

Proposed Action: Flathead Forest Plan Suitability Changes to Winter Travel Management and Recommended Wilderness

I. Introduction

The record of decision (ROD) that culminated the 5-year planning process for the Flathead National Forest's revised forest plan was signed on December 24, 2018. In the ROD, Forest Supervisor Chip Weber indicated that "the Forest will initiate site-specific planning per the land management plan's suitability direction within 3 years from the date of this decision where an existing order may need to be changed (e.g., changes to snowmobile use per the current over-snow vehicle motor vehicle use map) or where an order may need to be issued, (e.g., to prohibit mechanized transport)."

This direction was in direct response to the changes the revised forest plan made in suitability allocations relative to motorized over-snow vehicle use and recommended wilderness. When a forest plan identifies an area as not suitable for an activity such as mechanized transport (e.g., mountain biking) or motorized use, the plan has no immediate effect on the public. This is because changes in suitability allocations in the forest plan are programmatic in nature and do not change any site-specific public uses until second-tiered, site-specific planning takes place.

This project will be conducting this site-specific planning that will evaluate the effects of designating motorized over-snow vehicle use in those areas deemed as suitable for that use by the forest plan as well as evaluating the effects of prohibiting this type of use in those other areas deemed as not suitable by the forest plan. Additionally, this project will evaluate the effects of prohibiting mechanized transport/motorized use in recommended wilderness areas.

The analysis will not be re-visiting the decisions the forest plan made regarding the selection of recommended wilderness areas or which areas are suitable or unsuitable for motorized over-snow vehicle use. Instead, this analysis will focus on evaluating the site-specific effects of prohibiting or designating (allowing) certain uses and activities only within those areas.

Additionally, during the review of the suitability components for recommended wilderness areas, it was noted there was a conflict in a couple of the suitability components not related to public uses. This project will propose a programmatic amendment to clarify direction for administrative use of motorized use/mechanized transport in recommended wilderness.

II. Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is to:

- A. Update the motorized over-snow vehicle use map (OSVUM) to designate or prohibit motorized over-snow use in those areas where the forest plan made changes in motorized over-snow vehicle use suitability;
- B. Prohibit motorized use and mechanized transport in recommended wilderness areas by issuing a long-term forest closure order; and
- C. Clarify the direction in recommended wilderness related to mechanized transport/motorized uses for administrative purposes (i.e. restoration, trail clearing, etc.)

A. Recommended Wilderness

The revised forest plan identified about 190,000 acres of National Forest System lands as recommended wilderness areas which are suitable for potential inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System¹ (see figure 1). The final environmental impact statement (FEIS) that supported the revised forest plan inventoried, evaluated, analyzed and then made recommendations for potential wilderness areas across the Flathead National Forest. The inventory and evaluation process is documented in appendix 4 of the FEIS. The FEIS evaluated four alternatives with varying acres and locations of recommended wilderness areas (amongst these alternatives was the no-action alternative which evaluated the same areas as recommended for wilderness in the 1986 forest plan - 98,446 acres). In figure 1 and table 1, Alternative B Modified from the FEIS (the 2018 forest plan is represented by this alternative) identified the following areas for recommended wilderness:

Table 1. Forest plan recommended wilderness areas

Recommended wilderness area	Ranger district	Acres
Alcove-Bunker	Spotted Bear	18,901
Elk Creek	Swan Lake	1,442
Java-Bear Creek	Hungry Horse	1,824
Jewel Basin	Hungry Horse	18,462
Limestone-Dean Ridge	Spotted Bear	15,026
Slippery Bill-Puzzle	Hungry Horse	12,393
Swan Front	Swan Lake	42,534
Tuchuck-Whale	Glacier View	78,821
Total	-	190,403

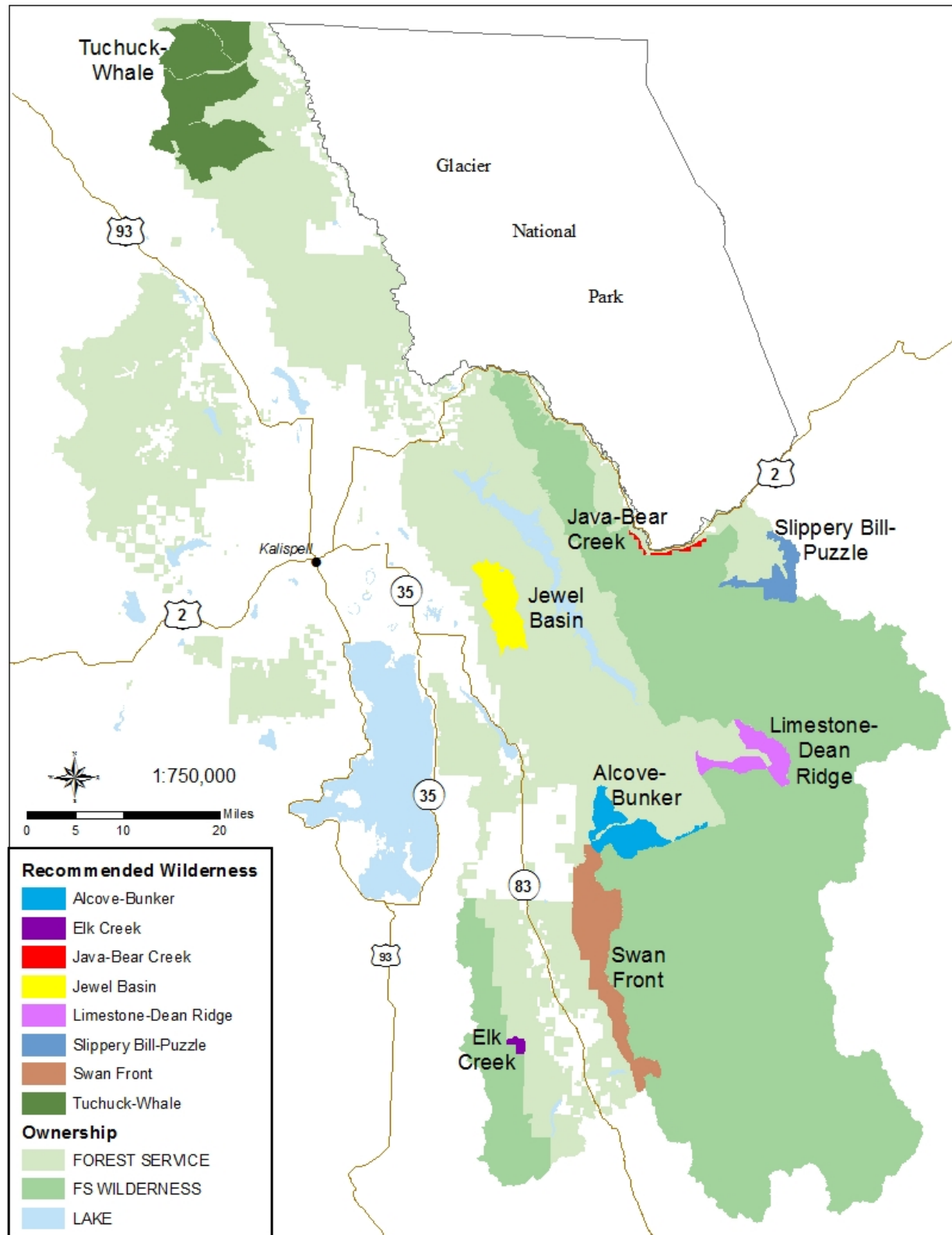
In the 2018 forest plan, these 190,403 acres of recommended wilderness are identified as management area 1b.

In addition to providing forest plan direction in desired conditions, standards, and guidelines, suitability for various uses or activities are also identified for management area 1b (recommended wilderness) which can be found on page 90 of the forest plan. Specifically, the suitability component that is affecting this site-specific analysis is:

MA1b-SUIT-06 Mechanized transport and motorized use are not suitable in recommended wilderness areas.

¹ The Forest Service only recommends these lands to the U.S. Congress for consideration. Congress and ultimately the president must establish legislation (though a wilderness bill) to officially designate a wilderness area.

Figure 1. Recommended wilderness areas on the Flathead National Forest



B. Motorized over-snow vehicle use

The 2018 forest plan identified 754,093 acres as suitable for motorized over-snow vehicle use on the Flathead National Forest (31 percent of the forest) (see figure 2). Over-snow vehicle use is defined in the forest plan as “An activity involving a motor vehicle that is designed for use over snow and that runs on a track or tracks and/or a ski or skis while in use over snow (36 CFR §212.1, Definitions).”

The actual use of these acres suitable for motorized over-snow use is less as terrain and vegetation also influence where motorized over-snow vehicles can physically go. Vegetation conditions are dynamic over time and change in response to disturbance and succession. Whereas fire may open up dense forest for over-snow motorized use, succession is closing areas to over-snow motorized use.

The selected alternative, Alternative B Modified, made limited adjustments to the areas suitable for motorized over-snow vehicle use, with an overall net increase of 525 acres (0.02 percent) where motorized over-snow vehicle use may occur. More specifically, suitability changed on about 25,000 acres of land across the forest (12,759 acres increased in over-snow motorized suitability and 12,234 acres decreased in over-snow motorized suitability)(see table 2).² The approximate 25,000 acres of land where over-snow motorized vehicle use suitability changed was based on a few factors: 1) addressing GIS mapping issues so that general small areas of either suitable or non-suitable areas better match the suitability of the surrounding areas; 2) concerns about facilitating existing over-snow motorized access into a non-motorized area of the Badger Two Medicine area on the Lewis and Clark/Helena National Forest – additionally this area is now part of the Slippery Bill-Puzzle recommended wilderness area; 3) suitable areas in the Canyon Creek-Big Creek and Skyland Challenge areas were traded for an area in the Sullivan drainage that has more difficult terrain to ride but provides quality habitat for Canada lynx.

