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From the Los Angeles Times

Yellowstone National Park speeds up action on snow machines

An environmental assessment allowing for the use of snowmobiles and snow coaches will be ready by next month, a spokesman says. The park's winter operations could be shut down if a plan is lacking.

By Julie Cart

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In an about-face, officials at Yellowstone National Park said Wednesday that they would quickly craft a plan to allow snowmobiles and snow coaches into the park in time for the winter season.

After a federal judge ruled two weeks ago that Yellowstone's snowmobile-use proposal was unacceptable because it would put the health of visitors and animals at risk, park officials said they would not be able to hammer out a new plan before the season starts Dec. 15. The impasse had threatened to shut down much of Yellowstone's winter operations for the first time in decades.

On Monday, park Supt. Suzanne Lewis told a business group in Cody, Wyo., that it was possible that only snowshoers and cross-country skiers would be allowed into Yellowstone. But on Wednesday, park spokesman Al Nash said that an environmental assessment allowing for the use of snow machines would be ready by early next month, followed by a 15-day comment period.

Conservation groups -- which support making the park accessible through snow coaches and a limited number of snowmobiles -- cautiously applauded the announcement.

"It's good news," said Bill Wade, a former park service superintendent and leader of a group of agency retirees who oppose Yellowstone's snowmobile regulations. But the better option, Wade said, would have been allowing solely snow coaches, which are multi-passenger vans on tracks and skis, because they are less-polluting and not as noisy as snowmobiles. Their use has increased 89% since 2002 as visitors seek a more comfortable experience complete with educational guides.

The scramble began after federal Judge Emmett G. Sullivan ruled that the snowmobile regulations Yellowstone had in place violated the "fundamental purpose of the national system . . . to conserve park resources and values."

Sullivan threw out the rules and told the park to come up with something environmentally acceptable. That ruling meant there would be no

regulations in place for motorized access to the park this winter.

Last year, as many as 720 snowmobiles a day were allowed in Yellowstone. That number would have been reduced to 540 per day under the plan Sullivan rejected. Conservation groups have argued that those numbers don't reflect actual visitor use.

Last year, the average daily number of snowmobiles in Yellowstone was 290, Nash said.

The switch to snow coaches has been gaining acceptance in the communities surrounding Yellowstone, where tourism has been disrupted in recent years because of lawsuits and judicial reversals regarding the park's winter-use plans.

Under President Clinton, snowmobiles were to be phased out after studies found their use negatively affected visitor and employee health as well as the welfare of wildlife. The Bush administration reversed that policy.

In the last eight years, the park has conducted scientific analyses on the effects of snowmobiles at Yellowstone. The reports all concluded that snowmobiles result in unhealthy air and unacceptable noise for humans and wildlife.

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