Snowmobile Advisory Workgroup

Meeting Minutes

Location: Lake Superior State University/Virtual
Date: February 29, 2024

Roll call

Present for the Snowmobile Advisory Workgroup (committee):

- Don Britton, chair
- Douglas Baum
- Jim Kelts
- Joe Kuchnicki
- Scott LaCombe
- Karen Middendorp
- Chad VanBennekom

Present for the Department of Natural Resources (department) Staff

- Michelle Ballard
- Ryan Brown
- Anna Centofanti
- John Codere
- PJ Costa
- Deb Gill
- Blake Gingrich
- Cpl. Mike Hearn
- Tyler Henry
- Nicole Hunt
- Rob Katona
- Richard Kennedy
- Greg Kinser
- Andrea Krikke
- Tim Novak
- Paige Perry
- Darin Potter

- Pam Rhine
- Jessica Roehrs
- Jill Sell
- Christopher Stark
- Matt Torreano
- Ron Yesney
- Monica Weis

Chair Don Britton called the meeting to order at 8:59 AM

Jim Kelts made a motion to approve the November 30, 2023, meeting minutes. Karen Middendorp seconded; motion carried unanimously.

Jim Kelts made a motion to allow the Chair to take agenda items out of order. Karen Middendorp seconded; motion carried unanimously.

Chad VanBennekom made a motion to approve the meeting agenda as amended. Karen Middendorp seconded; motion carried unanimously.

Meeting minutes

Public Comment:

Brian Bennett

We have had minor snow this year.

Lot of gates on private property

Create a sign to legally post “This gate is closed due to snow conditions.”

We could discuss with the sign subcommittee to propose a trail closed sign.

The DNR has a closed sign available.

Will add this issue to the next agenda.

Jeff Smith

New trail into Rogers City connector, thanks to all involved to get the trail approved.

Lot of trail issues on Trail 99 with groups of trucks and large vehicles

Met a group on the trail while grooming posing a safety issue and needed to make several passes to fix the trail.

Paul Hammers

The DNR closed a section of trail due to side-by-sides riding and creating ruts, we need to have better signage.

Had to do four passes to fix the trail damage.

Will send photos to Karen Middendorp to disseminate.

Business Items for Discussion:

Welcome New Members:

Chad VanBennekom (MISORVA #1)

Vice President Keweenaw Snowmobile Club

Houghton County Recreation Authority board member

Administrator for the conservation district

Douglas Baum – Trail Users and Snow Communities

Currently the Executive director of Northeast Michigan Council of Governments. We are considered a local planning agency or regional planning agency.

Prior to that, city manager and police chief for the city of Grayling for 13 years.

Prior to that. Mount Ramsey County Sheriff.

Also, a firefighter, Paramedic Fire Chief in Lewiston.

Snow Country Trails Conservancy Easement – Don Britton and Karen Middendorp:

Karen is part of the SCTC working with Ron Yesney and Matt Torreano in acquiring permanent year-round multi-use trail easements. We pay for 50% for four months while the ORV community pays 50% and uses the trail for eight months.

We need to be proactive as we have learned this winter, ORVs are seeking out multi-use trails, which is creating some issues on the groomed snowmobile trails. For future easement purchases, The SCTC made a resolution that wheeled traffic is prohibited December 1st through March 31st.

Ron Yesney said we can put some language in corporate easements; however, they may not agree to the prohibition of wheeled vehicles used to access their lands. Could add language stating wheeled traffic for trail maintenance or management purposes is allowed by the landowner.

Can discuss at the next SCTC meeting. Would need to have the language reviewed by the DNR legal department.

Table this agenda item until the next meeting after discussing with the SCTC and DNR.

Snow Equipment Subcommittee – Don Britton and Joe Kuchnicki:

The rule is in the handbook regarding adequate snow for track lubrication use; however, we needed to have a discussion regarding the language.

Clubs are bulldozing dirt or having the machines in their 4th of July parades.

ESRs were coming in noting track issues.

Some tracks come from agricultural machines which are rubber.

In the past we were able to take the tracks off and put tires on, now the process is very complex to change them out.

Came up with a letter to clarify there must be snow on the ground. The machine was purchased to groom the snowmobile trail. Follow manufacturer's recommendations, some are not following the manual.

Can storage tracks outdoors if they are off the ground and covered.

Proper maintenance is important as well.

Slow down and keep the temperature in mind.

Can the clubs bring the machines to some place that is able to change out the tracks? Most clubs are not equipped to make the change. Probably would not be paid through a reimbursement.

Richard Kennedy said these discussions are good. Clubs need machines to use in brushing, maintenance, putting in signs, and to promote the clubs in parades. It is a difficult issue clubs are volunteers, and some do not have the skill/equipment to change out tracks or check out the alignment.

Better emphasis at the pre-season with the clubs.

Do we add a follow up statement to the handbook for clarification?

