Snowmobile Advisory Workgroup

Meeting Minutes

Location: Virtual meeting
Date: September 7, 2023

Roll call

Present for the Snowmobile Advisory Workgroup (committee):

- Don Britton, chair
- Barry Bethke
- Jim Kelts
- Joe Kuchnicki
- Scott LaCombe
- Karen Middendorp

Present for the Department of Natural Resources (department) Staff

- Anna Centofanti
- PJ Costa
- Blake Gingrich
- Sage Hegdal
- Cpl. Mike Hearn
- Cpl. Doug Hermanson
- Jessica Holley-Roehrs
- Jeff Kakuk
- Rob Katona
- Greg Kinser
- Scott Lakosky
- Tim Novak
- Paige Perry
- Doug Rich
- Cody Stevens
- Matt Torreano
- Ron Yesney
- Monica Weis

Chair Don Britton called the meeting to order at 10:34

Karen Middendorp made a motion to approve the June 22nd Meeting Minutes; Jim Kelts seconded. Motion carried.

Karen Middendorp made a motion to approve the September 7th Agenda as amended; Jim Kelts seconded. Motion carried 2 spaces.

Meeting minutes

Public Comment:

Ryan LaPorte – MTAC and Keweenaw Snowmobile club

Thanks to the SAW for all the support and the DNR for help in turning all our documents.

Business Items for Discussion:

Ogemaw Hills (AuSable) Groomer – Blake Gingrich:

Working together as AuSable is going to be walking away but will be helping this year, would like to thank Ogemaw Hills and Jim Kelts. A new grant is in place, Tom, Liz, and Dave will rebuild to hand it off in the future.

Permanent Trails/Glassen Scholar – Ron Yesney:

Joint effort between DNR and MSU to bring on a student, Madison Jane, to analyze the DNR permanent trails program. Reviewed trail segments for ownership, especially private landowners to get a better idea of what we need to acquire in the permanent trails program. In the northern LP, systematic approach county by county, north to south – as the analysis moves south, it will become more complex. In the UP, specific priority areas that have private landowners who are in between sections of state land. This project will benefit us in the future and Madison will benefit from her work with us. Will any clubs have this data available to cross reference with what they have, yes if she had worked on that section. This data can be shared. There is a possibility to bring on Madison or another Glassen Scholar next year.

Wheeled Legislation – Karen Middendorp:

Having issues with the wording concerning “wheeled” vehicles. Would like to eliminate the “grooming” language and place restrictions on the snowmobile trails for all wheeled vehicles over

50 inches in width from December 1st through March 31st once snow exceeds 4 inches on the trail.

MISORVA has issue with the study which occurred out west the data does not work for Michigan.

Precedence with snow bikes and ORVs using the trails in the past. Seems width restrictions would eliminate the Jeeps, Razors, and side-by-sides that are causing the large ruts.

Need to discuss options, do we go with hard dates December 1st – March 30th would affect our hunters put in a provision for hunting/fishing, January 1st with language of four inches or more, getting push back from the ORV groups, might lose snowmobile sponsors if wheeled traffic goes on a snowmobile trail and causes issues, county roads open to traffic, there are differences between the snow depth/load in UP and NLP, phased approach – different areas have different rules, some states shut down ORV use on the trails in winter, local statute would only cover non-state land.

Directors' Order for a restriction of four inches on the trail, no need for wheeled vehicles on that section and the proximity to the highway, if signed can be enforced. If it melts below four inches, ORVs use the trail create ruts that refreeze causing grooming issues.

Maybe have a pilot area to test, revisit after two years to see if it is working or not – tweak if needed. Did that with ORVAW on piloting the alpha naming system in the UP, now looking to potentially do that in the NLP.

Look at areas that are not routed/groomed where people can ride off-trail and direct/educate the ORVs to ride there. Can't designate and promote state forest land for off-trail riding, would need to purchase land specific to off-trail ride. Educate why ORVs cannot ride trails in certain areas.

How long are we going to allow our sponsors to groom when the trails are becoming rutted.

Will need further discussion on the issue.

Pinney Bridge – Greg Kinser:

The road commission will permit the trail as it was last year, will permit through MDOT and the road commission. Waiting for the current ROW/approach court case before allowing any construction.

