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Storm brews over noisy use of national forests

*JIM LYNCH**The Detroit News*

At almost 1 million acres, the Huron-Manistee National Forests in Michigan's northern Lower Peninsula would seem to have enough room for everyone to play to their hearts' content.

But a challenge to the U.S. Forest Service's land management plan is forcing officials to consider prohibiting popular activities such as firearms hunting and snowmobiling from certain areas — all because of concerns over noise and how some recreational activities can affect others.

One Novi man's legal protest could render 67,770 acres — roughly 6.5 percent of the total forest land — off-limits to those activities believed to interfere with quieter endeavors such as bird-watching, hiking and cross-country skiing.

Novi resident Kurt Meister, 53, an attorney whose family owns a cottage near Cadillac, challenged the forest service plan, arguing that it didn't adequately address the concerns of all park users. On Friday, the comment period for readdressing the management plan closes with a final public information meeting in Lansing.

It could be a year or more, said forest service planner Lee Evison, before federal officials propose a new management plan as a result of the hearings.

"This could be a long process," Evison said.

The prospect of losing access to those lands for their favorite pastimes has many in the hunting and snowmobiling communities crying foul. They see the idea of limiting activities on public land as an infringement on their freedoms.

"The precedent that could be set here is dangerous," said Fred Fleming, 59, of Macomb Township. He owns property in the Huron-Manistee National Forests and is an avid hunter. "This could open the door to any special interest group or individual who wants a piece of public land limited to their own use," Fleming said. "I don't think we should go there. I don't think it's something we should allow."

Recent headlines from around the country aren't likely to put those fears to rest. Earlier this month, a court ruling in Idaho opened the door to possible limitations on where motorized vehicles can go on the Salmon-Challis National Forest. Yellowstone National Park recently also began limiting the number of daily guided snowmobile trips allowed.

Huron-Manistee National Forests, the only federal forests in Michigan's Lower Peninsula, cover 978,918 acres in two large masses. The Huron National Forest was created in 1909 on the state's east side, while the Manistee National Forest was established three decades later. Federal officials combined the two in 1945 and now the land attracts roughly 4 million recreational visits a year.

People come for a variety of outdoor activities that include everything from camping, fishing and hunting, to hiking, horseback riding and biking.

Lawyer takes action

For most of his 53 years, Meister has been one of the regulars — hiking the woods surrounding his family's

cottage near Cadillac. Now he finds himself at the center of the controversy regarding how Huron-Manistee's lands are used.

The forest service released a draft of its management plan in 2006, one that essentially allowed firearms hunting throughout the park and snowmobiling wherever trails allowed. Meister challenged the plan in the U.S. Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals in March, arguing federal officials had not followed required procedures in drafting it.

But beyond the technical issues raised by Meister was a simple question: If some recreation activities detract from others, does the forest service need to set aside land for restricted uses?

"It's about noise and about the ability to say, 'One day, I'd like to go for a walk in the woods and hear nothing but birds or maybe the sound of a squirrel running up a tree. And I'd like to have that experience separated from human disturbances,'" Meister said.

He said he has nothing against federal forest land being used for hunting or snowmobiling — two activities that can be intrusive because of the noise involved. Bow hunting would remain an acceptable activity in the restricted areas. To preserve the experience of bird-watching, snow-skiing, hiking or other activities, he said, some property should be set aside for those people.

As a result of Meister's challenge, the U.S. Court of Appeals in September ordered the forest service to go back over its management plan, starting with a public comment period, and take into consideration closing off Huron-Manistee land — already designated as "semi-primitive, nonmotorized" — to firearms hunting and snowmobiling.

Snowmobilers upset

The action has prompted many members of Michigan's snowmobiling community to share the reaction of hunters. There are 653 total miles of snowmobile trails in the Huron-Manistee National Forests, and 9.23 miles of those would be affected by the proposed changes.

"I think any infringement on our snowmobiling rights is wrong," said Sharon Flewelling, a Cadillac resident who has been riding the trails for more than 40 of her 65 years. "You keep chipping away at any opportunity for snowmobilers to utilize trails, where will it end? If (Meister) wins and gains something here, there's going to be someone else with even more demands."

Last weekend, Flewelling and others welcomed hundreds of fellow snowmobilers to Cadillac for its 27th annual North American Snow Festival. Reducing the number of forest acres where snowmobilers can roam will only hurt those kinds of events, she said.

"Snowmobiling brings a lot of money into communities in northern Michigan, including the Upper Peninsula," she said. "If you want to take away those trails, to restrict people from snowmobiling ... then you're going to see reduced income."

In protesters' defense

Meister has supporters, however. Novi resident Kathleen "Kit" Hadley has been an avid kayaker for the past eight years. In several instances, she said, she and friends have felt uncomfortable with the proximity of hunters.

"Hunters absolutely have a right to do what they do, and I'm glad for that," the 51-year-old said. "But I don't want to be kayaking right next to them when they're hunting. Couldn't we have a little area for recreational activities where we don't have to have hunting?"

Since the September court ruling, sporting blogs have been filled with discussion about the possible loss of hunting access to some of the federal land. Not all of the discussion has been polite and a great deal of anger has been directed at Meister, including posts like: "I would hope that every business that lies in this area that makes money from snowmobilers and hunters posts a wanted sign in their window with (Meister's) name and

picture on it."

Regardless, Meister doesn't feel he's asking for too much.

"I simply think that anyone who wants to use the forest can find some place there to do the things they want to do," he said.

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