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Battle for Aspen Mountain's backside continues

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For some die-hard backcountry skiers, the best powder on Aspen Mountain is tucked away on the backside where the slopes are steep, the snow is deep and the lifts don't run. [Send To Printer »](#)

They skip the chairlifts for snowmobiles, motoring up and skiing down a landscape where snow and solitude prevail. Their motorized access to these stashes, though, could be sealed off -- or saved -- by a plan being finalized by the White River National Forest that will dictate where motorized vehicles can go throughout the forest.

Skiers worry the Forest Service's new travel management plan could shut out their sleds altogether from the Richmond Ridge area. They've found themselves aligning with traditional snowmobilers -- a group that doesn't always mix well with skiers -- in hopes they can use their machines to reach terrain now limited to Aspen Skiing Co. The company offers guided powder tours there for visitors who pay top dollar for first tracks down secluded runs.

"How can you let them take over and not allow the public out there on an equal basis?" asked Mike Sladdin, president and founder of Powder to the People, a nonprofit he launched to champion the cause.

Sladdin's group has been asking supporters to weigh in on the travel management plan in support of public snowmobile access to Richmond Ridge and its 400 acres of backcountry ski terrain. The public comment period ends Thursday.

"It's extremely, extremely rare for the Forest Service to put private interests ahead of John Q. Public's interests, and that's what they've done," said Powder to the People member Gary Gleason.

Access in question

Richmond Ridge has been controversial for the past three winters when the Forest Service began enforcing a little-known policy that gave SkiCo exclusive motorized access. Last winter, skiers reached an agreement with the company to allow private snowmobiles on part of the terrain while SkiCo's snowcats had access to the rest.

Powder to the People wants full access, though, and members worry the new travel management plan could shut them out completely.

The Forest Service's preferred plan, Alternative D, seeks to balance motorized and non-motorized uses throughout the forest. It was a middle ground between other alternatives. The final plan is likely to be a mix of alternatives.

Sladdin said he supports Alternative D for most of the forest, but he's rallying

supporters to call for the more-permissive Alternative C for the area behind Aspen Mountain. That would allow widespread snowmobile use throughout the area -- a possible source of conflicts between uphill sledders and downhill schussers, and something even Sladdin said he'd rather not see.

"We're just hoping that people will do what they've been doing all along and preserve that as a ski area and continue to stay on the roads," he said.

Ideally, Gleason said, the group would like to limit snowmobiles to a trio of over-snow roads that climb the ridge, but he said he fears that would lead the Forest Service to continue to limit access to SkiCo.

SkiCo wants exclusive permit

"I believe the Forest Service is trying to do what they can to please all parties, but you have to recognize that the Skiing Company and the Forest Service are very close partners," said Gleason, who doesn't ski Richmond Ridge but worried SkiCo was getting preferential treatment. "I believe at times the Forest Service defers to the Skiing Company because they don't want to make them mad and they have to work with them on a day-to-day basis, and members of the general public are more diffuse."

SkiCo hopes to hold on to its exclusive permit. Bob Perlmutter, who runs its Aspen Mountain Powder Tours, fears more snowmobiles will damage the pristine experience his clients seek when they pay \$335 to ride a snowcat to untracked powder.

"Our view of the general public is a much broader view than I feel Powder to the People's view of the general public is," he said. "My view of the general public is anybody, anywhere. Anybody, anywhere can't show up in Aspen and be expected to have, a) a snowmobile, and b) have the ancillary equipment, and c) have the knowledge and training to be able to go back there on their own."

Perlmutter has written a letter to the Forest Service asking to maintain SkiCo's exclusive use, and to continue the agreement that allows others access to McFarland's Road, one of three roads Powder to the People wants to use. SkiCo reached the agreement reluctantly, he said, but found it worked well last winter, and it gives skiers access to some of the best terrain.

"We feel that's a balanced approach," he said.

'Very much champagne'

Both sides agree about the lure of the slopes on the backside of Aspen Mountain.

"It's just a really good, cold-snow powder cache," Sladdin said. "It doesn't get skied a lot. It piles up out there. It's typically untracked. Nice and light. Very much champagne. You can go out there a couple of days after the mountain is all skied out after a powder day on Aspen Mountain and you're skiing untracked again. And you're getting away from it all, too. You're out there on your own."

That's why visitors pay top dollar to escape the ski lifts.

"Of course I understand why both non-motorized and motorized (skiers) want to enjoy and partake in that," Perlmutter said.

They also agree wide-open snowmobile use wouldn't be ideal for skiers.

"It's counter-productive to the experience, needless to say," said Perlmutter, who said run-ins prompted the crackdown on Powder Tours' terrain.

Powder to the People members hope sledders who want to "high mark" on steep slopes will find other places to play.

"I think the area has traditionally been respected," Sladdin said.

Finding a balance

The Forest Service is left finding a balance, not just between Powder to the People and the SkiCo, but between others who are eyeing Aspen Mountain's other side. Forest planner Wendy Haskins said she's heard from backcountry trekkers who want all motorized users kept out, and there may be snowmobilers who don't want to stick to the roads.

"You have to weigh all sides and then render a decision that way," she said. "Hopefully we can see what people want and come up with some sort of solution. Now, are we going to satisfy everyone 100 percent? It's kind of hard to do when everyone has very different ideas."

The public comment period on the travel management plan ends Thursday.

Information on the plan and a link to send public comments is available at the White River National Forest Web site at www.fs.fed.us.

Comments may also be e-mailed to wrnftmp@contentanalysisgroup.com; mailed to WRNF Travel Management Plan and DEIS, c/o Content Analysis Group, P.O. Box 2000, Bountiful, UT 84011-2000, faxed to 801-397-2601 or hand delivered to local White River National Forest offices.

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