



*WWA Backcountry Ambassador Report
Stanislaus National Forest Winter 2022/2023*

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Thoughts on the Backcountry Ambassador Role

This season was a logistically challenging one with back to back storms and incredible snow levels. Some of the issues experienced this season aren't likely to be repeated until we have another winter like this one, however some issues will persist. Deep snow may have buried some signs, but fluctuating snow levels throughout any winter should necessitate the USFS adapting signage to continue to function.

Monitoring and making recommendations and assisting with placement of signs seems to be the most important role that a backcountry ambassador could currently fill on the Stanislaus. Since the USFS staff primarily stay in the parking lot and on groomed trails, it is important for the backcountry ambassador to monitor areas outside of that limited scope. Maintaining strong communication and a positive working relationship with USFS staff is important so that issues can be identified and addressed promptly. Establishing a once a month outing with USFS staff would be beneficial to allow for better communication. That outing would ideally include using snowmobiles and backcountry ski/splitboard to monitor more remote areas of concern. The ability to use snowmobiles to start skinning farther from the trailhead is an important aspect of effectively monitoring sensitive resources and areas of concern.

USFS staff seem to have the education component decently covered with recreation staff on highway 4 and with interpretive events and signage on highway 108. The USFS staff could be collecting data about use levels but to my knowledge have not been. If the USFS loses funding for the staff fulfilling the education component, the ambassador would be most helpful in the parking lot and within the first mile of trailheads to do outreach and education. This season there was a USFS employee present at the sno parks on highway 4 at some point during the day on weekends. The SledFest event that occurs after Bear Valley Ski Resort closes poses significant issues and concerns that should be addressed. It also may provide an opportunity for WWA to provide education and show support for the snowmobile community.

Bringing human powered recreationists together through avalanche awareness presentations, beacons and beers type events would be great, especially on the 108 corridor. Uniting those backcountry users would be helpful in advocating for more human powered backcountry access on the 108 corridor, which is very much needed. I did not connect with USFS staff on the Summit RD/108 corridor this season due to how limited the backcountry access and use is in that district. Monitoring for snowmobile violations could be worthwhile but would likely only allow for a long ride on the groomed highway due to how far out the areas of concern are on 108. It

would be a long difficult day to attempt to snowmobile and ski the areas WWA would be concerned about.

Outside of the occasions where snowmobiles violated boundaries, the biggest conflict and issue for backcountry users is backcountry access being blocked/utilized by people engaging in snow play. The vast majority of littering, not cleaning up after pets, and parking illegally seems to be coming from the snow play community as it occurs within the first ¼ mile of the sno parks and parking areas. It would serve all backcountry users, motorized and non-motorized, for the USFS and other public lands managers to take a more proactive role in managing the public's desire to engage in snow play. Many of the backcountry users I chatted with this season shared the same sentiment about the negative impacts snow players are having on natural resources as well as backcountry access. Differentiating between snow play areas and sno parks that serve as a trailhead could be beneficial. Just like in summer when you are not allowed to camp within a certain distance of certain trailheads, an attempt to limit snow play from occurring at dedicated trailheads could be beneficial. Similarly, having areas that are dedicated to snow play that don't interfere with backcountry access would be beneficial.

The avalanche forecasting for the Stanislaus is very limited to almost nonexistent. The Sierra Avalanche Center extends their forecast area to include Ebbetts Pass, but the west side of Sonora Pass is outside of any official forecast area. The Bridgeport Avalanche Center provides an avalanche forecast for the Bridgeport Winter Recreation Area on the Humboldt-Toiyabe NF. This leaves the entire Highway 108 corridor on the STF without any avalanche forecasting.

