

Winter openings near

*By Cory Hatch, Jackson Hole Daily
December 14, 2007*

Yellowstone National Park will open to winter snow travel Wednesday as scheduled, according to park officials.

This year's opening comes after the National Park Service decided on a winter travel plan that would allow 540 snowmobiles and 83 snow coaches in the park each day. The Park Service published the final rule on the snowmobile plan Thursday in the Federal Register.

The new plan, however, will go into effect for the 2008-09 winter season. This winter, officials will continue with a temporary plan that has allowed 720 snowmobiles into the park each day for the past three years. The park will also continue avalanche control on Sylvan Pass this season.

"We will be ready to open to winter snow travel next Wednesday, unless Mother Nature throws us a left hook," Yellowstone spokesman Al Nash said.

For this year's opening, Nash said, the park has varying snow depths, from about 4 inches in places like Hayden Valley to about 22 inches elsewhere. There is a chance of snow in Yellowstone each day through Wednesday.

Until the park gets more snow, it will allow only rubber-tracked snowmobiles and snow coaches except for on the stretch of road between Old Faithful and the South Gate, which has enough snow to accommodate vehicles with metal tracks. Metal-tracked vehicles include some of the older Bombardier snow coaches and a couple of the park's groomers, Nash said.

Park officials used a howitzer to knock down a potential avalanche Wednesday on Sylvan Pass, and crews expect to have the road between Fishing Bridge and the park's east entrance groomed by the opening, Nash said.

As stated in the new travel plan, next season park officials will not rely on helicopters and howitzer shots to control avalanches on the pass but will instead use "full avalanche forecasting" to determine when Sylvan Pass is safe. Park officials continue to negotiate with Wyoming lawmakers and Cody residents on the future of avalanche control on Sylvan Pass. A final decision is expected by June 1.

In a statement Thursday, park officials said, "Methods used to reduce the risk of avalanche-hazard mitigation this winter may result in longer temporary closures between the detection of avalanche risk and the reopening of Sylvan Pass."

Grand Teton National Park will also open for the winter season Wednesday. Depending on snow cover, crews will start sporadic grooming on Teton Park Road from the Taggart Lake parking lot to Signal Mountain for cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and walking, according to park official Carol Cunningham. Dogs are allowed on the groomed surface but must be on a leash. Snowmobile travel in Grand Teton National Park won't start until mid-January.

This year, 140 snowmobiles will be allowed in Grand Teton each day on the Continental Divide Snowmobile Trail, Grassy Lake Road and on Jackson Lake. Starting next winter season, 25 snowmobiles each day will be allowed to travel on Grassy Lake Road and 40 snowmobiles that use the best available technology to prevent pollution will be allowed on Jackson Lake to access ice fishing; officials will close the Continental Divide Snowmobile Trail for cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and walking, according to park official Carol Cunningham. Dogs are allowed on the groomed surface but must be on a leash. Snowmobile travel in Grand Teton National Park won't start until mid-January.