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ILLEGAL RECREATIONAL USE THREATENING THE BIGHORN

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It is now officially official!! Although September was thought to be the last 2003 date of AWA's Bighorn Recreation Use and Impact Monitoring project, the October weather agreed with us and I, along with two fearless volunteers, set off to the Bighorn once again! The October trip allowed us to obtain the last of the information needed to complete our first year monitoring database. Data from the TRAFx counters were downloaded and their batteries changed for the season. We are optimistic that the TRAFx will continue to count OHVs and snowmobiles over the winter months and that this data will be available to us in the spring.

The results of this first season are in the process of being analyzed. The final report will be completed in January. These results will be presented to the appropriate authorities in anticipation of bringing change in management and ultimately protection for the Bighorn.

Preliminary results show that visible and measurable damage of trails from various forms of recreation activity, primarily off-highway vehicles (OHVs) and horse use, are occurring. A large number of the trails have exhibited severe structural and vegetation damage. By definition, *severe* includes the presence of deep ruts, the complete removal of vegetation, tree root exposure and widened trails.

Illegal use in the form of off-trail use, out of season use, and illegal recreation type (on-highway vehicles such as trucks) has been documented in the study area. It is evident that insufficient signage in terms of their number, location, size and clarity of message is contributing to this illegal use. Data downloaded from the TRAFx counters help substantiate these claims. Preliminary results are showing that illegal out of season and off-trail OHV use has occurred. Of all the OHV use recorded every month, approximately half occurs on legally designated trails and half on illegal or non-designated trails. These results may imply that the current management of the area under the Forest Land Use Zones (FLUZ) is not achieving the desired result.

October in the Bighorn has also brought about changes to the area. The once rather crude dirt road leading to the head of the Onion Lake Trail was improved. The new road, or "highway" as I call it, constructed by the Clearwater County, is now composed of rock/shale material, it has been widened, and trees on the shoulder have been removed. Although the existing road was highly degraded and in need of maintenance, AWA is concerned that such dramatic improvements will facilitate and encourage more illegal access into the area.

In attempting to curb illegal use in the area, however, Sustainable Resource Development (SRD), has placed piles of small boulders on either side of the Onion Lake trailhead. It is hoped that such attempts will deter illegal access into the area, but next year's monitoring trips will reveal how effective they have been.