² The acres reported above are slightly different than what is reported in the forest plan ROD because since the signing of the ROD in December 2018 the majority of forest roads were realigned in GIS and the ownership GIS layer was updated.

Figure 2. Changes in over-snow motorized suitability on the Flathead National Forest

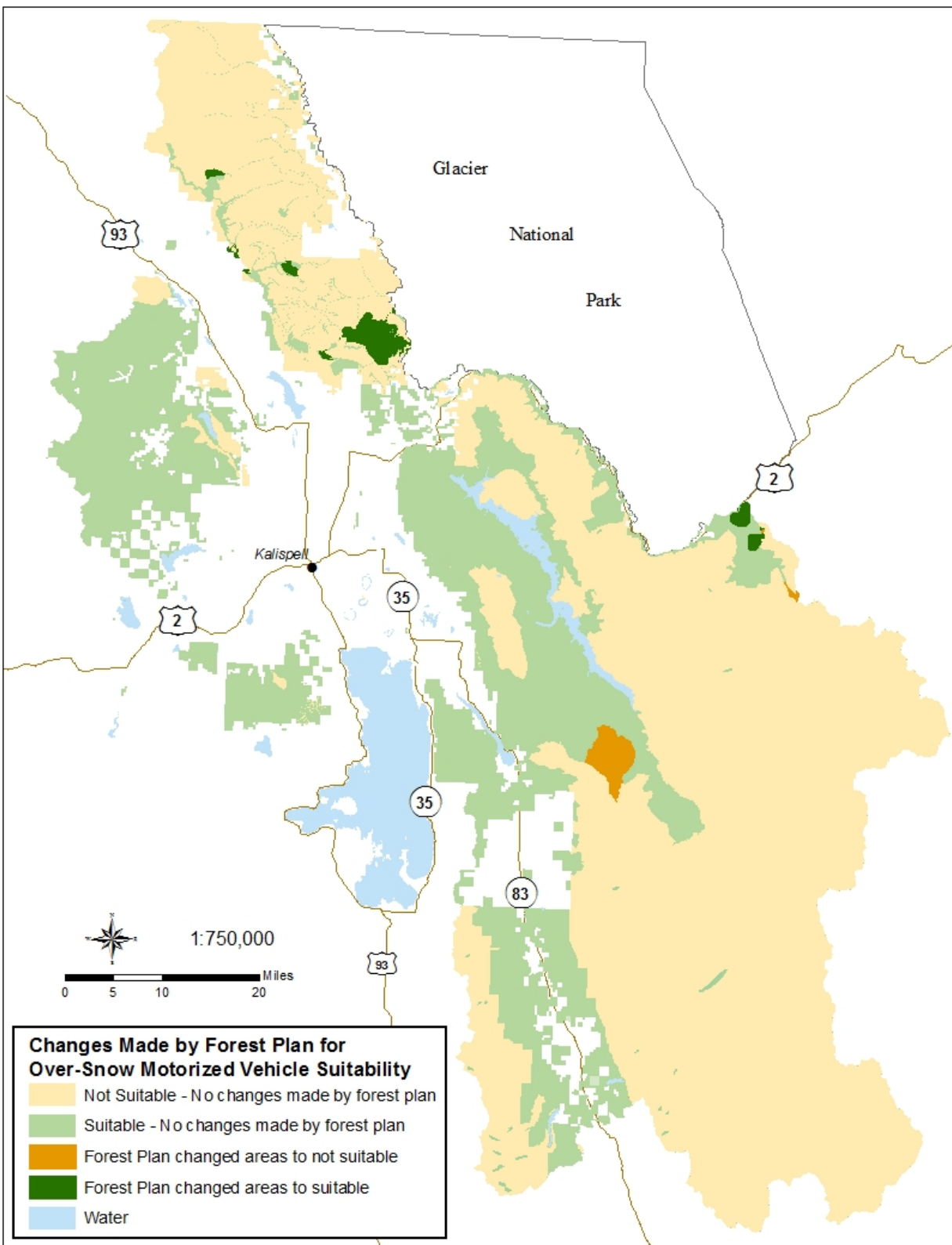


Table 2. 2018 forest plan motorized over-snow vehicle suitability changes

Reason for suitability change	Increase in suitable motorized over-snow vehicle use acres	Decrease in suitable motorized over-snow vehicle use acres
GIS cleanup ³	1,382	295
Changes as a result of Alternative B Modified	11,377	11,938
Total	12,759 acres	12,234 acres

Suitability for over-snow motorized vehicle use was determined by management areas. The revised forest plan has 16 different management areas and in each of them, except for management areas 1a and 1b, suitability for over-snow motorized vehicle use is referred to in figure B-11 in the forest plan.⁴ This figure identifies across the Flathead National Forest where over-snow motorized use is suitable. This project is not going to change suitability determinations made in the forest plan revision process.

IV. Proposed Action

A. Recommended Wilderness

The proposed action proposes to prohibit public motorized use (includes both summer and winter motorized uses) as well as mechanized transport in all recommended wilderness areas. Mechanized transport is defined in the forest plan glossary (page 23) as:

“Travel using a contrivance for moving people or material in or over land, water, or air, having moving parts, that provides a mechanical advantage to the user, and that is powered by a living or nonliving power source. This includes, but is not limited to, sailboats, hang gliders, parachutes, bicycles, game carriers, carts, and wagons. It does not include wheelchairs when used as necessary medical appliances. It also does not include skis, snowshoes, rafts, canoes, sleds, travois, or similar primitive devices without moving parts (Forest Service Manual 2320.5(3)).”

Specifically, within the 190,403 acres of recommended wilderness areas, about 96 miles of trail currently allow mechanized transport and about 383 acres currently allow over-snow motorized use. There are no open motorized trails or roads or designated over-snow motorized travel routes in these recommended wilderness areas. Public uses that are currently allowable would be prohibited in the following recommended wilderness areas (see appendix A for more detailed maps of these recommended wilderness areas):

Alcove-Bunker

- 10 acres of over-snow motorized travel areas

³ These acres are identified by 667 polygons across the Flathead National Forest. Out of the 667 polygons, about 89 polygons are greater than 5 acres in size (the largest is found near Lindbergh Lake on Swan Lake Ranger District and is about 145 acres; the second largest is found near Skyland Creek on Hungry Horse Ranger District and is about 113 acres) and the remaining polygons are less than 2 acres in size.

⁴ Management area 1a (wilderness) does not refer to over-snow motorized vehicle use suitability; however, under the Wilderness Act, public motorized use is illegal. Management area 1b (recommended wilderness) does not specifically refer to over-snow motorized vehicle use suitability, but does state that motorized use is not suitable.

Java-Bear Creek

- 1.3 miles of trail (Trails #158, #167, and #254) open to mechanized transport
- 8 acres of over-snow motorized travel areas

Jewel Basin

- 0.4 miles of trail (Trail #544) open to mechanized transport
- 10 acres of over-snow motorized travel areas

Limestone-Dean Ridge

- 8.2 miles of trail (Trails #327, #43, #83) open to mechanized transport but not currently open to bicycles

Slippery Bill-Puzzle

- 4 miles of trail (Trails #154, #156, #159) open to mechanized transport
- 353 acres of over-snow motorized travel areas

Tuchuck-Whale

- 82.3 miles of trail (Trails #106, #11, #113, #114, #13, #18, #19, #22, #23, #26, #28, #372, #374, #375, #79, #9) open to mechanized transport
- 2 acres of over-snow motorized travel areas

B. Programmatic Amendment

While reviewing the suitability components for recommended wilderness for this project, it was apparent that there are conflicting components with administrative uses of mechanized transport/motorized uses. As an example, two of the components (MA1b-SUIT-03 and MA1b-SUIT-06) appear to be in conflict especially after reviewing the FEIS for the forest plan.

MA1b-SUIT-03 states: “Recommended wilderness areas are suitable for restoration activities where the outcomes will protect the wilderness characteristics of the areas, as long as the ecological and social characteristics that provide the basis for wilderness recommendation are maintained and protected.”

MA1b-SUIT-06 states: “Mechanized transport and motorized use are not suitable in recommended wilderness areas.”

The FEIS associated with the forest plan was clear in its intent to allow restoration vegetation treatments to occur within recommended wilderness, although it acknowledges these treatments would be limited. It was anticipated that vegetation treatment activities would largely be associated with the restoration of high-elevation ecosystems, particularly as an example whitebark pine forest communities. Whitebark pine was proposed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a threatened species in December 2020.

Additionally, the FEIS indicated its intent that some mechanized transport and motorized use would be necessary to accomplish this work.

Page 330 of the FEIS indicates that:

“[p]art of the intent of this forest plan direction is to provide flexibility to address the need for whitebark pine restoration within recommended wilderness areas because of the amount of

potential whitebark pine habitat on the Forest that lies within these areas. These areas also contain ongoing restoration sites as discussed earlier (plantations and cone collection trees). This direction would provide support for the application of whitebark pine restoration activities within the recommended wilderness areas, if determined through a site-specific analysis to be a necessary and important component of the forestwide and rangewide restoration strategy for the species.