Updates:

LED Update – Cpl. Mike Hearn:

New Assistant Chief Brandon Kieft

12 new COs started training this week.

Updating the snowmobile student manual, adding content for grooming, snow bikes, trespassing and trail set-up.

Received feedback on the sound enforcement issues. There are some false narratives out there, particularly with testing 4-strokes and the sheriff's departments not having access to the sound equipment. If the tickets go to court and gets dismissed due to the way the law is written, not many tickets will be issued.

Quickest option for enforcement would be to not allow modified exhaust or exhaust that creates excessive noise, snowmobilers will fight that though. Even if we change the legislation to the newest SAE testing standard, trail-rated cans still pass that test, so it will have little impact on enforcement.

USFS Update – Megan Impson:

Staffing: Ben Richardson is in the Hiawatha and Connor is wrapping up his sting in the Huron-Manistee and will soon have a new program manager.

Miners Castle – PJ Costa:

Trail currently runs on .9 of a mile on the county road which the county will be repaving. Looking for a reroute, one option being through ManuLife's timberland that has a conservation easement. The AG's office weighed in any issue with building a bridge on the conservation easement, and they agree that the trail can be re-routed and install a new bridge. We were also going to use a portion of the outside the easement to continue the trail.

Since discussing with the landowner, they do not want to sell an easement on the parcel that does not have the conservation easement as they will be selling that property. They believe that an easement would diminish the price. The landowner is divesting all properties without a conservation easement.

If ManuLife sells, wait to do any re-route or bridge work on the conservation easement as the new landowners may not be willing to sell us an easement across their newly purchase property from ManuLife.

Do we purchase that piece of land, yes but it could put us in the same situation as the landowner, interested parties may not want to purchase the land with an easement.

Land swap option would need to be of equal value that they want and what ManuLife would take.

Will try to work with ManuLife reroute to a different area on their land so that the purchase would not affect their sale of the property, ask if they would sell us an easement anyway where we would like, purchase the property ourselves. However, if a willing buyer shows up, they will sell the parcel.

440 acres, purchase with permanent easement funds and then re-sell. We would only be allowed to pay fair market value. The appraisal would most likely not match the asking price.

Lake Linden – Matt Torreano:

Thanks to those who were on the tour this morning we saw some of the highlights.

Project is 80% complete.

Two bid packages are substantially complete with punch lists to be finished.

The other four packages - two have less than three sites left one is about 60% complete and the last one, work is progressing and on schedule.

November 10th is the completion date for the project and the trail will be open this winter.

Ride Right Update – Ron Yesney:

The posters are working well, however in the UP there are limited areas where we can put the posters lack of trailheads, parking lots, and kiosks. Clubs would like the poster on a plastic backing to put at intersections or below confidence markers which would allow more areas to be posted with the safety message. The 12 x 18-inch signs are about $8.00 apiece. For a total cost, decide how many per club, saturation, and where to post - at each intersection or once every two miles. Too many are too much, intersections would be a right fit.

Would people read them, too wordy to read as they are going past the sign. Have a 4x6 inch sign with the Ride Right logo with a single bullet: Ride Right/Ride Sober, Ride Right/Ride at a Safe Speed. What about uniform and consistent signage coinciding with ORV riding, make the sign universal. Being mindful of the font-size.

Benefit safety message out to more snowmobilers, downside we have too many signs along the trail. What happens if the information is outdated, new sign.

Looking for a recommendation from the SAW Committee. It is agreed the need for a plastic-backed sign with bigger font, Ride Right logo in the middle for continuity with a message on the top and bottom and create a QR Code on the poster at the trailhead.

Yesney will bring this discussion to the Ride Right Committee, would be ready for next year.

Working on messaging with Lead Right campaign to educate the lead rider. Many fatalities due to novice riders keeping up with the lead rider. Yesney working on a video with the Marketing and Outreach Division promoting Lead Right. Posting the messaging on social media.

With the Free Weekend Rides messaging we are also combining Ride Right bullets.

We are creating a consistent messaging.

Researching options for Ride Right billboards on I 75. Seeking funding and language for next season.

