

## Judge bans snowmobiles to protect caribou in northern Idaho

SPOKANE, Wash. (AP) -- A judge has declared nearly 470 square miles of national forest land in northern Idaho off-limits to snowmobiles in an effort to save the last mountain caribou herd in the contiguous 48 states.

In a 31-page ruling Friday, U.S. District Judge Robert H. Whaley banned snowmobiles throughout a caribou recovery zone in the Idaho Panhandle National Forests until the U.S. Forest Service develops a winter recreation strategy taking into account the impact of the loud, exhaust-spewing devices on the herd.

Estimates of the herd in the Selkirk Mountains, which extend into southeast British Columbia from around Priest Lake, Idaho, northeast of Spokane, run to about three dozen animals, a "precarious finger-hold" on survival, Whaley wrote.

Citing aerial photographs that show snowmobile tracks crisscrossing caribou routes to vital feeding areas, the judge added, "The court chooses to be overprotective rather than under-protective."

The ban does not apply to hundreds of miles of state-owned land east of Priest Lake and offers a slim chance that limited snowmobiling might still be allowed in part of the recovery zone. Whaley gave environmental groups and the forest service a week to develop a proposal for a more trail-specific approach.

Many experts believe that not all snowmobile trails within the 300,000-acre recovery area cross key caribou habitat, especially at lower elevations.

The ruling was the second in less than a year by Whaley against snowmobilers who have provided a vital wintertime economic boost in an area many have viewed as a powder paradise.

In December he banned snowmobile trail grooming, and few were willing to endure the bumpy trails although snowmobiling was still allowed.

Owners of businesses on the west side of Priest Lake said the grooming ban put a severe damper on winter tourism, and the new snowmobile prohibition "will probably be pretty devastating," said Mike Sudnikovich, a lifelong area resident and member of the Priest Lake Trails and Snowmobile Association.

Citing evidence that snowmobiles scare caribou from feeding and calving grounds, environmentalists have sought to ban the machines to protect the endangered animals, which once roamed vast reaches of the forests east of the Cascade Range.

"We're down to the last few animals. We need to do everything we can to protect them," said Mark Sprengel, director of the Selkirk Conservation Alliance in Priest River.

Other plaintiffs in the legal battle include The Lands Council, the Idaho Conservation League, Conservation Northwest, Defenders of Wildlife and the Center for Biological Diversity.

With lighter, more powerful designs, snowmobiles have increasingly been able to roar through remote areas that once provided refuge for the caribou, which can weigh 400 pounds but are able to walk on deep snow with their dinner plate-sized hooves, grazing on lichen that hangs from the branches of subalpine trees.

Lichen provides little nutrition, but deep snow provides safety from predators - except when, according to experts cited by the environmental groups, the predators are able to take advantage of compacted snowmobile trails and tracks.

Snowmobile interests have countered that the herd has shrunk over the decades mostly because of past logging, backcountry skiing and global warming, adding that as few as two or three caribou from the herd have been seen south of the border in recent years.