The potential restoration activities that may be allowed within recommended wilderness (but are currently not allowed in designated wilderness) under forestwide direction in alternatives B modified and C include prescribed fire (e.g., to create sites for the regeneration of whitebark pine or reduce the competition from other conifers); planting (or seeding) of whitebark pine seedlings; hand thinning (e.g., use of chainsaws to daylight thin around seedling or sapling whitebark pine trees); and protecting phenotypically superior seed-producing whitebark pine trees from loss due to fire, bark beetles, or other stressors (e.g., the use of chainsaws to reduce fuels and encroaching trees around mature whitebark pine cone-producing trees)."

Similarly, page 383 of the FEIS indicates that:

"[r]estoration activities [in recommended wilderness areas] could include restoration of whitebark pine (currently a candidate species under the Endangered Species Act), which could consist of prescribed burning, seeding, planting of rust-resistant whitebark pine seedlings, thinning with an emphasis on hand thinning over mechanical, and protecting phenotypically superior seed-producing whitebark pine trees from loss due to fire, bark beetles, or other stressors. Control of invasive plant species by hand pulling and/or herbicide spraying and the planting or seeding of native plant species could also occur. Vegetation management options would likely change in the future if recommended wilderness areas are designated as wilderness."

A programmatic amendment is proposed to modify MA1b-SUIT-06. On page 90 of the revised forest plan, MA1b-SUIT-06 states that "Mechanized transport and motorized use are not suitable in recommended wilderness." This statement would be modified to say, "Mechanized transport and motorized use are not suitable for general public use in recommended wilderness; however mechanized transport/ motorized use may be used for administrative purposes so long as that use does not preclude the area from future wilderness designation by Congress."

The following is the substantive requirement within 36 CFR 219.8 through 219.11 that is directly related to the plan direction that is being proposed to be modified:

36 CFR 219.10 (b) (iv) (Multiple Use): protection of congressionally designated wilderness areas as well as management of areas recommended for wilderness designation to protect and maintain the ecological and social characteristics that provide the basis for their suitability for wilderness designation.

36 CFR 219.8(a)(1)(v) (Sustainability): wildland fire and opportunities to restore fire adapted ecosystems.

36 CFR 219.9(b)(1) (Diversity): provide the ecological conditions necessary to: contribute to the recovery of federally listed threatened and endangered species, conserve proposed and candidate species, and maintain a viable population of each species of conservation concern within the plan area.

C. Motorized Over-Snow Vehicle Use

The Flathead National Forest is proposing to authorize motorized over-snow vehicle use in those additional areas deemed in the forest plan as suitable for this use and prohibit motorized over-snow vehicle use in those areas deemed not suitable for that use by the forest plan. Proposed motorized over-snow vehicle use would be allowed from December 1 to March 31, which is the timeframe permitted for

this use across most of the forest, in all of these newly suitable areas with the exception of three areas. In the upper Middle Fork portion of the Hungry Horse Ranger District, there are three additional areas/acres that became suitable for motorized over-snow vehicle use and are located adjacent to areas that are currently open to motorized over-snow vehicle use from December 1 to May 14. It is proposed these three areas (Marias Pass, Skyland Challenge, and Elk Calf Mountain) would match the same time frame of those adjacent areas currently open to motorized over-snow vehicle use.

Please refer to appendix A for more detailed maps of these proposed designated or prohibited motorized over-snow vehicle areas.

Table 3. Proposed areas to be open or prohibited to motorized over-snow vehicle use

Area	Ranger district	Additional forest plan acres identified as suitable for motorized over-snow vehicle use and proposed to be added to the current OSVUM	Dates proposed for motorized over-snow vehicle use	Forest plan acres no longer identified as suitable for motorized over-snow vehicle use and proposed to be removed from the current OSVUM
Upper Stillwater River	Tally Lake	19	December 1 – March 31	-
Chain of Lakes	Glacier View	258	December 1 – March 31	-
Haines Pass	Glacier View and Tally Lake	172	December 1 – March 31	-
Canyon Big Creek (McGinnis)	Glacier View	8,087	December 1 – March 31	-
Canyon Creek	Glacier View	161	December 1 – March 31	-
Mathias	Glacier View	67	December 1 – March 31	-
Moose Peak	Glacier View	660	December 1 – March 31	-
Skyland Challenge	Hungry Horse	674	December 1 – May 14	-
Marias Pass	Hungry Horse	1,228	December 1 – May 14	-
Puzzle Creek	Hungry Horse	-	Not applicable – Use would be prohibited	342
Elk Calf Mountain	Hungry Horse	26	December 1 – May 14	-
Upper Sullivan	Spotted Bear	-	Not applicable – Use would be prohibited	9,063
Upper Tin	Spotted Bear	-	Not applicable – Use would be prohibited	2,534
GIS cleanup (see page 4 and footnote 2)	Across forest	1,382	For the 1,453 acres: December 1 – March 31 For the 308 acres: Not applicable – Use would be prohibited	295
Total	-	12,759	-	12,234

Appendix A. Maps

Fig. A-1. Vicinity Map for A-2 through A-8.

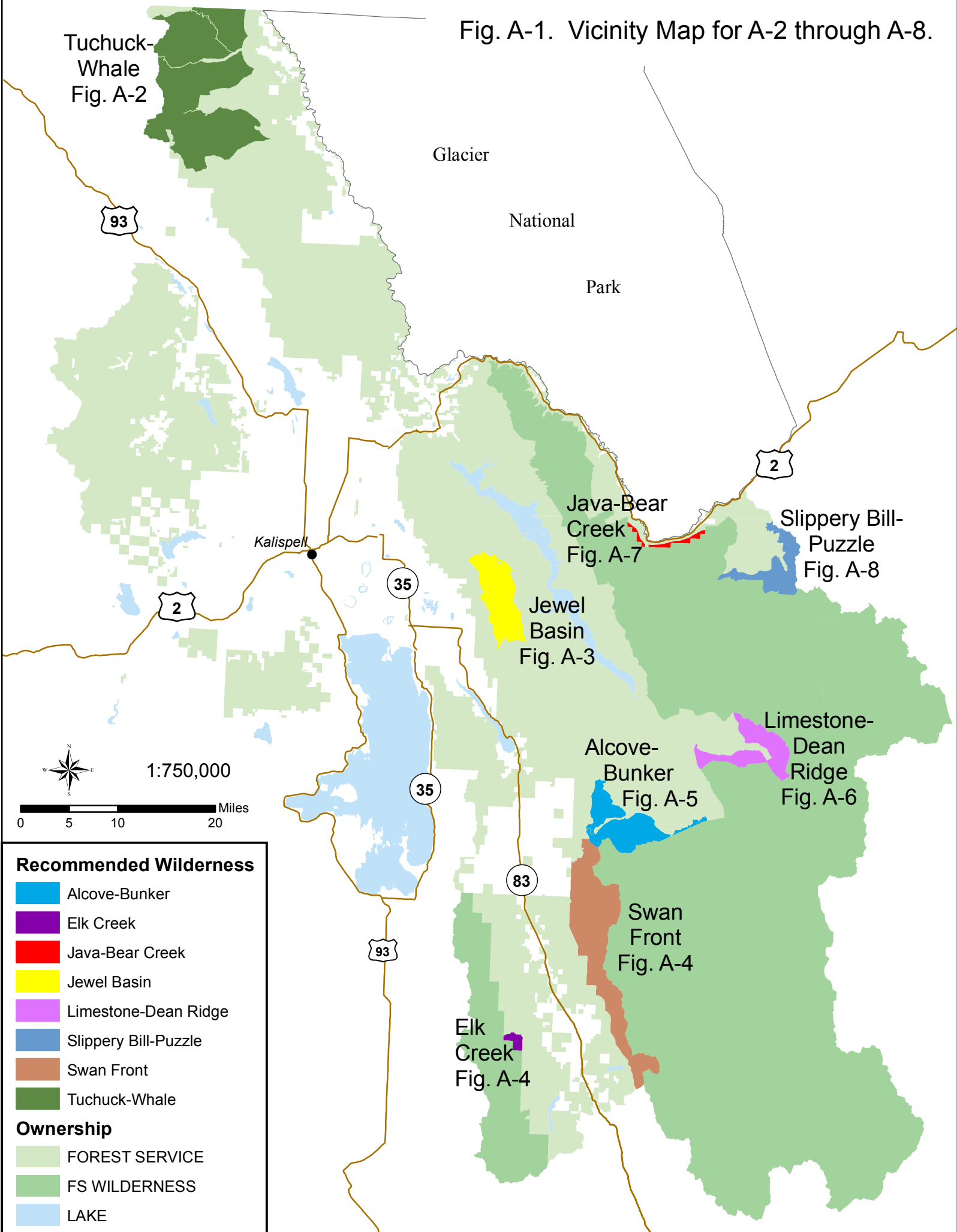
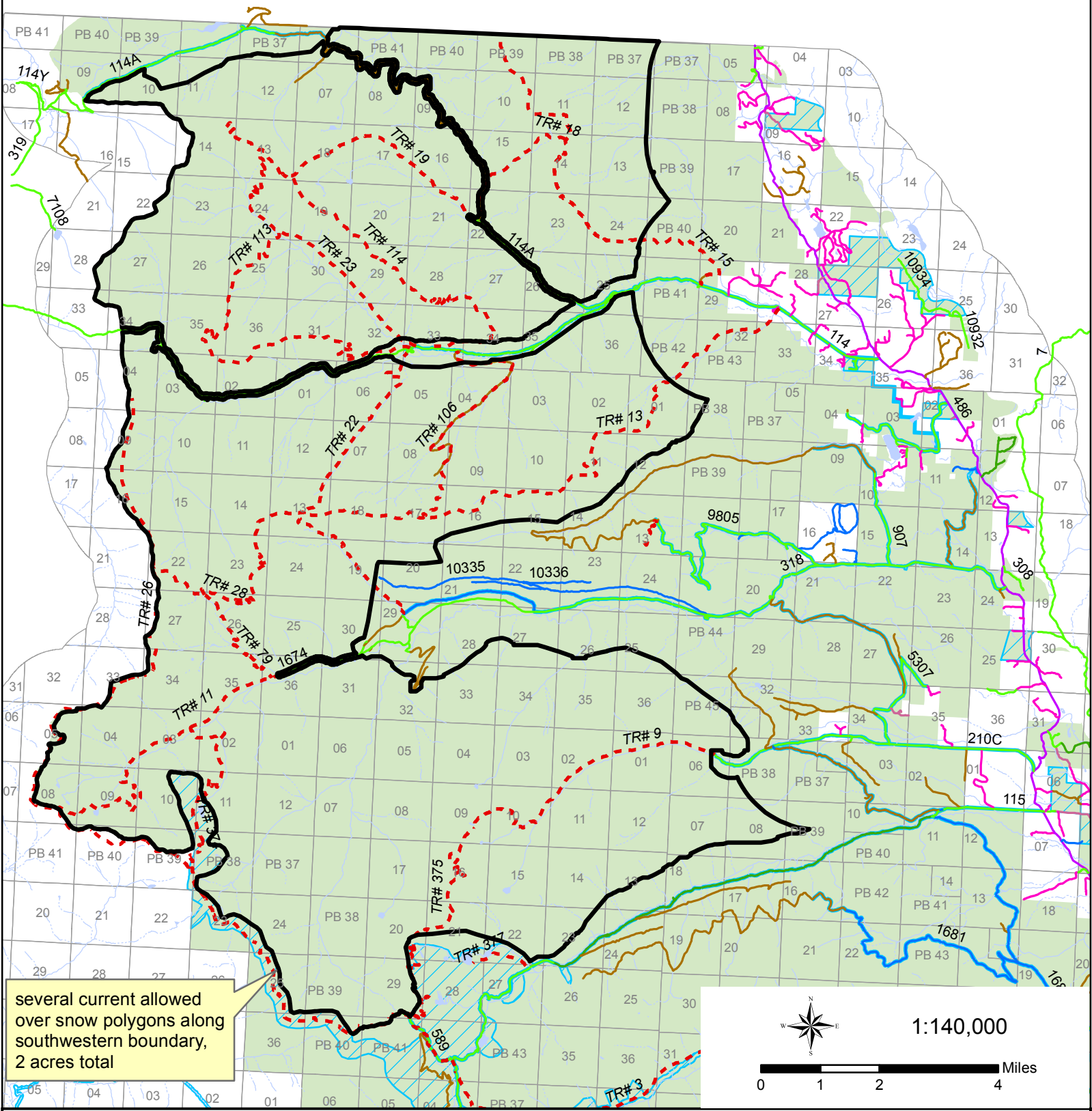


