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Forest Service urges compromise in Aspen backcountry

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A decision over whether the public will be able to use snowmobiles to access 400 acres of coveted ski terrain on the back of Aspen Mountain this winter appears unlikely before the snow flies, a U.S. Forest Service official said Tuesday, but a compromise agreement between the two main parties in the dispute could be brokered before then.

Bill Westbrook, Aspen/Sopris district ranger for the White River National Forest, said a formal determination would not be made until the draft version of the Travel Management Plan is completed, probably in spring 2006.

"It is truly a travel management issue and we are in the middle of a travel management analysis," Westbrook told the Pitkin County commissioners at their quarterly meeting yesterday.

Local backcountry skiers, who have formed a collective called Powder to the People, are upset that the Richmond Ridge area on the back of Aspen Mountain is out of bounds to private snowmobiles. It has been for years, but the Forest Service only recently started to enforce the rule.

The machines' prohibition means it is much harder for individuals to access the powder-rich terrain, though they still can on foot. The Aspen Skiing Co., however, is able to take its Sno-cats into the area because it has a special-use permit from the Forest Service. Users of the SkiCo-run Aspen Mountain Powder Tours pay up to \$295 for a day.

Powder to the People also applied for a special-use permit, earlier this year, but this was turned down as the Forest Service said it was in the middle of its Travel Management Plan, which studies the types of vehicles accessing national forest.

Although a Forest Service decision is unlikely anytime soon, Westbrook suggested that a compromise could be reached between Powder to the People and SkiCo. He said the two parties should get together and work out an agreement that would see SkiCo agree to let private snowmobiles access parts of the contested terrain.

The parties have already met to try to flesh out an agreement and although negotiations were unsuccessful, they appeared amenable to the idea of further talks.

"We're always willing to get down and talk to these guys," said Steve Sewell, Aspen Mountain manager.

Powder to the People spokesman and founder Michael Sladdin said he would talk to SkiCo in coming weeks. Still, he said he was frustrated with the length of time the process is taking.

"We can't get anything done," said Sladdin. "It doesn't seem to be the way it

should be. We want to be responsible users."

The BOCC has little say over what happens on Richmond Ridge, as the area is federal. Politicians did however urge the two parties to work out an agreement that would see responsible use, but not unchecked snowmobiling.

"If we work this right, it can work for everyone," said Commissioner Mick Ireland.

Westbrook said after the meeting that if SkiCo and Powder to the People fail to reach a compromise, he would have no choice but to fall back on earlier Forest Service rulings, effectively precluding private snowmobile use in the area.

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