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County considers commercial snowmobiling on conserved West Routt Ranch

By **Tom Ross**

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Steamboat Springs — The Routt County commissioners voted 7-1 Thursday night to recommend approval of a commercial snowmobiling operation on two remote ranches north of Hayden.

Portions of both Elkhead Ranch and Agner are under conservation easements held by the Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust and secured with the help of Purchase of Development Rights funds provided by Routt County property taxpayers.

In voting to approve the permit, Planning Commission included recommendations from Area Wildlife Manager Jim Haskins of Colorado Parks and Wildlife to curtail the dates of annual operations of rancher Heather Stirling’s Elkhead Sleds in order to protect an “extremely important” elk migration corridor in the fall and breeding leks for two species of threatened grouse in the early spring.

In other business:

What: Routt County commissioners consider approval of a special use permit for a residential addiction recovery and rehab facility, The Foundry, under the portion of the zoning code created for guest ranches.

When: 1:30 p.m., March 24

Where: Commissioners’ Hearing Room, Routt County Courthouse, 522 Lincoln Ave., Steamboat Springs

The dissenting vote was cast by Commissioner Bob Woodmansee, who was not opposed to the snowmobiling operation, but rather, sought assurances that should the constrained dates of operation prove more restrictive than need be, they could be adjusted.

Stirling also sought and received permission to use about 4.6 miles of Routt County Roads 56 and 56E to get from her 3,453-acre Elkhead Ranch to trails on 36 acres on neighboring Agner Ranch and the National Forest in California Park. The Forest Service has indicated to county government that it is “likely” to issue a permit for the commercial activity to take place next winter.

The ranch is so close to the boundary with Moffat County that Moffat maintains the roads for Routt.

The matter next goes to the Routt County Board of Commissioners for final consideration at 1:30 p.m. April 28.

Routt County Planning Director Chad Phillips said Friday that Planning Commission members expressed some concern about the potential effect of snowmobiling

operations on the conserved land but realized that responsibility for ensuring that the conservation values are protected lies with the land trust.

In a letter to staff planner Alan Goldich, land trust director of stewardship Megan Knott said her organization will continue to monitor the easements to ensure their terms are upheld, and she added that it's in Stirling's interest to run her agritourism activities in a sustainable nature.

"The scale of the tours is pretty limited," Knott wrote. "As long as there is sufficient snowpack, seven sleds for one tour a day can be managed in a way so as not to significantly impair or diminish the conservation values."

Stirling had sought to begin annual operations Nov. 15 and wind up each spring on April 15. However, Haskins pointed out that Elkhead Ranch partners with CPW on special Ranching for Wildlife public hunting and the final hunt last season took place Dec. 13.

"The area along Routt County Road 56 and 56E, including Agner Mountain, (is an) extremely important migration corridor for elk," Haskins wrote to Goldich. "By beginning no earlier than Dec. 15, or the end of the final hunting season, it is anticipated that most elk will have migrated through this area and impacts will be negligible. Tours should end by March 1 annually to protect the local Columbian sharp-tailed grouse and greater sage grouse breeding."

There is "locally important" sage grouse lek in one corner of the ranch and two more sharp-tailed grouse leks along the county roads Elkhead Sleds intends to use, Haskins added.

To reach Tom Ross, call 970-871-4205, email tross@SteamboatToday.com or follow him on Twitter @ThomasSRoss1



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