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Snowmobilers see win in forests bill

ISLAND PARK -- Snowmobilers won a battle Dec. 19 when Sen. Jon Tester's Forest Jobs and Recreation Act passed the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. The Montana Democrat's bill included an amendment to move a proposed wilderness boundary. The change would allow snowmobilers to continue to ride on some 3,000 acres of high country terrain on Mount Jefferson near the Idaho-Montana border.

The premier Montana snowmobile wonderland is accessed via Fremont County and Idaho's snowmobile trail system. Snowmobile industry and county officials have been fighting to keep it open for years. It was viewed as so vital to the Fremont County economy that three years ago, a county commissioner testified before a Senate committee hearing in Washington, D.C.

While the bill passed last month with bipartisan support from the committee, and will likely be approved in the Senate, it still must pass the House, where its prospects are uncertain. Introduced in 2009, Tester's bill proposes to create timber industry jobs through logging as a way to support the state's outdoor economy and protect its resources.

The bill is supported by the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management and, in amended form, by Idaho Sens. Jim Risch and Mike Crapo. Risch said he voted for the amended bill because it affects Idahoans who have argued against the closing the southern portion of Mount Jefferson to snowmobiling. "For years, I have insisted that the southern portion of Mount Jefferson must remain open ...," he said.

For now, it remains open. But Sandra Mitchell of the Idaho Snowmobile Association has doubts about the bill's future in the House and beyond. "I would be very surprised if it got to Obama's desk," she said. Still, after years of working to keep the area available for recreationists through administrative, judicial, and now, legislative channels, Mitchell said snowmobiling advocates won't let their guard down. "My experience is that a bad idea never goes away," Mitchell said. "It (Mount Jefferson) is a snowmobiling icon and has been since the late '60s and '70s. It's an Idaho resource in Montana. "It's unique. It's important to the quality of life and the economy of the area." That importance has only increased with restrictive changes in snowmobile regulations in Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks. Mount Jefferson is considered the No. 1 destination for those renting snowmobiles in Island Park.

Locally, the effort to keep the area open has shifted toward making sure the existing boundaries are obeyed because the area is being monitored closely for violators -- snowmobilers that cross from open to closed areas.

"We're getting the word out to stay out," Fremont County Parks and Recreation Director Tamra Cikaitoga said. "If too many cross into the closed areas and are in violation, then we've lost."

The county has put up signs in five parking lots that could be used to access trails into Mount Jefferson. "It's actually double signing," Cikaitoga said. The same warning signs to obey boundaries have been placed about a half-mile from the lots on the trails to make sure snowmobilers see them. "We're doing a public relations campaign with the snowmobiling association for newspaper and radio ads," Cikaitoga said. The ads explain the stakes involved in obeying the boundary closures. "Yielding to temptation could lead to more closures," Cikaitoga said.