Highway 108 Corridor (Summit Ranger District)

Only one true Sno-Park at the highway closure which does not provide desirable skiable terrain within a reasonable distance for human powered recreation

Pinecrest is a huge draw for snow play but does not provide backcountry access

Two trailheads near the ski resort provide backcountry access but the ski resort is the most common ski/splitboard access

Options for better human powered access include

- Moving the sno park to Eagle Meadows road

- Creation of public parking/access at Leland Meadows

Opportunities to collaborate with:

1. Pinecrest Nordic Ski Patrol, USFS Summit Ranger District Interpretive staff to encourage them to use the RIMS app, report data from their events
2. Dodge Ridge Ski Resort, Bear Tent Brewing (local splitboarder owned & operated) & the Dodov Foundation to host beacons and brews event next season

Pinecrest Winter Recreation Area

- Not backcountry skiing access but when it isn't open and accessible it displaces snow players to areas where they do interfere with backcountry access

- Weeks of only one bathroom being open, limited parking due to heavy snowfall not being cleared
- Insufficient trash service
- Great signage
- Lots of interpretative activities this year, including guided snowshoe trips out of Crabtree Nordic trailhead
- **Recommendation:** Encourage the USFS to maintain access to this area throughout the winter, including ensuring regular trash service on weekends, and **promoting the area for safe snow play to alleviate pressure on backcountry access areas**

Dodge Ridge

- Very relaxed uphill travel policy - a ski patroller this season told me they “think there’s designated routes” but weren’t sure where they were and seemed very unconcerned with uphill travel
- Snowmobile evidence behind the resort - because I was with a resort employee I found out that the tracks were from ski patrol rescuing lost individuals and that they have to get USFS permission before taking sleds out there
- No reasonable access to backcountry without entering resort boundaries
- **Recommendation:** Sponsor a beacon search day at the resort

Crabtree Nordic Trailhead

- A decent part of the parking lot did not get plowed most of the season, not a big deal at any time that I have seen
- Light but consistent use from snowplay, xc skiers and snowshoers
- Better signage would help
- Definitely need some pack it in pack it out, clean up after your pet signs
- No restroom facility available here
- This lot sees snowplay use as well
- **Recommendation:** Better signage

Gooseberry Road Trailhead

- Mostly a xc ski access, eventually enters the ski resort
- Parking is heavily affected here when the ski resort is busy as patrons take up the limited parking for the trailhead
- The parking at the base of the road itself is usually only enough for 2-3 cars
- No signage whatsoever here

108 Sno Park

- Tremendous amount of snowmobile use here
- Great signage
- Snowplay occurs around the parking lots

- Too low elevation and too far away from higher elevations to be utilized for backcountry ski access

Leland Meadows Road

- County plows the road to provide access to private condos and privately owned Leland High Sierra Snow Play
- Small sliver of USFS land abuts the road, otherwise the no parking along the road in and the presence of private residences blocks most reasonable access
- Important human powered access area (snowmobiles use Herring Creek Road to eventually access this area) as it is the highest elevation one can drive to in winter on 108 except for the ski resort
- **Recommendation:** Work with USFS and Leland Meadows Snow Park to establish a few public parking spots for backcountry access

Herring Creek Road

- Mostly snowmobile access and snow play due to distance to skiable terrain
- **Recommendation:** Needs signage/OSVUM

Highway 4 (Calaveras Ranger District)

Three well used Sno Parks exist, and Bear Valley Village and the cross country ski center draw significant winter recreation to the area. Spicer Sno Park is only 6 miles from Lake Alpine Sno Park, and Lake Alpine and Round Valley Sno Parks are less than half a mile apart.

Recommendation: Reach out to the Nordic Ski Patrol in the area

Round Valley Sno Park (non-motorized)

- Significant conflicts with snow players taking up parking and creating hazardous conditions at entry/exit point for bc users; not an ideal location for snow play as it rolls into a creek but it is easily accessible; the terrain provides essentially one path into and out of the parking lot so when there are 50-100 people sledding, building snowmen etc. it creates a dangerous and difficult return to the parking lot for backcountry users
- Only signage is inside of the restrooms which get blocked by the plow frequently; appropriate parking is not obvious (parking in the middle of the lot instead of the edges)
- USFS did a good job maintaining the restrooms and shoveling out the entrances
- No motorized violations were observed until the weekend of the SledFest event but those that did occur included high-marking in a bowl and traversing various ridges and features
- The area is used for overnight trips as well
- CalTrans began clearing highway 4 to the asphalt from the Lake Alpine sno park around April 15th. On April 22, 2023 the map that was in the restroom was missing, there was no visible signage indicating non-motorized use only, and there was a snowmobile track into the parking lot

- **Recommendation:** Better signage
- **Recommendation:** Increase monitoring and enforcement for at minimum the first two weeks after CalTrans starts clearing the highway in spring