Ride Right messaging on the electronic Smokey signs, would have to be sure we are incompliance with federal law. Had messaging on MDOT electronic signs.)11

JVTR Logging Issue Update - Cody Stevens:

In Charlevoix area logging site destroying the road. Trail was in poor condition prior, and portions of the road are really wet. Area #1 on the map was the worst area as well as sections to the north. Grading and shaping have occurred to fix the road. Fixed with snowmobile and Forest Resources funding. Road and trail look good.

Always work with your local contact. Not the best use of time or appropriate to bring these issues to SAW and/or PRD, bring to the local contact. How long do the sponsors wait after bringing the issue to the local contact, bring it to the supervisor or other trails staff.

FRD/PRD Transition Update - Blake Gingrich:

Conducting a sponsor training with FRD and half the PRD and trails staff on September 19th and 20th for “Snowmobile Training 101” using the handbook and sign manual. There will be additional virtual training for each piece of reporting or other items as they come up - ESR training, etc.

This year FRD and PRD working together as the contact and will be transitioning out and by 2027 PRD will be the local contacts. During this time, need continuity and more communication. Each year moving forward to put PRD people in place to build new relationships. On-going teaching and mentoring will occur, will make it work. Have meetings with the club shake hands and look them in the eye.

Novak discussed how we were given a short time frame for the transition; our staff have taken a complex process and is turning it around. Trails staff are working to accomplish the goals of communication and in-person contact with the sponsors will have a big impact on the future of the program.

Equipment Subcommittee – Don Britton:

Buying 11 groomers with the current appropriation, includes the second set appropriations: Gogebic Range Trail Authority, Gogebic Area Grooming, Moose Country, Grand Marais, TASA, Sault Ste. Marie, Houghton Lake, Sno Valley, Big Bay de Noc, Trailriders, and AuSable Valley/Ogemaw Hills

Five drags: North Country, Drummond Island, Curtis, Great Lakes Dual Sporters, and Irons Area.

We rely heavily on Karl Davenport's compiled information to help us make these decisions.

Novak stated we put in a supplemental request for funding, the legislature approved the supplemental but not the entire request. A portion of the snow supplemental went to Lake Linden as we must fund the projects and get reimbursements. The supplemental money is not our money, it is an additional pot of money. The Equipment Subcommittee comes up with the clubs needing new machines and gives the information to the division which then goes to the department for the overall ask. The DNR was awarded $63m and the department allocates by line item what will be funded and how much. We originally had through the snowmobile program $3.5m, $1.3m went to Lake Linden and the other $2.35m was to go to grooming equipment with only $1.8m being allocated for equipment. Trail permits are paying for our equipment, it is self-funded recreation. How can the legislature deny the funding request. Novak will seek clarification and will have an update at the next meeting.

2023 Meetings - Informational

Checking the availability of the American Legion in Munising on November 30th.

Round Robin/Closing Comments:

Joe Kuchnicki

Some from the snowmobiling community went to the Doty Bridge and did an unofficial dedication to Jim Duke. Would like to rename the bridge to the Jim Duke bridge. There is an official process and a way to do, money is involved. Start with the Hiawatha to ask them, there is a process to name a federal bridge. Yesney to send a letter to the Forest Supervisor Shannon Rische.

The SAW Committee should still be available to discuss issues rather than people going to the news outlets.

Scott LaCombe

The signage throughout the UP differs from place to place. Seen signs on trees or on the backs of other signs. There are signs all over the place, there isn't continuity throughout the UP.

Karen Middendorp

Groomer Workshop, run the workshop mid-week March 6th, 7th and 8th Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday having the SAW meeting on Thursday the 7th starting at 9:00 AM instead of 10:00 AM. All PRD staff will be at a meeting in Grand Rapids that week, will discuss internally and can discuss further at the next SAW meeting.

Don Britton

Appreciate all the work being done to change over the local contacts from FRD to PRD with the sponsors.

Yesney

Trail 2 in Gogebic County was closed by the new ski hill owners. The City of Wakefield is not going to allow the reroute that was in place last year. The alternative reroute was not approved and we do not have a trail this year. The city, village, and the club will continue to meet, and the department will do what is needed to work on this issue.

Adjournment:

Jim Kelts made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 1:57. Barry Bethke seconded; motion carried.