



## FOREST SERVICE:

### Agency agrees to study snowmobile impacts on Calif. forests

Laura Petersen, E&E reporter  
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The Forest Service has agreed to conduct a detailed environmental analysis of snowmobiles' impacts on five Northern California forests under a legal settlement with environmentalists, green groups announced today.

The agency will analyze effects on wildlife, habitat and quiet recreation in the Stanislaus, Eldorado, Tahoe, Plumas and Lassen national forests, according to the settlement filed last week in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of California.

The Center for Biological Diversity, Snowlands Network and Winter Wildlands Alliance had challenged the Forest Service's lack of environmental analysis of snowmobiles and their trails in parts of the Sierra Nevada and Cascade Range in 2011.

They argued that the agency used "categorical exclusions" to avoid detailed impact analysis required by the National Environmental Policy Act and relied on outdated studies to make its decisions.

Under the terms of the settlement, the Forest Service plans to issue one or more draft environmental analyses by May 30, 2015,

and "will use its best efforts" to finalize the documents by Nov. 30, 2015. It will also pay \$15,000 to cover plaintiffs' litigation costs.

In exchange, the environmental groups pledged not to challenge the current snowmobile activities in the five national forests before the agency completes its review. However, they retain the right to challenge plans for any new or modified snowmobile activities.

The environmental groups criticize snowmobiles as "extremely noisy and polluting" and are concerned about the resulting impacts on cross-country skiers and snowshoers, as well as wildlife and habitat.

"The harm that snowmobiles do to Sierra Nevada red foxes, Pacific fishers and mountain lions urgently needs to be studied," said Lisa Belenky, a senior attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity.

The settlement comes several months after an Idaho judge ordered the Forest Service to strengthen its snowmobile regulations for national forests (Greenwire, April 3).