Soucy was supposed to deliver tires to the club or keep them at the dealership. It's about $1,500 to change them out.

Note it states in the handbook the club is to alert the contact for use of equipment in the summer.

Wheeled Traffic on Snowmobile Trails – Jim Kelts:

Wheeled traffic is creating safety issues.

Ruts causing grooming issues.

Some side-by-sides users are stating that allowing their use on the trails could create business for the area in winter.

They do not have to use the trails to reach the businesses, they could ride the roads unless closed.

Private land gates are open while we are grooming. May need to close the gates in snow season if we are unable to groom.

Post signs at the head of the trail closed due to trail conditions when there is not enough snow to groom.

Karen Middendorp said that many years ago, the DNR drafted a Land Use Order from the Director, to close the trail systems through November 15th through May 1st protecting the system during the spring season to prevent ruts. Would like to research the LUOD and revisit it so the snowmobiler's have a season to safely ride the trails. We need to protect our resources and have a safe season.

Should we conform state land rules to federal rules? Megan Impson said National Forest land still have the same issues, it is less when there is enforcement. We went from an open to a closed system where only wheeled vehicles are allowed. It would be helpful if the rules are similar across ownerships.

Karen Middendorp made a motion to ask that the DNR revisit the LUOD and the viability to bring it back again. Jim Kelts seconded; motion carried unanimously.

ORVs have been an issue for many years.

Who is paying for the extra grooms to fix the trails when side-by-sides are creating the ruts? This year we didn't have enough snow to "fill" in the ruts.

Ron Yesney let the group know ORVAW is working on the alpha system in the lower peninsula, MTAC is reviewing.

He went on to say the last time we spoke about the LUOD, Fisheries Division was concerned that anglers couldn't access fishing streams/lakes and Wildlife Division was concerned about rabbit hunting.

Nicole Hunt would like to have more information on the damage, is it localized or all over? Should it be a blanket closure or have a clause where closures could be implemented as the weather dictates? Need to have further discussions and gather information. Will discuss internally and have this as an agenda item in the future.

Signs on Trails:

Would like the DNR logo on the signs or property of the DNR.

The clubs are having issues with signs being taken down/stolen, especially stop signs.

If the signs are taken down/stolen, we are doing due diligence, there is no additional liability on the club.

Karen Middendorp made a motion to have the DNR add their logo or property of the DNR added to our signs. Jim Kelts second; motion carried unanimously.

The DNR would take the motion into consideration and find out if this is feasible.

Perhaps a sticker to place on the sign in the meantime.

Cpl. Mike Hearn said putting the emblem will not do anything other than a general deterrence. Won't make a difference in terms of prosecutions. If someone had a pile of them, they would get a larceny misdemeanor charge.

Involve LED, perhaps install trail cameras in the area and catch the person in the act.

Updates:

LED – Cpl. Mike Hearn:

Discussed the Michigan snowmobile safety education program as it compares to other states.

Under 12 cannot ride on public land without direct adult supervision

12 to 17 can operate under one of the following conditions:

Ride with someone over 21 without a safety certificate on state land.

12 to 17 operate unsupervised with a safety certificate on state land.

Person on lands owned, no requirement for a safety certificate.

Person from another state, Michigan will honor their state's safety certificate.

12 to 17 cannot cross a street without the safety certificate.

Would not need a safety certificate unless unsupervised or crossing a street – lot less restricted than other states.

Four states have no safety certificate requirements.

Some states require safety certificates for all youth operating on public land.

Three states require all adults to have a safety certificate.

Several only offer on-line options, some either in-person and on-line like Michigan.

Minnesota most restrictive state – all residents born after 1976 like Michigan after 1960

Kids take classes online and have a field day. About 10K students, 300 kids took the in-person class.

After passing the class, a four-hour field day with a riding exercise is required.

Michigan certified at the most, 6,000 kids in one year with the numbers declining through the years. Since 2013, classes have been offered online. With that said, in 2023 only 1,100 people were certified.

Michigan has a safety certificate law different than any other in the nation, we need to revisit the statute. Perhaps bring it in line with ORV safety.

Had an uptick in fatalities last year.

Classes have been cancelled because kids aren't showing up. Our educators are volunteers, and our program would not exist without them.

Per Jessica Roehrs, PRD unit contacts at a district meeting in the lower peninsula went through the snowmobile safety course. Were required to do the online training before the field day. They will now be able to do their jobs.

USFS – Megan Impson:

The Huron-Manistee filled the recreation program manager, Nick Edgerton will be starting in March.

Carmeuse – Paige Perry:

Rogers City Spur is part of the update.

Thanks to the Presque Isle club Trail 998 is now open.

Many roadblocks were in the way, but the Presque Isle Snow Trails did a lot of the work.

This south trail, 11 miles, connects to the area trails in the Rogers City area.

Swan river bridge

South US 23 crossing on public land,

After a review, 2010 the substructure was still viable, might need to be re-decked.

