflicts is through a review of its Road and Travel Map, an addendum to the White River National Forest management plan where the motorized-vehicle law is written. The Road and Travel Map is revisited every 20 years and a draft is due out this spring. Then it will open to public comment. A final draft is expected in the spring of 2006.

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