

Unquestionably....by Jan Neish

"Unquestionably there will be snowmobiling in any Caldera national monument." So said Rick Johnson, executive director of Idaho Conservation League. He stated that any monument designation would honor the area's long tradition of snowmobiling. In fact, he said that to speak of Island Park's future without snowmobiling would be like talking of Idaho's future without agriculture. Not going to happen.

Yes, you read that right. The executive director of a major environmentalist group has said there would be snowmobiling allowed in any possible Caldera national monument. And he is not alone in that belief. Johnson's sentiment was echoed by the State BLM office and the National Park Service Washington D.C. regulations office.

To clarify, there are three government agencies from two different departments that could manage or co-manage a national monument. From the Department of the Interior there is the BLM agency and the National Park Service and from the Department of Agriculture there is the National Forest Service. All three agencies follow the same procedure of creating a customized management plan for any national monument once it is designated.

According to Russ Wilson of the National Park Service, their general regulation - which could be further modified - allows snowmobiling on designated roads that support vehicular traffic and on frozen lakes that allow motor boating when thawed. The roads do not have to be paved. The Forest Service also has a general policy of multiple uses as long as it is compatible with the sustainability of the forest. And the BLM classifies snowmobiles as "off road" vehicles and would create a travel management plan unique for each area after public input. They may leave the trail system "open as was" or designate trail areas.

Our local snowmobile trail expert and Fremont County Parks and Rec Director Tamra Cikatoga explained that 80% of our snowmobile trails are based on forest service roads. She cautioned, though, that "roads" might be a generous term for some of those routes and that the other remaining 20% of trails across private lands are a vital part of the whole system.

Still, the trail system that was established in the 1960s definitely represents 50 years of snowmobiling tradition and could be adopted as a whole. At any rate, snowmobiling is not an automatic exclusion as many feared.

Other reasons for not wanting a national monument, gleaned from the Caldera Heritage Coalition online petition, include concerns over irrigation rights; grazing permits; ATV use; hunting, fishing, camping, and boating recreation; and restricted access to private property.

Let me be clear - this discussion is not to persuade anyone to want a national monument. It is merely to present facts so clear decisions can be made.

It is unclear if ATV use would have the same consideration that snowmobiling would. Can we point to the same depth of tradition and established trails? Maybe. Of the 17 western national monuments created since 1982, all allowed hunting, fishing, and general recreating, only 3 restricted grazing, and 4 restricted or prohibited timber harvesting. In all cases, private properties and existing rights were honored.

What usually was not allowed included mining, geothermal activity, new residents, or new public land use. These 17 national monuments are a small sampling, but they do seem to point to trends in management plans for large, western monuments.

On the Caldera Heritage Coalition site, the remaining reasons for opposing a national monument centered on the designation process and the issue of control. Yes, the President can create a national monument with "the stroke of his pen" and Congress, influenced by special interest groups, can legislate national monuments as well. That is a reality. It might be irritating, insulting, or frustrating, but it is the law.

Control of the county lands by federal agencies was also a major reason to sign the petition. With 69% of Fremont County already owned by federal and state agencies, this is hardly new. It may still be unwelcome, but it is not new. Either way, Fremont County has to work with federal agencies.

I'm reminded of Dragnet, which shows my age. Remember how he would say, "Just the facts, ma'am.?" In that spirit, the national monument facts are:

Snowmobiling will be allowed, ATVs might not be.

Hunting, fishing, boating, hiking, x-country skiing, camping, horseback riding, etc. will be allowed.

Private lands and rights will be honored.

Grazing can be allowed, timber harvesting might not be.

Mining and geothermal developments won't be allowed

New public land use and residents probably won't be allowed

By sticking with the facts and presenting our concerns on that foundation, we increase our credibility with those in power. Generally, valid and intelligent concerns are heard, while basely fears are not. Additionally such fears can cloud the issues and weaken our voice. Let's be informed and stick with the facts.