RTP funding for re-evaluation and re-design

Building the bridge from Mackinac City to Alpena to Petoskey for multi-use.

Carmeuse

New quarry interest in the past year for new developments

Entering into a MOU with them, they are dedicated to exchange corridors for use.

Once signed, will create a Land Transaction Application – first need to un-railbank it, survey the new corridor, and evaluate the cost of both.

Trail proposal bridging a wet area, have the trail go straight across, they will have an option to pay to move the trail if they need.

John Houk and Dave Campo did a lot of work to have this completed.

Miners Castle – Ron Yesney:

Letters exchanged between PRD Chief Ron Olson and Bob Lindbeck with the Alger County Road Commission (ACRC) regarding the crossing.

We have been on the road for over 40 years without any issues.

Would pay for hardening of the road crossing.

Reply from ACRC was vague, they didn't really agree with what Chief Olson said.

For a reroute, the landowner is not interested in selling an easement for a trail.

Essentially, we would need a long-term agreement to build either one bridge or several others depending on the route for about $2M.

Some of the business owners are involved and not receiving any support from the road commission.

Even if they close the road, people will still ride the trail.

The National Park Service is concerned as the trail is not signed or designated and people will ride into areas where they should not be.

Cannot claim eminent domain for trails.

Who owns the right of way, doesn't matter cannot build a trail in the right of way.

Verizon Fleet Management– Jessica Roehrs:

Continuing to work on and moving forward with the program and implementation.

Having training sessions with clubs, staff, and PRD contacts.

Positive to see the interest and the feedback is very helpful.

Doing data analysis with the information we have now, can use that for help in training.

Tackling several issues case-by-case situations as they arise

When the hardware unit is looking for a signal, it creates the hardest draw which is draining the batteries.

Let Jessica know if you are having an issue with this, can be reimbursed for batteries.

To solve the problem, considering the ignition on/off may help with the issue, maybe having a different battery harness.

Low signal areas - raise the ping rate with Verizon maybe signal boosts. Perhaps satellite hook-ups, however, it is a very expensive option.

If we can access the JD Link, we could have diagnostic information.

If there is a problem or issue, let Jessica know. We will make it right or get a reimbursement to help fix the problem.

Karen mention how this will affect our budget, we need to look at how much this is costing us in replacing battery or other items being. Go back to Verizon if they caused the issues.

Would like permission to temporary disconnect from the system. Could be as simple as pulling a fuse or shut the main battery switch off. Could put a small antenna on the building so the unit won't have to keep searching for a signal.

Jessica has the capability to shut off the units remotely. Will need to have a discussion with Verizon, clubs, and internally to decide if we can and when we should shut off the units or come up with a way to mitigate the situation statewide.

Snow Preseason Meeting Attendance (Mandatory) – Tim Novak:

The department is in favor of mandatory attendance.

We are creating a letter informing the clubs of this requirement.

Would not need any travel reimbursements with the online option availability.

Don Britton would like this to occur so the clubs and contacts will have a place for discussions.

FRD/PRD Transition Update – Greg Kinser:

Things have been going well.

Appreciate the dedication of department staff and the clubs in working together to make this transition run smoothly.

By next season, we will be fully transitioned.

We will look to FRD in the future for project support.

Had a two-day training session and had several online sessions as well.

SOS Registration Sticker Size Change – Tim Novak:

Brought up at the MTAC meeting and they agree.

We haven't had a conversation yet with the SOS, the PRD Chief and the Assistant Chief are aware of the issue and the SAW Committee's reasoning behind the request.

Wheeled Motorized Bill 4559 – Karen Middendorp:

No movement, the house split 54/54 most likely will see something next year.

Snow Season Date Change (Dec 15th – April 15th) – Jim Kelts:

This would back up everything by 15 days and winters are getting a later start. This change would not affect deer hunting.

Jim had been in discussions with many people who would like it to stay as it is, do not make the change.

Don Britton hasn't received many positive comments, neither did Karen.

Round Robin/Closing Comments:

Scott LaCombe

ORV use on the snowmobile trails.

In the central UP we need more designated ORV trails. Would need a season like the snowmobile season. ORVs are running everywhere and causing a lot of damage, the program is great at fixing the problems.

Chad VanBennekom

Thanks for a good meeting and its great being here.

Karen Middendorp

Our focus should be on safety, education, and land preservation.

Echoes Scott's sentiments.

Jim Kelts

Also agrees with the ORV discussions. No ORVs on the snowmobile trails from December 1 to March 31.

Don Britton

If a trail is groomed, the ORVs should not be on the trail.

Joe Kuchnicki

If we don't want the Verizon units on, it should be associated with turning the vehicle off/on. Or use a disconnect switch unless we need to have the units on 24/7.

Adjournment:

Jim Kelts made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Chad VanBennekom seconded; motion carried.

Meeting adjourned at 12:31 PM.