



Lack of Snowmobiles Affect Montana Town

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WEST YELLOWSTONE, Mont. -- Getting a table at Bullwinkle's Saloon & Restaurant is easy this winter. So is finding a room at any local motel -- if they're still open.

This town just outside Yellowstone National Park and largely dependent on park visitors is much quieter than normal, and for many residents, the mood is bleaker.

While snowmobiles still cruise the powdery streets of the self-proclaimed "snowmobile capital of the world," the numbers are far below those in previous years.

Residents blame it on a federal judge's ruling that reversed Yellowstone's snowmobile rules just hours before the start of the season in December and on the confusion and uncertainty that have surrounded the issue for months.

"Just tell them: Yellowstone is open and West Yellowstone is open," said Jackie LaFever, from behind the bar at Bullwinkle's Saloon & Restaurant.

U.S. District Judge Emmet Sullivan put a cloud over the town's economic outlook when he ruled that the National Park Service had to revive a Clinton-era plan that banned snowmobiles from Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks.

The rules, originally scrapped by the Bush administration in favor of cleaner machines, favor mass-transit snow coaches, which would reduce pollution in the parks. Although a limited number of snowmobiles will be allowed to enter this winter, all will have to be part of commercially guided trips.

Perhaps none of the towns around the park are feeling the economic pinch as much as West Yellowstone, which historically has been the most popular gate for entering Yellowstone in winter.

Town officials are trying to figure out what happens to West Yellowstone and its businesses if Sullivan's ruling withstands an appeal.

"We have many questions we need answers to before we can start out on a plan," said Marysue Costello, executive director of the West Yellowstone Chamber of Commerce.

The not-knowing is the worst part, said Bill Howell, whose business includes snowmobile rentals, a hotel and restaurant. "I haven't really thought about next year," he said. "How can you?"

Howell, whose total fleet numbers 137 machines, was among those who invested in cleaner snowmobiles that could meet the Bush plan standards. His limit in the park is now 35 a day, but there haven't been many takers so far.

"I haven't been able to fill those all days because people aren't coming," said Howell, who also rents machines to people who want to ride snowmobiles outside Yellowstone. "You can't survive with what they're proposing."

Snowmobile businessman Kent Swanson agrees. He said he may have to file for bankruptcy if he can't generate more revenue and attract more riders.

On average, Swanson said only about half his 46-snowmobile fleet is rented each day. Swanson, too, said he got back in the snowmobile rental business specifically because he anticipated a profit before the change.

Conservationists cheered the federal changes and say they offer all visitors a chance to see Yellowstone without the buzz of so many snowmobiles.

"I think once things settle down, it will be good for the economy," said Betsy Robinson, a guide based in Bozeman who takes trips into the park. "I think people are resistant to change but I think this will be more in keeping with what the park was created for."

Scott Carsley, a snowcoach operator, said his business has been good this year and believes it will improve under the current rules. "But we're a small segment of the winter economy here," he said.

In town, many business owners paint a different picture.

Some restaurants like The Gusher have scaled back hours. A few motels are closed. And the Food Roundup, a local grocery, recently laid off three part-time workers and a full-time worker.

Linda Heyes, coordinator of job and social services, said job openings have been down "dramatically."

Vernetta Steele is drafting a new marketing plan in between minding the front desk at her Big Western Pine Motel. Steele, who also has a restaurant, has also had to lay off workers.

She is thinking about remodeling the motel and making a few other changes, too, as she looks to cater to other groups of visitors. Her backup plan: to sell.

"This is beyond belief," said Steele, whose reservation book is filled with nearly empty pages. "I can't grasp it myself but I believe it's true because I'm running out of money."

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On the Net:

Yellowstone National Park: <http://www.nps.gov/yell>

Greater Yellowstone Coalition: <http://www.greateryellowstone.org>

International Snowmobile Manufacturers Association: <http://www.snowmobile.org>

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