Fig.A-2 Tuchuck-Whale Recommended Wilderness



Allowed Trail Uses

- - - All summer uses
- - - All non-motorized uses
- - - Mechanical Cart, Hiker, Pack/Saddle Uses
- - - Hiker, Pack/Saddle Uses
- - - Hiker ONLY

Existing Road Management

- Highways, county/city roads
- Private roads
- Special Use Permit roads
- OPEN yearlong
- OPEN seasonally
- CLOSED yearlong by sign or gate
- CLOSED yearlong by physical barrier

Land Ownership

- Existing Allowed Over Snow Motorized
- Reservoirs, Lakes, Streams
- Recommended Wilderness
- FOREST SERVICE
- DESIGNATED WILDERNESS

Fig.A-3 Jewel Basin Recommended Wilderness

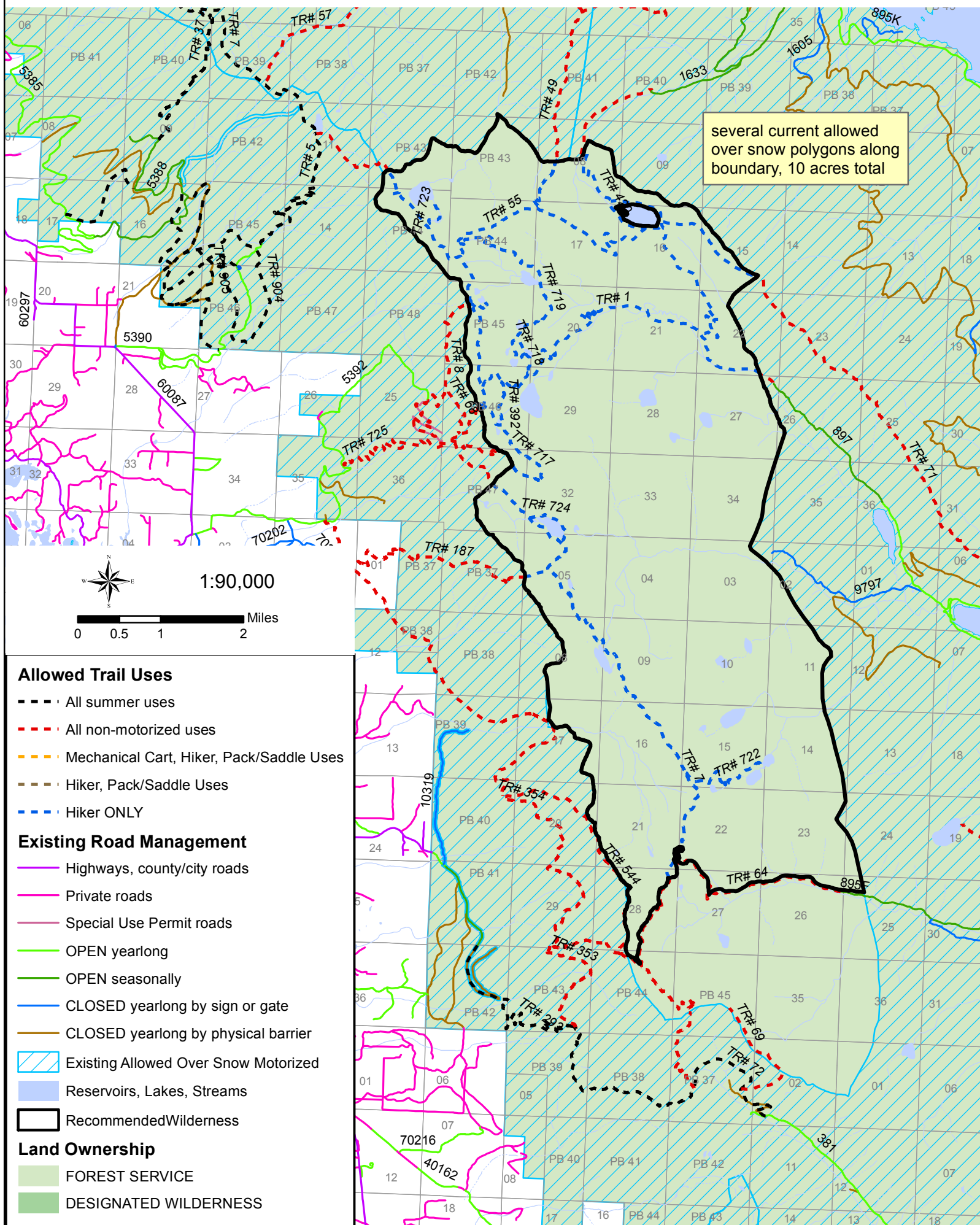


Fig.A-4 Elk Creek and Swan Front Recommended Wilderness

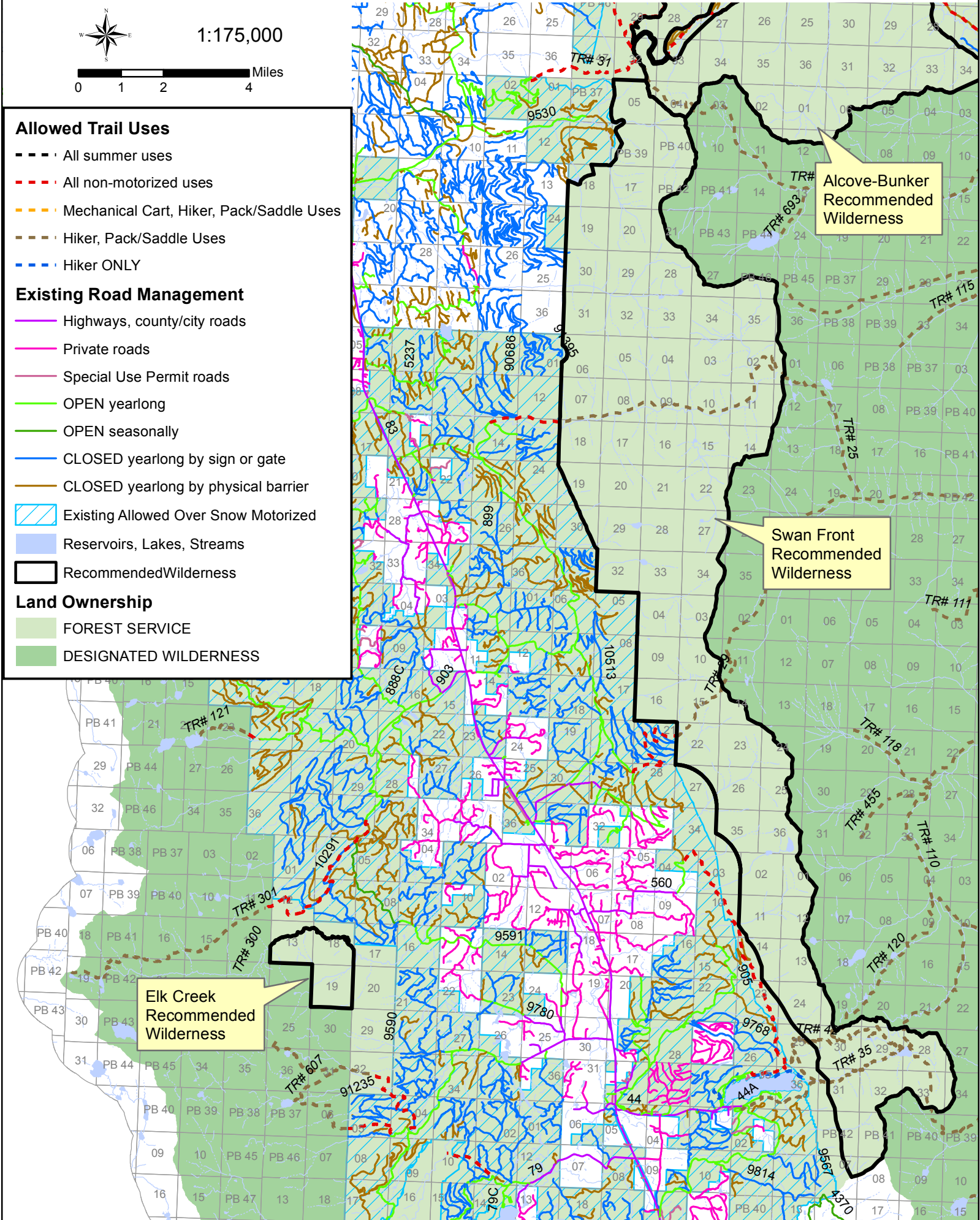
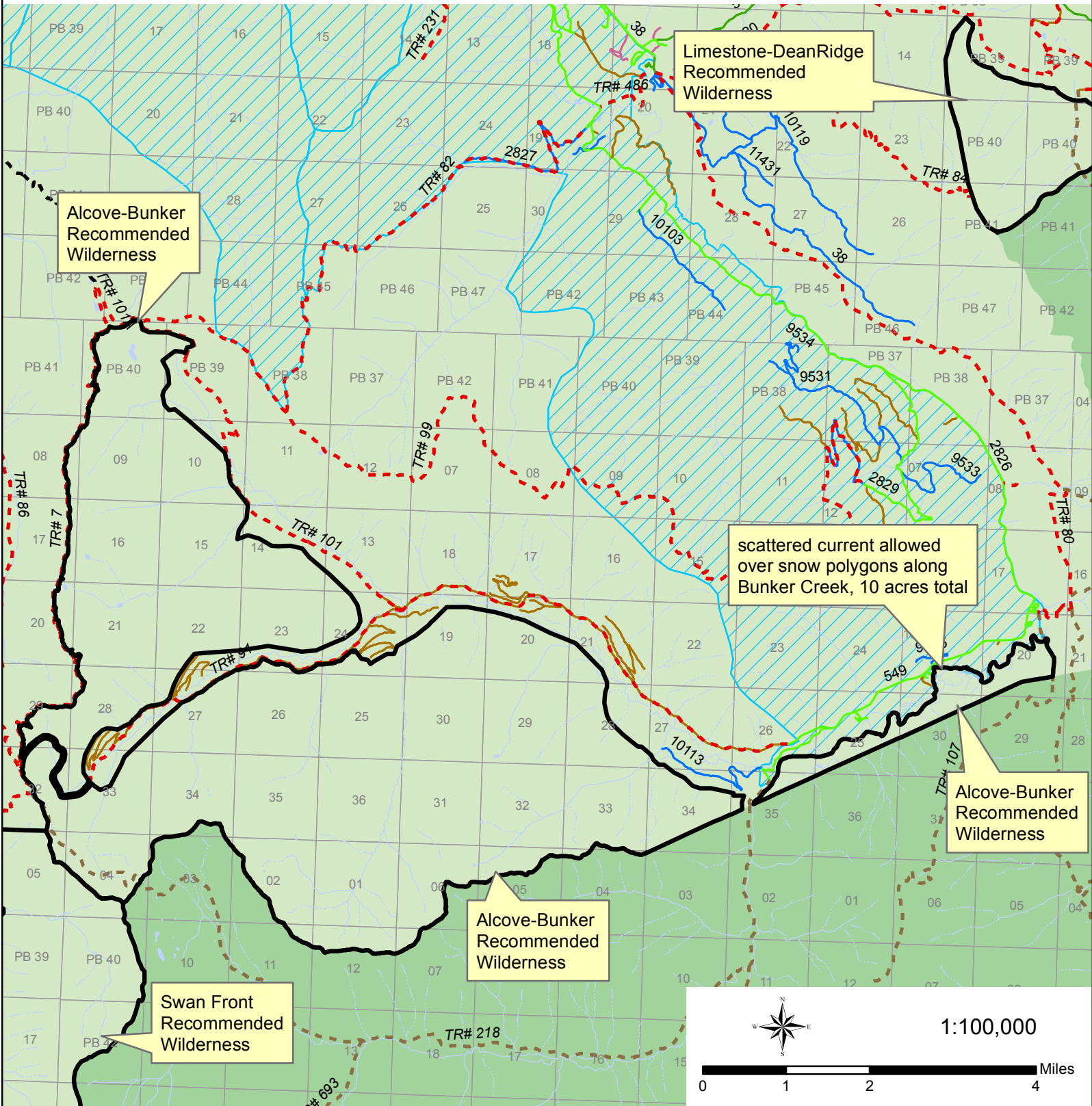


Fig.A-5 Alcove-Bunker Recommended Wilderness



Allowed Trail Uses

- ■ ■ All summer uses
- ■ ■ All non-motorized uses
- ■ ■ Mechanical Cart, Hiker, Pack/Saddle Uses
- ■ ■ Hiker, Pack/Saddle Uses
- ■ ■ Hiker ONLY

Existing Road Management

- Highways, county/city roads
- Private roads
- Special Use Permit roads
- OPEN yearlong
- OPEN seasonally
- CLOSED yearlong by sign or gate
- CLOSED yearlong by physical barrier

