

Sylvan Pass Study Group sets rules for meeting

By Carole Cloudwalker, Cody Enterprise

Draft ground rules for a group hoping to find avalanche and winter access solutions on Sylvan Pass will be reviewed and approved before a Jan. 28-30 meeting in Billings.

The Sylvan Pass Study Group was authorized by wording in the Yellowstone and Grand Teton parks' winter use Record of Decision that was signed Nov. 20.

If the group cannot come up with a workable plan by June 1, the Park Service will proceed to close Yellowstone's East Entrance in winter, claiming avalanche danger threatens both park employees and the public.

Members of the study group include Yellowstone Superintendent Suzanne Lewis, Cody Mayor Roger Sedam, Park County Commission Chairman Tim French, Rep. Colin Simpson, and Ryan Lance and Mark Toft from Gov. Dave Freudenthal's office.

"I think the rules are fair and they will help us make good decisions and arrive at a consensus," Simpson said.

"I'm eager to talk about issues that matter on Sylvan Pass and winter use."

Simpson added that he does not "want to re-invent the wheel" by reviewing data that's already been presented.

"The group has a great deal of information, but there are some things that can be added rather than just reading what's been written" so far, he said.

Each member of the group is allowed to name one additional person to participate in the sessions, but that person must be a government representative.

While the group, under terms of the draft ground rules, may change the status of Sylvan Pass winter opening, neither the ROD or final rule authorizing its implementation gives the group the authority to alter the number of snowmobiles or snow coaches permitted in the park. Its function is strictly limited to Sylvan Pass avalanche and access issues.

The group likely will learn from "experts knowledgeable about the issues" when working on its proposal.

The Park Service has employed facilitator Carl Moore, Ph.D., to conduct the meetings.

Moore will prepare a final recommendation reflecting consensus of the group, as well as reports of each meeting.

The reports will be made available on Web sites of the city of Cody and Park County.

While the public and the press are barred from attending "deliberations" of the group, they will be admitted to "informational" portions of each session under terms of the draft ground rules.

At the close of each meeting, group members will decide what information will be communicated to the press. Moore will prepare a press release based on that decision.

Representatives of Wyoming, Montana and Idaho Congressional delegations will be allowed to observe deliberations of the group if they wish.

The ultimate goal of the group is to reach agreement on mitigation that would provide continued snowmobile and snowcoach access to the two national parks beyond the current winter season via the East Entrance and Sylvan Pass.

If such mitigation can be found before June 1, the ROD would be amended to reflect it, according to the ground rules. The mitigation would be implemented during the winter of 2008-09 and beyond.

The group already conducted one meeting in Billings where ground rules were established.