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YBP Conference Panel Adds Plowing, Buses and Hut System to Yellowstone Winter Use Prospects

At its annual conference last week, the Yellowstone Business Partnership (YBP) hosted a diverse array of voices to discuss Winter Use in Yellowstone National Park. Those represented included David Jacob, who is working for the National Park service specifically on the new winter Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). He talked about the importance of getting a good grip on the “current slate of science” and identifying what is known and unknown and how to put in place adaptive management practices to deal with unknowns.

Everyone in the room seemed to agree that the vacillation and unpredictability in Yellowstone winter use policy has been problematic. As one local government representative said, “Give us something to work with. It’s up and down we can’t work with.”

YBP Executive Director Jan Brown pointed to the need for the Park Service to evaluate more options that go beyond the snowmobile vs. snowcoach debate. YBP submitted comments to the scoping phase of the EIS process suggesting that NPS evaluate the benefits and impacts of plowing the lowest elevation roads and allowing access by low-emission and low-noise buses. Doug Edgerton, of West Yellowstone, Montana made the point that a lot of local visitors are not able to use their park pass in the winter but that some plowing for auto and bus access in the winter could change that: “There’s no real future for snowmobiles and snowcoaches in a carbon-limited economy.”

Mark Menlove of the Winter Wildlands Alliance made the case for the uniqueness of the Yellowstone winter experience and provided economic data showing that cross-country and backcountry skiers spend more per person per visit than other visitors. He raised the idea of a hut system for use by skiers and snowshoers.

Bert Miller, Vice President of the Wyoming Snowmobile Association, harkened back to the days when snowmobilers had more freedom in the park and were not required to hire a guide. He said the industry has done their best and improved technology when it comes to noise and pollution and also that he saw signs of an improving relationship between snowmobilers and skiers. He did warn that some of the plowing scenarios could raise the ire of the snowmobiling community which is protective of its nationally-ranked snowmobiling trails.

Mark Pearson of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition put Yellowstone National Park in perspective as a one-of-a-kind global treasure for which economic benefit cannot be the sole driver of policy. He emphasized that the park has a legal mandate to protect natural resources and that as their decision to prohibit kayaking shows, it does not mean accommodating every conceivable use.

Randy Roberson, a snowcoach operator from West Yellowstone, spoke of the snowcoaches' role in preserving a unique Yellowstone experience. "There are plenty of places to go and enjoy a bus ride," he pointed out. He says he hears from his customers how many of them want an over-snow experience. He also pointed to a growing demand for interpretation and information on the part of visitors and an expectation of environmental stewardship from park concessioners.

An interactive discussion following the panel allowed participants to converse with each other and try to find areas of common ground. The Yellowstone Business Partnership hopes that this discussion can be a starting point for more constructive, cross-boundary dialogue among businesses and concerned stakeholders through the EIS process. YBP believes in the potential for the new winter use policy to bring social and economic benefits while preserving the unique natural resources of Yellowstone.

The Yellowstone Business Partnership (YBP) is a nonprofit organization working to resolve the major cross-boundary challenges facing businesses and communities in the Yellowstone-Teton region. YBP believes that to achieve long-term profitability in this place, businesses must fulfill their social and environmental responsibilities, and care for the region as a whole. YBP has offices in Bozeman, Montana, and Idaho Falls and Driggs, Idaho.

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