-  Existing Allowed Over Snow Motorized

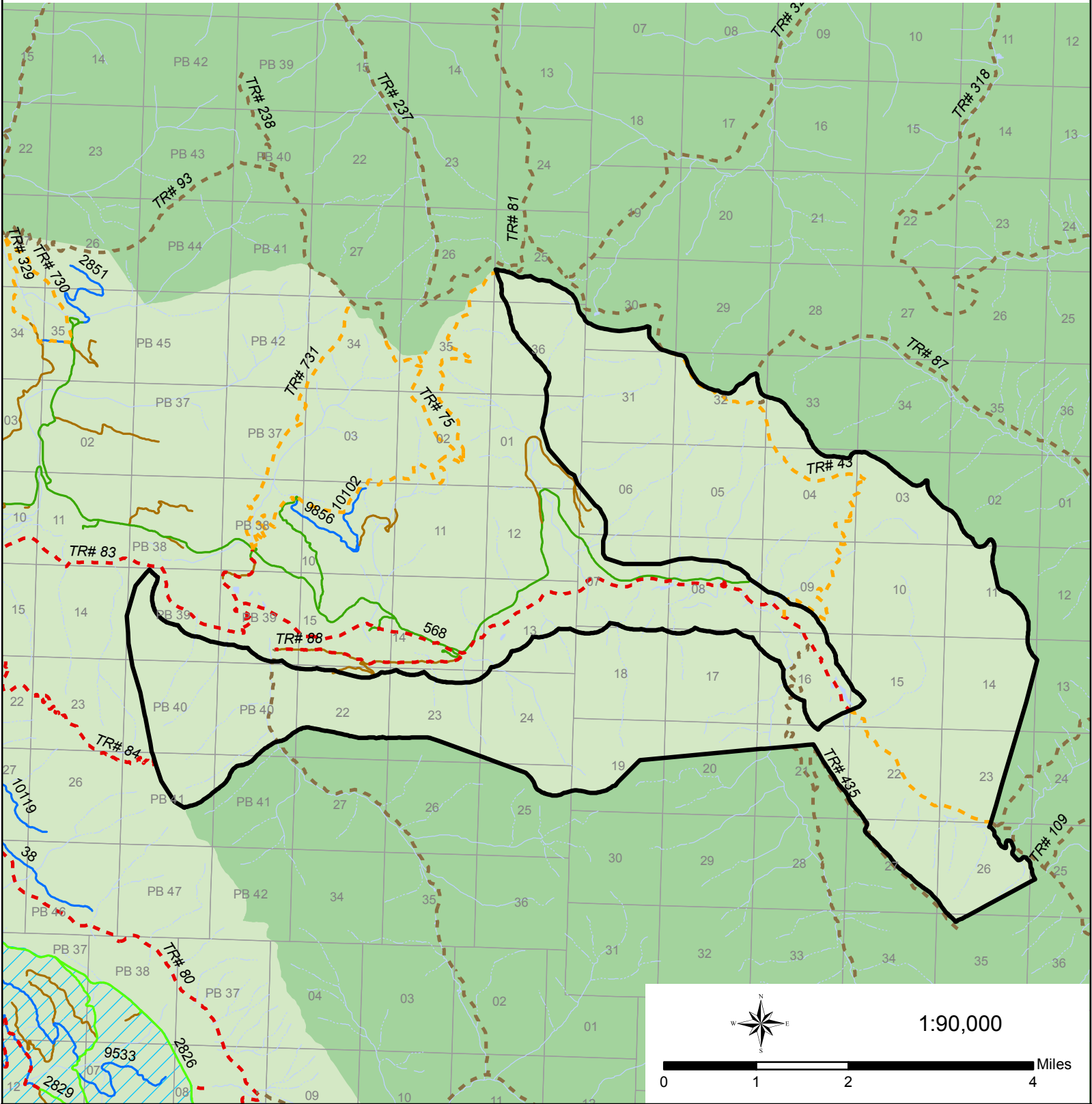
- Reservoirs, Lakes, Streams

- ☐
- Recommended Wilderness

Land Ownership

- FOREST SERVICE
DESIGNATED WILDERNESS

Fig.A-6 Limestone-Dean Ridge Recommended Wilderness



Allowed Trail Uses

- All summer uses
- All non-motorized uses
- Mechanical Cart, Hiker, Pack/Saddle Uses
- Hiker, Pack/Saddle Uses
- Hiker ONLY

Existing Road Management

- Highways, county/city roads
- Private roads
- Special Use Permit roads
- OPEN yearlong
- OPEN seasonally
- CLOSED yearlong by sign or gate
- CLOSED yearlong by physical barrier

Existing Allowed Over Snow Motorized