Lake Alpine Sno Park

- Most heavily used motorized access; receives traffic from Bear Valley village as well
- Bear Valley snowmobile rentals uses this access for customers who can show up and park at the sno park and the snowmobiles are waiting for them on the snow
- Snow play occurs here
- Conflict exists from motorized and non motorized users sharing the groomed road which even in summer is less than two lanes wide
- The first few miles from the sno park, motorized use is prohibited immediately north of the highway but there are no boundary signs and there is no map at the sno park
- **Recommendation:** Support USFS Evan Watson's efforts to re-establish a previously existing non motorized winter trail that parallels the highway on the south side (the north side of the highway is probably not a good candidate for a new trail based on terrain, heavy forest, cabins etc)
- **Recommendation:** Better signage, particularly in the immediate area of the sno parks
- **Recommendation:** Work with the USFS and Bear Valley Snowmobile Rentals to do more education and provide more maps and information

Spicer Sno Park

- Lowest elevation sno park on 4 corridor, mostly used for snow play and snowshoeing
- Strong USFS presence on weekends
- Often fills to capacity with snow play folks on weekends
- Not much skiable terrain accessed from here either

SledFest

I imagine WWA should engage in this event and permitting process in some way as it impacts human powered recreation in the area and has grown significantly every year it has occurred. Collaborating with the event creators may or may not be possible as many of them are supporters of the counter lawsuit filed after the STF OSVUM was approved. It is a unique event that brings a wide spectrum of motorized winter recreationists together.

- Occurs the weekend after Bear Valley ski resort closes, starting around 2018
- After the resort closes it becomes open to motorized use regardless of the event
- USFS issues a special use permit for the event - needs to be a much more robust permit if the event is allowed to continue due to many conflicts
 - Round valley non-motorized area, as well as the Mokelumne wilderness is immediately adjacent to the ski resort

- Multiple violations were documented of motorized use in Round Valley during the event
- I have been monitoring Round Valley all season and there were ZERO violations this season prior to the first day of the SledFest event
- **Recommendation:** the special use permit include requirement of fresh signage placed at all boundaries around the ski resort and at adjacent sno-parks to discourage motorized use outside of allowed areas
- **Recommendation:** Ensure that ALL attendees of the event receive an OSVUM informing them of where it is legal/illegal to ride
- **Recommendation:** the special use permit include funding for a USFS LEO to be on call, and an USFS employee with over snow capabilities be present all 3 days of the event
 - The current USFS recreation staff are not backcountry users outside of snowmobile use on groomed trails
- Attendees avoid paying the parking fee by parking in Bear Valley village public parking and riding their snowmobiles on the groomed roads in the village and up to the resort
 - Snowmobile traffic in the village is allowed, but recreational use is discouraged
 - Speed limit of 20 mph maximum on groomed roads in the village
 - This year a video posted on social media showed event affiliated individuals putting up caution tape throughout town to indicate the “route” to take to the mountain
 - Local residents complained that starting Friday (the first day of the event) there was a significant increase in snowmobiles riding through private property, particularly unoccupied residences
 - Personally witnessed groups of snowmobilers passing through town on routes they are told not to utilize by event organizers (entering on Fremont instead of Bear Valley Road)
 - Personally witnessed snowmobilers with packs, shovels etc. far exceeding the speed limit on groomed roads in town
 - **Recommendation:** The special use permit needs to clearly lay out a plan for:
 - parking in the village
 - travel between the village and the ski resort
 - adequate enforcement
- **Recommendation:** Consideration of whether the event and special use permit warrants technical environmental review
 - An event like SledFest does not occur at any ski resort anywhere else in the Country, according to the organizers of the event itself

- Clearly there are significant and different impacts than normal ski resort operations
- 2023 was the first year they had a sanctioned hill climb event
 - Much different impact on the snow as they built jumps and a hill climb course that resulted in incredibly deep trenches and other impacts that would not occur with normal ski resort use
 - Higher powered machines, potentially more impactful
 - Many images of sleds stuck in tree wells, lodged against trees, hard to argue that is not an impact
- Video documentation exists of a helicopter being used to longline a snowmobile from outside the ski resort boundary and in a designated non motorized area from this year's event