

Mark Menlove: Idaho Senators Need to Heed More Than Just Snowmobilers

READER'S VIEW: WILDERNESS

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There's a move afoot from Idaho Sens. Jim Risch and Mike Crapo to pressure their Montana counterparts, Sens. Jon Tester and Max Baucus, to remove the Montana side of Mount Jefferson and Hellroaring Creek from wilderness designation as proposed in the Forest Jobs and Recreation Act (FJRA), a Montana wilderness bill co-sponsored by the two Montana senators. The move, which would serve only a narrow special interest, is ill-advised.

Mount Jefferson is a small but significant 4,500-acre area located in the Centennial Mountains along the Idaho/Montana border. The political pressure from Idaho hinges on the fact that Idaho snowmobilers want access to Montana's Mount Jefferson. Never mind the fact that the Idaho portion of Mount Jefferson as well as the entire Idaho side of the Centennial Range are already open to snowmobiles and would remain open to snowmobiles under the Montana bill. Meanwhile, backcountry skiers, snowshoers and other quiet winter enthusiasts from both Idaho and Montana have been pushed into one small, rugged corner of Mount Jefferson.

In addition to its recreational value, Mount Jefferson provides critical wildlife habitat. Big game species including elk, deer and moose find secure, productive habitat in this remote region, as do rare carnivores including wolverine, lynx and grizzlies. Mount Jefferson forms the eastern gateway to the High Divide wildlife corridor, an irreplaceable connection between the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem and undeveloped wild country in Central Idaho made possible by the unique east-west axis of the Centennial Mountains.

The claim put forth by Idaho opponents of the Montana wilderness designation is that the winter economies of Idaho communities like Island Park are dependent on snowmobile access to all of Mount Jefferson. While I recognize and support the desire for Idaho's senators to be sensitive to their snowmobile constituents' concerns, a closer review of public land designations on both sides of the state line reveals that Idaho's demands may be more a case of simple greed than of economic need.

Analysis of Forest Service, BLM and state land data for public lands within a 20-mile radius of Island Park, including the Mount Jefferson area, show that 98 percent of those lands are currently open to snowmobile use. That's 297,933 acres. The Forest Jobs and Recreation Act would reduce that figure by just 2,344 acres and bring the percentage of public lands open to snowmobiles in the Greater Island Park area to 97 percent. On a broader scale, of the 3 million total acres on the Caribou-Targhee National Forest that surround Island Park and other eastern Idaho communities, nearly 2.5 million acres are open to snowmobiles while just 545,000 acres are protected for non-motorized winter activities. It seems a shaky argument indeed to claim Idaho snowmobilers will be harmed by the Montana bill.

The Island Park chamber's promotional materials justifiably tout the area's 500 miles of snowmobile trails and thousands of acres of backcountry snowmobile adventures. None of that will change with the passage of FJRA. On the other hand, wilderness designation for part of Mount Jefferson will enhance opportunities for regional businesses to attract clientele seeking non-motorized winter recreation and wilderness experiences. Already, two Montana businesses are catering to that clientele with backcountry hut trips, guided ski touring and backcountry pack trips around Mount Jefferson. Wilderness designation will ensure opportunities for Idaho businesses to do the same.

A broad coalition of recreation and sportsmen's groups and businesses from both states has endorsed the bill and specifically called for wilderness designation for Mount Jefferson. These groups and businesses are constituents too, and their voices should be given consideration just like the Idaho snowmobile lobby.

Sens. Tester and Baucus have good reason to stand firm on their recommendation for Mount Jefferson. Our Idaho senators will better serve their entire constituency by respecting that recommendation.

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