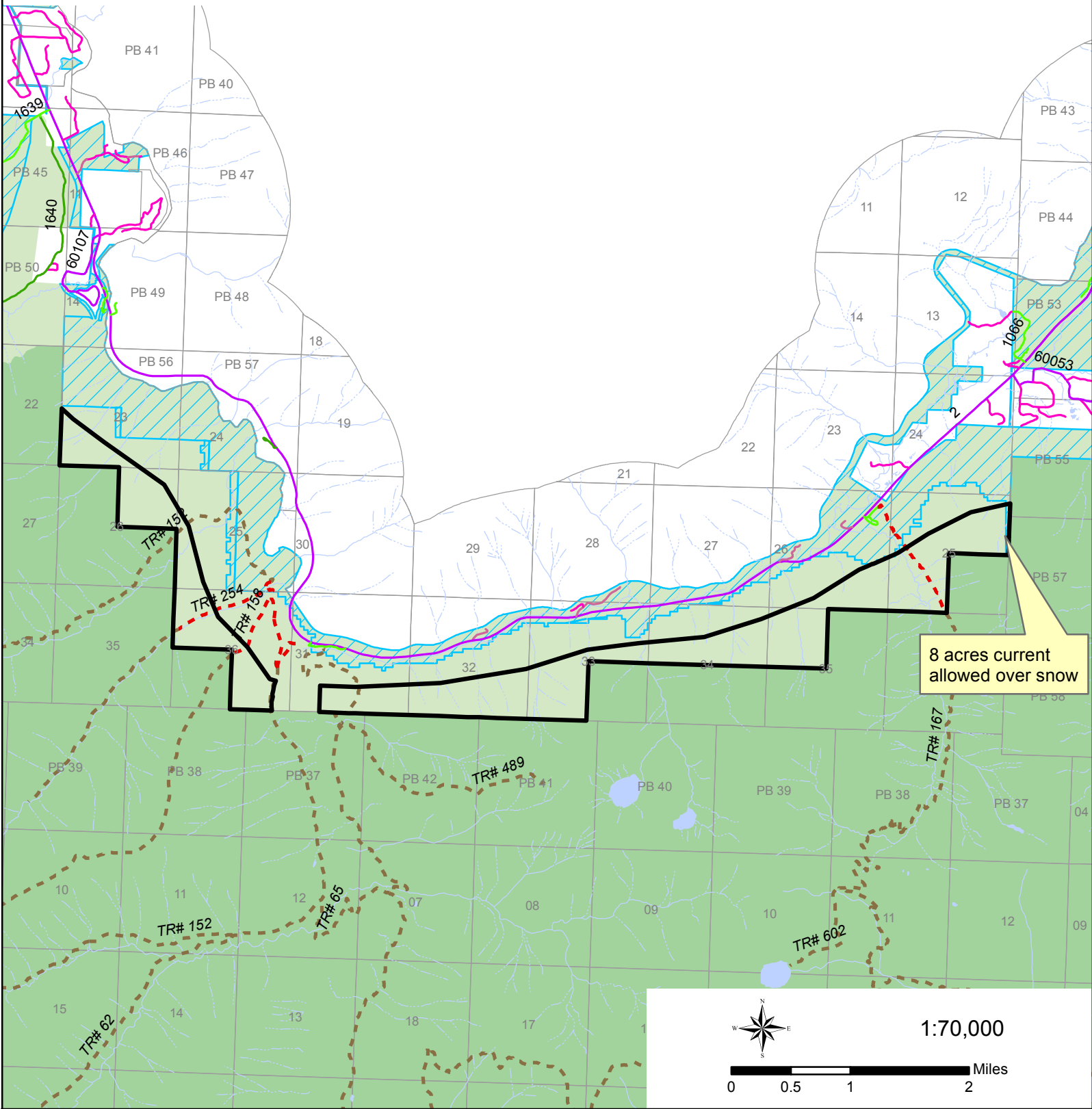
Reservoirs, Lakes, Streams

Recommended Wilderness

Land Ownership

- FOREST SERVICE
- DESIGNATED WILDERNESS

Fig.A-7 Java-Bear Creek Recommended Wilderness



Allowed Trail Uses

- ■ ■ All summer uses
- ■ ■ All non-motorized uses
- ■ ■ Mechanical Cart, Hiker, Pack/Saddle Uses
- ■ ■ Hiker, Pack/Saddle Uses
- ■ ■ Hiker ONLY

Existing Road Management

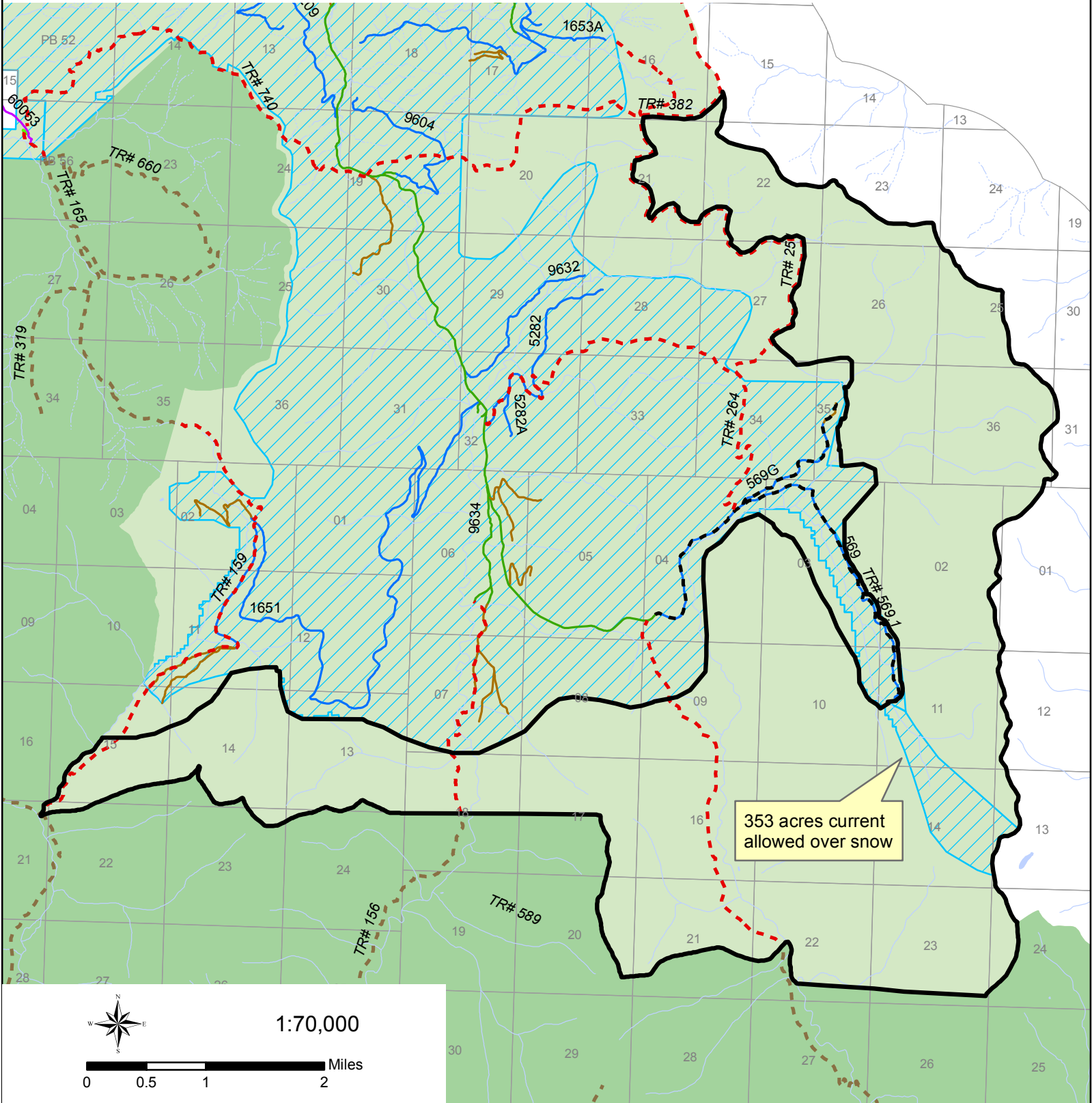
-  Highways, county/city roads
-  Private roads
-  Special Use Permit roads
-  OPEN yearlong
-  OPEN seasonally
-  CLOSED yearlong by sign or gate
-  CLOSED yearlong by physical barrier

