

Yellowstone boss sees big summer

By RUFFIN PREVOST

Gazette Wyoming Bureau

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CODY -- Yellowstone National Park Superintendent Suzanne Lewis said Monday that early signs point to a strong summer in the park, and she expressed optimism that a deal will be struck to continue winter access over Sylvan Pass.

"Right now, every indication is that it will be a busy, busy summer in Yellowstone," Lewis told a group of business and community leaders during National Parks Day, a traditional summer tourism season kick-off event in Cody.

"With fuel prices where they are, people ask how can I be so optimistic in my forecasting, but all the indications that we see are that we're going to have a very good, very strong year in the park for visitation," she said.

Saying this year's reservations are at or ahead of last year's at this time, Lewis reminded the group that 2007 "was a banner year in Yellowstone," with visitation up 10 percent, and most of that increase coming through the park's East Entrance.

She said meetings between representatives from the Park Service, Park County, Cody and Wyoming about winter access over Sylvan Pass have "gone very good, and it's tough work, but it has been a good, honest exchange."

"We're working hard toward being able to make an announcement in June, and I'm very optimistic we'll be able to do that," she said.

John Sacklin, a Yellowstone management assistant who has played a key role in winter planning, also said he thought an agreement would be reached.

Several lawsuits over Yellowstone's winter use plan have been consolidated into two actions, and federal courts in Washington, D.C. and Cheyenne are expected to rule on the cases before the winter season starts, Sacklin said.

He said one set of legal challenges claims that too many snowmobiles are allowed under the plan, while another argues that not enough are.

John Parsons, chairman of a national parks committee of Cody Country Chamber of Commerce members, said he was optimistic that sustained snowmobile traffic over Sylvan Pass, a newly opened ski area at Sleeping Giant and a growing ice hockey scene in Cody could give the winter economy a boost like it hasn't seen in years.

He said public interest in national parks issues continues to rise.

"The parks have always been a cornerstone of our economy and our community, but as the public becomes more informed about what's going on, they are getting more involved," Parsons said.

Lewis said no major road construction or maintenance work was planned for the East Entrance this year, although "plenty of road work will be going on somewhere else in the park, as this is the only time of year we have to get the road work done."

Construction costs continue to rise, along with fuel prices, which have posed a challenge to the park's annual budget, she said.

"While we've been very fortunate in the Park Service to get a little more money every year, that money just doesn't cover expenses," Lewis said.

"The cost of fuel is impacting everything else we're buying, including food, supplies and materials, and that's a big issue," she said, adding that road plowing this spring, at times, had consumed up to 12,000 gallons of diesel fuel each day.