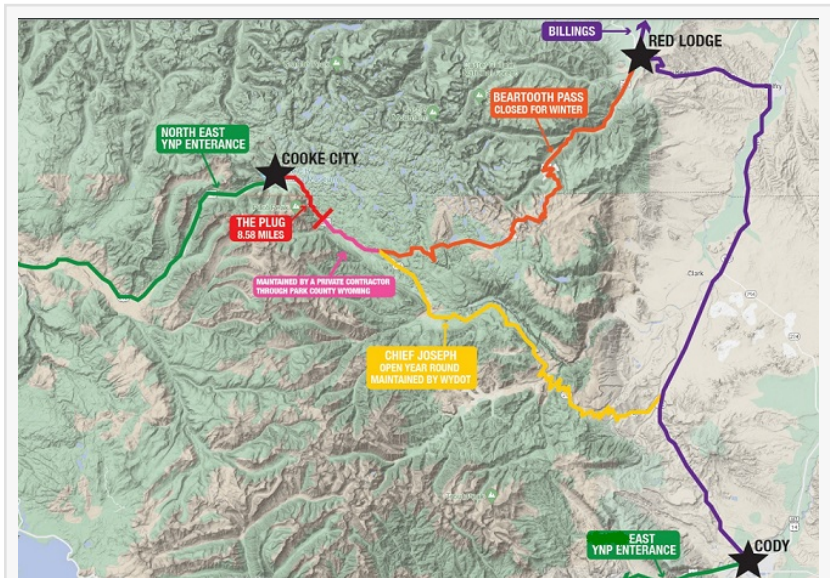


Results of Cooke City & Silver Gate, Montana Winter Access Study Announced; Examined Impact of Plowing 'The Plug'

Study was commissioned by tourism entities Park County (Wyo.) Travel Council, Montana's Yellowstone Country and Institute for Tourism & Recreation Research

CODY, WY, UNITED STATES, August 21, 2024 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The results of a winter-recreation access study focused on the opinions of local residents as well as visitors' views on plowing an 8.58-mile section of Highway 212 – known as the “Plug” – east of the Northeast Gate of Yellowstone National Park were announced today.



"The Plug" is an 8.58-mile stretch of unplowed highway 212 east of Cooke City, Mont.

The results were presented during an open meeting on Tuesday, Aug. 20 attended by residents of Cooke City and Silver Gate, Mont. and surrounding communities including Red Lodge, Mont. and Cody, Wyo., as well as staff from the National Park Service and park concessioner Xanterra Parks & Resorts, tourism officials from Park County (Wyo.) Travel Council (PCTC) and Montana's Yellowstone Country and the Institute for Tourism, & Recreation Research (ITTR).

PCTC, ITTR and Montana's Yellowstone Country funded the study in a three-way, equal partnership.

Complete details of the study can be found at <https://www.codyyellowstone.org/industrypartners/toolkits-and-research/>.

About The Plug:

Encompassing the stretch of road from the Pilot Creek parking lot on Highway 212 to the western edge of Cooke City, Mont., the Plug has historically remained unplowed throughout the

winter to allow for recreational access for snowmobilers. The park road from the Northeast Gate to Mammoth Hot Springs and Gardiner, Mont. at the park's North Gate is plowed by the National Park Service.

From October to May residents of Cooke City and Silver Gate, Mont. must drive through Yellowstone to access the town of Gardiner, Mont. and beyond. The town of Cody, Wyo. is cut off from Montana and Yellowstone. Residents of Cooke City and Silver Gate have expressed concerns about lack of access to emergency services.

About the Study:

The study was conducted in three stages from winter 2023 to winter 2024. Researchers examined both local and visitor sentiment.

The purpose of the study was to examine the perceptions of residents in the region about seasonal access and recreation as well as to explore topics such as quality of life, access to health care and other services, tourism and recreation and future visitation plans.

This is the first time tourism entities from both Wyoming and Montana studied the issue in partnership.

Key Findings:

- Most residents (58 percent) prefer the section be plowed in winter with 44 percent in favor of adding trails and parking areas, 14 percent in favor of plowing with no additional actions and 36 in favor of leaving the road unplowed.
- Most residents (53 percent) agreed that plowing US 212 east of Cooke City is necessary for emergencies.
- Most visitors (68 percent) prefer that US 212 east of Cooke City remain unplowed during the winter season.
- The survey asked visitors to respond to two hypothetical scenarios. 1) The Plug is plowed without adding any trails or parking and 2) The Plug is plowed with the addition of trails and parking.
- Forty-two percent of visitors said it would not influence their winter plans if the road was plowed without trails and parking while 41 percent said it would not influence their decision if trails and parking were added.
- Thirty-five percent said they'd be less likely to visit without trails and parking while 26 percent indicated they would be less likely if trails and parking were added.

Scenarios:

- Maintaining the status quo and not plowing would mean 16 percent of total visitor revenue would be collected in winter.

- If the Plug is plowed with no additional trails and parking, the net reduction of winter visitors would be 20.5 percent and more than 3,000 new groups (approximately 2.5 persons in each group) would be needed to offset that reduction.
- If the Plug is plowed and alternative trails and parking are added, the net reduction of winter visitors would be 2.5 percent, and some 300 groups would be needed to offset those losses.
- These scenarios do not reflect the potential increased visitation that would stem from increased marketing efforts by Park County Travel Council and Montana's Yellowstone Country designed to significantly grow winter-season business to Cooke City/Silver Gate as well as Yellowstone National Park.

Conclusions:

- Data point to opening Highway 212 with replacement trails and additional parking as the best solution.
- Protecting the winter experience is very important.
- Additional social and infrastructure considerations, such as emergency services and road maintenance costs, are needed with any option.
- Communication and PR focused on the topic will be critical.
- Local business owners and residents should have special considerations.

"Both Park County Wyoming and Montana's Yellowstone Country have a key stake in winter access to the Northeast Gate of Yellowstone National Park, and we were committed to staging a strategic and neutral study that thoroughly examined all sides of the issue," said Ryan Hauck, executive director of Wyoming's Park County Travel Council. "Our next step as a partnership will be to explore reasonable ways to both expand access to travelers beyond snowmobile enthusiasts while protecting access for those snowmobilers. In the event the Plug is indeed plowed we are prepared to put our marketing muscle to work to promote Cody Yellowstone as a viable winter gateway to Cooke City and Yellowstone National Park, and we are confident that our efforts would quickly result in offsetting a 2.5 percent reduction in winter visitors."

Hauck noted that the study was funded by lodging tax funds collected by both Park County, Wyo. and Montana's Yellowstone Country tourism region, which represents the five-county region that borders Yellowstone National Park, including Park County (Mont.), Gallatin, Stillwater, Carbon and Sweet Grass Counties.

"Since our entity represents such a large swath of southern Montana, we felt it was crucial to be a part of the conversation about the Plug, and this is the first time we as a tourism entity have been able to scientifically analyze data about the potential impacts of various scenarios," said Robin Hoover, executive director of Montana's Yellowstone Country. "We are hopeful that the results of the study will lead to a workable solution that will help us promote this stunning region as a highly desirable year-round vacation destination."

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