-  Existing Allowed Over Snow Motorized
 Reservoirs, Lakes, Streams
 Recommended Wilderness

Land Ownership

- FOREST SERVICE
DESIGNATED WILDERNESS

Fig.A-8 Slippery Bill-Puzzle Recommended Wilderness



Allowed Trail Uses

- All summer uses
- All non-motorized uses
- Mechanical Cart, Hiker, Pack/Saddle Uses
- Hiker, Pack/Saddle Uses
- Hiker ONLY

Existing Road Management

- Highways, county/city roads
- Private roads
- Special Use Permit roads
- OPEN yearlong
- OPEN seasonally
- CLOSED yearlong by sign or gate
- CLOSED yearlong by physical barrier

Land Ownership

- Existing Allowed Over Snow Motorized
- Reservoirs, Lakes, Streams
- Recommended Wilderness
- FOREST SERVICE
- DESIGNATED WILDERNESS

Fig. A-9. Vicinity Map for A-10 through A-13.

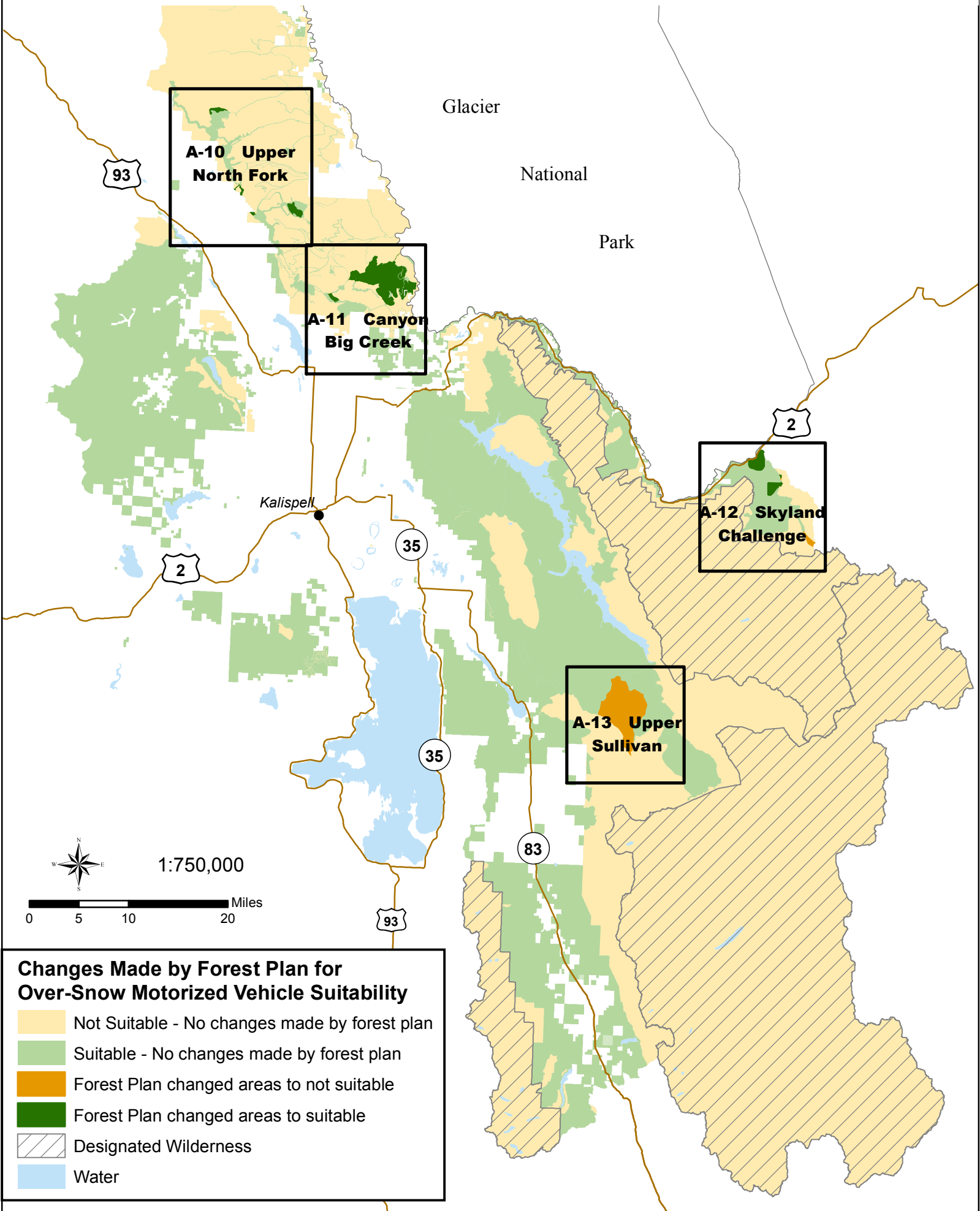


Figure A-10. Upper North Fork Over Snow Motorized

The GIS mapping issue polygons have been outlined with a thin red line. The internal color indicates what the proposed polygon will be assigned. Given the polygons are very small, it may be necessary to zoom in to see them.

Whether the route is a road, route corridor, groomed route or groomed route corridor is shown on the various forest Over Snow Motorized Use Maps (OSVUM).

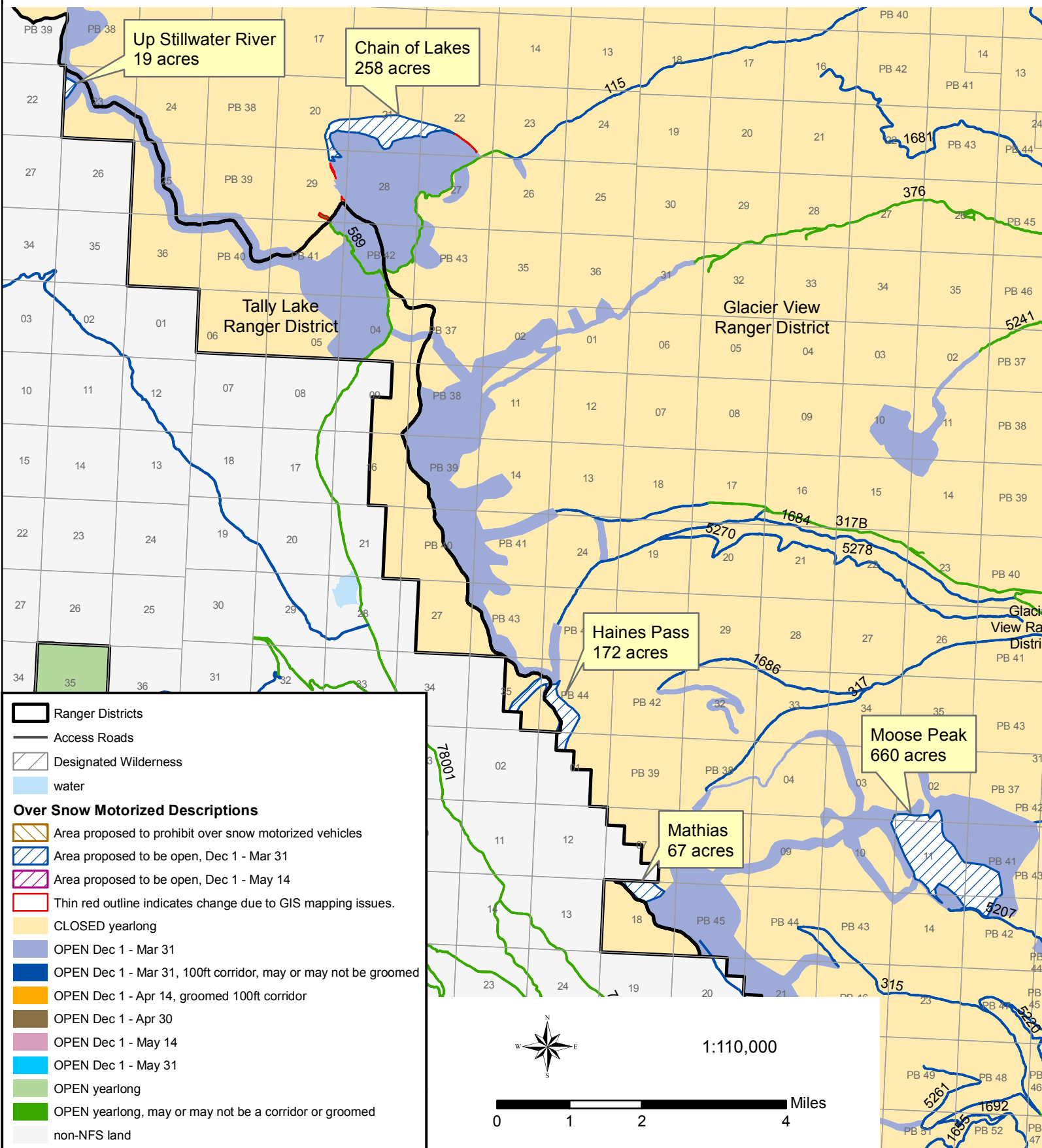


Figure A-11. Canyon Big Creek Over Snow Motorized

The GIS mapping issue polygons have been outlined with a thin red line. The internal color indicates what the proposed polygon will be assigned. Given the polygons are very small, it may be necessary to zoom in to see them.

