

ATVs reconsidered on North Shore trail

RECREATION: The debate over ATV use on the North Shore Snowmobile Trail heats up again.

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Efforts to open the North Shore State Snowmobile Trail to summertime ATV use have been rekindled thanks to a little-known law passed by the 2005 Legislature.

Lawmakers ordered the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources to study the prospect of adding ATVs to the trail during snowless

months. In August 2004, DNR Commissioner Gene Merriam decided ATVs should not be allowed on the trail. Without major route changes and new bridges, he said, ATVs would have too big of an impact on sensitive North Shore streams and wetlands.

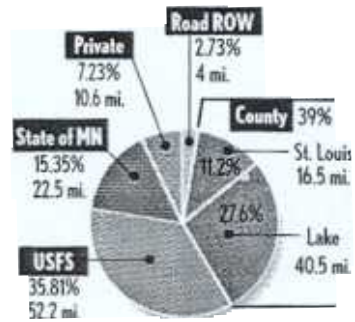
But ATV clubs, county boards and some northern lawmakers kept pressing the issue. Lawmakers gave the DNR \$55,000 to conduct the study and report back by

March 2006, when the Legislature goes back to work. Lawmakers could pass a bill allowing ATV use at that time, although only on state and county land.

DNR representatives will meet with the St. Louis County Land Department today as part of the study. When it is completed, DNR staff will lay out trail issues for lawmakers but not make any official recommendation, said Laurie Martinson, director of the DNR's Trails and Waterways Division.

Trail land ownership

Who owns land under the North Shore State Snowmobile Trail?



SOURCE: Minnesota DNR NEWS TRIBUNE GRAPHICS

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"We need to be in contact with all the landowners, such as the county, and see what ordinances are in effect that might affect ATV use," Martinson said. "There's still a lot of information we need to dig out."

For example, the state doesn't know how many private landowners own land the trail crosses. Each private landowner would have to approve the change to allow ATVs to cross their land. At least 10 miles of the trail is on private land.

Critics of ATV use on the trail, such as Jeff Brown, president of Duluth-based Minnesotans for Responsible Recreation, say some county and state officials are trying to quietly push the change without public input.

"Our goal now is to see that this be an open, public process. . . . We're talking about public land and public use and public money. We all deserve input," he said.

The 146-mile snowmobile trail runs from near Duluth to Grand Marais. At issue is about 48 miles from outside Duluth to the Silver Bay area.

The trail is open to snowmobiling during winter and a mix of nonmotorized activities — hiking, biking, walking hunters and horseback riding — during the remainder of the year, although it is only lightly used in summer months. Only about six miles of the trail near Finland currently are open to ATVs.

The North Shore State Trail is separate from the walking-only Superior Hiking Trail, although they run parallel at times and cross in some areas.

Much of the snowmobile trail, 36 percent, runs across the Superior National Forest, and any effort to change uses would require a federal environmental review, said Kris Reichnebach, forest spokeswoman.

The North Shore ATV Club first proposed adding ATVs to the trail in 2003. The St. Louis and Lake County boards have supported the concept. Supporters hope the trail will act as a major ATV artery to link with other loop trails inland from the North Shore. They argue that a trail network would focus riders in designated areas, making for easier law enforcement and minimizing conflicts with others.

John Knutson of rural Duluth, vice president of the All Terrain Vehicle Association of Minnesota, said the environmental impacts of adding ATVs to the trail would be minimal. Adding a second use to the existing trail avoids having to blaze a new one, with only minimal resurfacing and rerouting needed.

"There are no open stream crossings on the trail at all any more — that's a fallacy. The bridges are in over the trout streams. There's no reason it can't handle ATVs right now," he said. "There will be ongoing maintenance, but you have that on any trail."

Some local environmental groups oppose adding ATVs because of potential problems with erosion and runoff into trout streams and wetlands. They also say it would cause excessive noise and traffic.

"We don't want a network of ATV trails sprouting along the North Shore. We don't think most residents up here want that. . . . We think if people know about this, they will stop it," Brown said. But northern lawmakers "likely will push it through next year no matter what the feasibility study says."

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