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In a move to protect the Lower 48's last remaining caribou, a federal judge has barred snowmobile trail grooming for the rest of the season on federal land in some of Idaho's most popular snowmobiling territory.

The order issued late Tuesday by U.S. District Judge Robert H. Whaley, of Spokane, will halt grooming of snowmobile trails on U.S. Forest Service land near Priest Lake. Trails on state land, mostly on the east side of the lake, will continue to be groomed.

Although the order does not prohibit snowmobiling, ungroomed trails typically become washboarded, rough and largely impassable without regular grooming, said Dave

O'Brien, spokesman for the Idaho Panhandle National Forests.

"One of the things we hear is if you don't groom from the beginning of the season, it's hard to catch up later," O'Brien said. Grooming also makes trails safer for heavy snowmobile traffic, he added.

The ruling could have deep impacts on resorts on the west side of Priest Lake that depend on snowmobile tourism, especially after last year's largely snow-free season. But environmentalists say drastic measures were needed to protect skittish caribou from the burgeoning popularity of backcountry snowmobiling.

"When we weigh the balance of winter

recreation and the most endangered animal, we're going to come down on the side of caribou," said Priest River resident Mark Sprengel, who directs the Selkirk Conservation Alliance. "We had to take this action. ... This was just one step we thought we could take to give these animals some breathing room."

The Selkirk Conservation Alliance filed the suit along with Defenders of Wildlife, Conservation Northwest, The Lands Council, Idaho Conservation League and the Center for Biological Diversity.

The lawsuit is nowhere close to being settled the ruling is simply a one-year ban on trail grooming on 450,000 acres of a federally designated caribou recovery zone. The lawsuit seeks to ban

snowmobiling permanently on large portions of the zone, which covers much of the northwest corner of the Panhandle.

Sprengel said the preliminary injunction against trail grooming is being greeted by the groups as a good sign. "It really puts us in a solid position of prevailing in court. It's incredibly encouraging."

Some trails on the west side of the lake will remain opened and groomed, but the order shuts down prime touring routes that circle Upper Priest Lake. Those routes are a prime attraction for many guests at Elkins Resort on Priest Lake, said Tracie Szybnski, one of the resort's owners.

"It will impact us greatly," she said.

A total of 77 miles of trails on Forest Service land will be affected by the order, including those leading up the Pack River and Smith Creek drainages. Another 400-some miles of groomed trails, largely on state land, will remain open. But the Forest Service

trails are considered vital connectors.

Elkins Resort is the farthest north on the west side of the lake and is closest to the trails that will be left ungroomed. Szybnski stressed that many west side trails will remain open, but not the crown jewel of the system.

"It's very, very important, especially to our guests," she said. "They love it up there; the views are tremendous."

About 95 percent of the resort's winter guests come to snowmobile, Szybnski said. There haven't been cancellations, but the word was just beginning to spread when Szybnski was reached Wednesday afternoon. "We're trying not to tell our guests at this point," she said, adding that the court case has not yet been settled. "We'll continue to fight."

Last year, only three caribou were spotted in North Idaho. Biologists say their decline has been caused by a complex network of factors, including

increased cougar populations and decreased old-growth forest habitat. But in a 2001 report, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service noted winter recreation, "particularly snowmobiling, is quickly becoming a significant threat to caribou, both through direct harassment and indirectly by potentially precluding caribou use of historic habitats and travel corridors."

Judge Whaley noted this report in his ruling, and he faulted the Forest Service for not developing a strategy to better protect caribou. The judge also ruled the agency was in violation of the Endangered Species Act by promoting trail grooming in caribou recovery areas.

Sprengel, with the Selkirk Conservation Alliance, said environmentalists have been working outside of court for nearly 20 years to push the agency to better protect caribou. He said suing the Forest Service was the last option. "They just stonewalled everything."

Agency spokesman Dave O'Brien said the Forest Service was planning to address the issue as it revises its long-term forest management plans for the region. A draft of the next plan is scheduled to be released early next year. O'Brien also said the agency has been working to educate snowmobile groups.

Priest Lake native Mike Sudnikovich said he's worried the ruling could turn the west side of Priest Lake into a ghost town in winter.

"All those people that come from Seattle, Spokane and Coeur d'Alene aren't going to go out and snowmobile on these rough trails," Sudnikovich said. "It's unfortunate. It'll probably cost a lot of people their jobs and a lot of people their enjoyment."