Whether the route is a road, route corridor, groomed route or groomed route corridor is shown on the various forest Over Snow Motorized Use Maps (OSVUM).

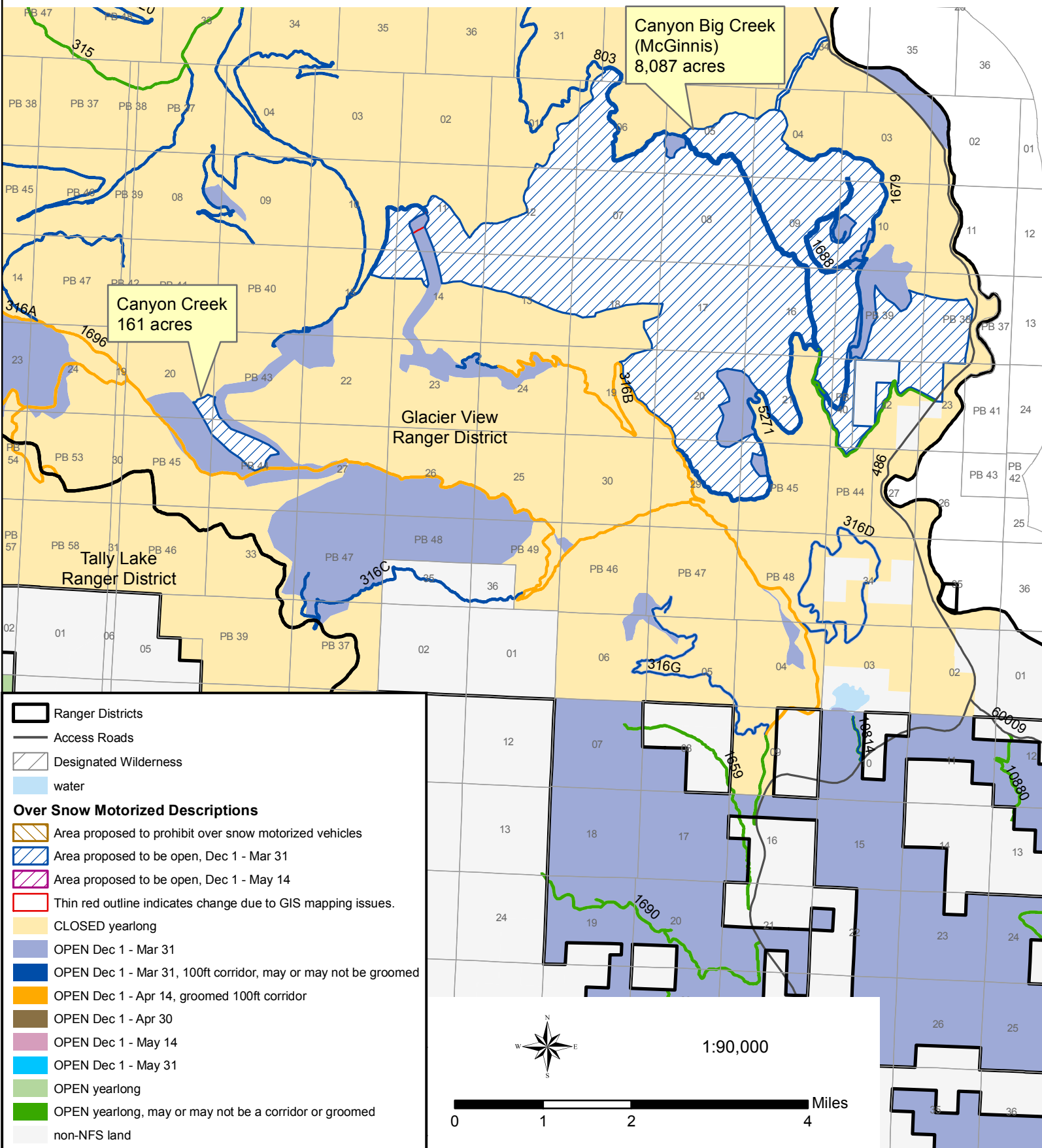


Figure A-12. Skyland Challenge Over Snow Motorized

The GIS mapping issue polygons have been outlined with a thin red line. The internal color indicates what the proposed polygon will be assigned. Given the polygons are very small, it may be necessary to zoom in to see them.

Whether the route is a road, route corridor, groomed route or groomed route corridor is shown on the various forest Over Snow Motorized Use Maps (OSVUM).

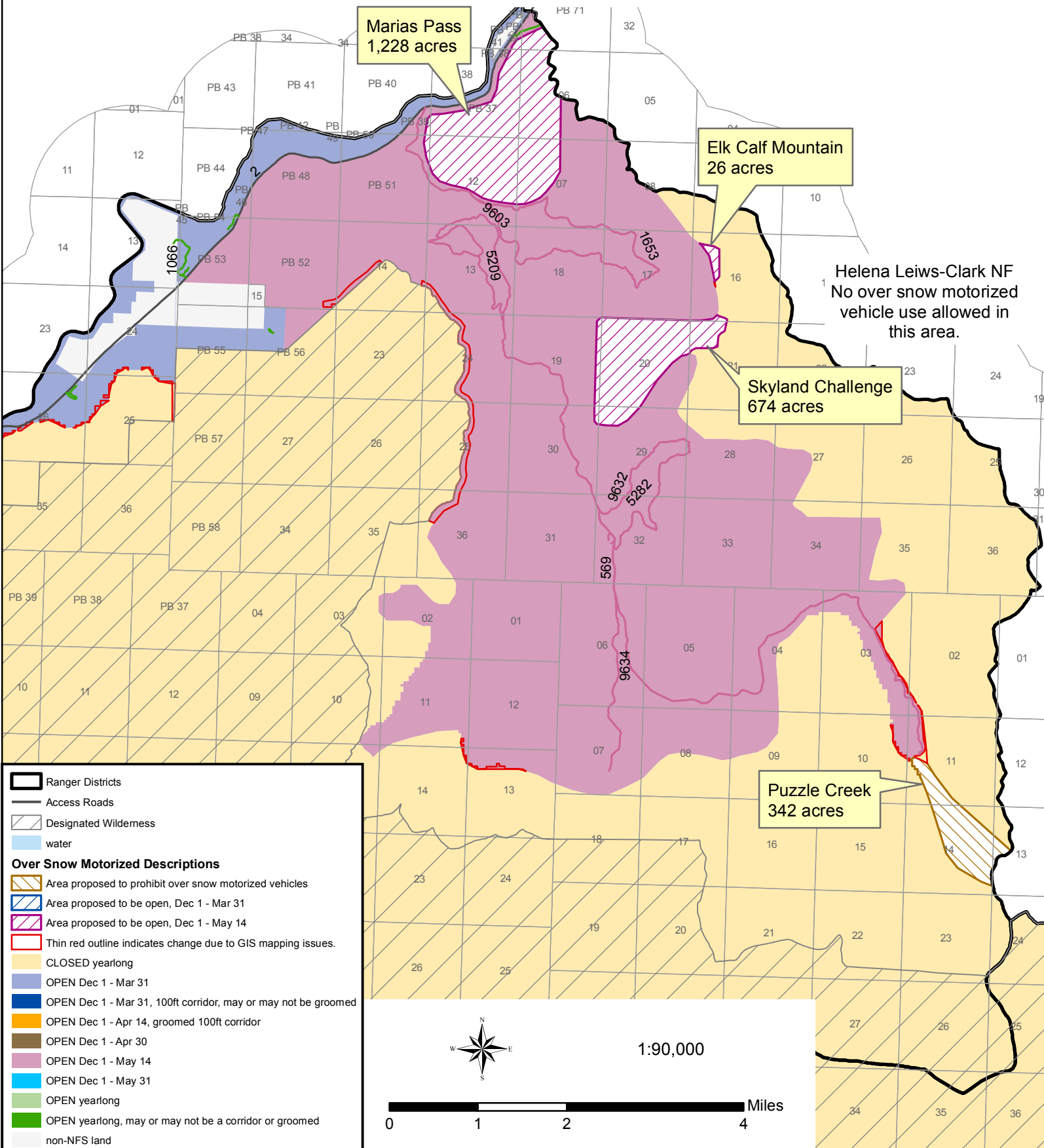


Figure A-13. Upper Sullivan Over Snow Motorized

The GIS mapping issue polygons have been outlined with a thin red line. The internal color indicates what the proposed polygon will be assigned. Given the polygons are very small, it may be necessary to zoom in to see them.

Whether the route is a road, route corridor, groomed route or groomed route corridor is shown on the various forest Over Snow Motorized Use Maps (OSVUM).

