Snowmobile Advisory Workgroup

Meeting Minutes

February 26, 2026
Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan

Roll Call

PRESENT for the Snowmobile Advisory Workgroup (SAW):

WORKGROUP

Karen Middendorp, Chad VanBennekom, Doug Baum, Scott LaCombe, Larry Toth

VIRTUAL:

Joe Kuchnicki, Jim Kelts (late)

PRESENT for the Department of Natural Resources (DNR):

DEPARTMENT STAFF

Tim Novak, Anna Centofanti, Greg Kinser, Jessica Roehrs, PJ Costa, Carly Graff, Ron Yesney, Daryl Browning, Connor Smith, Dallas Blair, Michael Hearn, Jennifer Lehto

VIRTUAL:

Rob Katona, Bobbi Audette, Michelle Ballard, Scott Slavin, Chris Stark, Paige Perry, Heather Durocher, Jill Sell, Katie Gervasi, Griselda Trevino, Blake Gingrich, Barb Graves, Scott Lakosky

SNOWMOBILE EQUIPMENT SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Joe Kuchnicki (Chair), Karl Davenport, Scott LaCombe, Chad VanBennekom, Richard Kennedy (DNR), Jessica Roehrs (DNR), Blake Gingrich (DNR), PJ Costa (DNR)

Meeting Minutes

Meeting called to order at 1:02 by Karen Middendorp, SAW Chair.

ACTION ITEMS

Larry Toth: Dec. 5 draft minutes modification; remove “notes” references from Dec. 5 meeting draft minutes and replace with “minutes”.

Motion to approve the Dec. 5, 2025, draft meeting minutes with corrections was made by Doug Baum and seconded by Chad VanBennekom. With all in favor, the motion carried.

Motion to take agenda items out of order was made by Chad VanBennekom and seconded by Scott LaCombe. With all in favor, the motion carried.

Motion to approve the February 26, 2026, meeting agenda was made by Chad VanBennekom and seconded by Scott LaCombe. With all in favor, the motion carried.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Bryan Young - Snow Equipment Purchases
Mr. Young would like to see grant sponsors and clubs receive clearer guidance on purchasing equipment. His club currently has equipment with tracks that should not have been ordered with the tractor, resulting in multiple repairs.

Joe Shaffer – Allegan County Snowmobile ORV Association (club)
The club reported losing a section of trail due to the presence of a protected butterfly species. A reroute has been identified, but current conditions are not suitable for development. The club has been working with DNR Wildlife Division on establishing a new trail, though progress has been slow. They currently do not have the funding needed to construct the reroute. Mr. Shaffer has also been in communication with DNR Wildlife Division regarding mowing that occurred within the protected butterfly area. In addition, the club is facing challenges with private landowners choosing not to renew public access agreements.

BUSINESS ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION

SAW BY-LAW AMENDMENT PROPOSAL

Karen Middendorp
Karen provided and submitted a by-law change to the SAW Workgroup for review and discussion.

Doug Baum
Doug explained that, similar to other statewide advisory workgroups, representatives should be formally brought forward by the organization's leadership rather than simply being dues-paying members. He believes MISORVA leadership should nominate members to serve on the SAW Workgroup to ensure proper alignment and representation, which is why he recommends revisiting and updating the bylaws.

Motion to accept and approve the SAW by-law amendment as presented was made by Karen Middendorp and seconded by Doug Baum. The motion required a two-thirds vote from the Workgroup to pass, and it did not meet that threshold, so the motion failed.

Karen Middendorp – approve/in favor
Doug Baum – approve/in favor
Larry Toth – approve/in favor
Scott LaCombe – approve/in favor
Joe Kuchnick (abstain)
Chad VanBennekom (abstain)
Jim Kelts (absent during vote)

TRAIL AMBASSADOR PROGRAM

Jessica Roehrs, DNR

The Michigan DNR trails staff are working on developing a trail ambassador program for inspecting motorized and nonmotorized trails. Other states have similar programs in place, and the Michigan DNR staff are utilizing their program structures to assist in developing a trails ambassador program for the State of Michigan (SOM) designated trail system. Jessica Roehrs, DNR, presented a high overview of what the SOM program would look like. Both Jessica and Dave Merk, DNR, will be reaching out to trail sponsors, clubs, and friends' groups to solicit interest and participation.

FY 27 RECREATIONAL TRAIL PROGRAM (RTP) PROJECT LIST

Tim Novak, DNR

The FY27 RTP Project List was presented and provided to the SAW Workgroup. Projects that have already been approved internally with the DNR from past years will remain on the FY27 RTP Project List. The RTP Review Selection Committee, created by Michigan Trails Advisory Council members, chose nine additional projects (below), proposing to add them to the FY27 RTP Project List. These projects selected by the committee may not get funded but will remain on the list when funding becomes available. All projects are in an early preliminary stage, and costs are based off DNR staff estimates.

1. Shore to Shore Trail equestrian and hiking trail $250K
2. EQ Staging Highland Rec Area $125K
3. Shore to Shore Trail Hopkins Creek Staging Area $125K
4. State Line Grade multi-use primarily ORV and Snow $3M
5. Lake Linden-Keweenaw $400K
6. Misery River Bridge Redecking $300K
7. Bald Mountain Rec Area $500K
8. Maybury State Park $200K
9. Equestrian Staging Ortonville Rec Area $125K

Motion was made to support the FY27 RTP Project List as presented by Chad VanBennekom and seconded by Doug Baum.
Vote taken:
Karen Middendorp – in support
Chad VanBennekom – in support
Doug Baum – in support
Larry Toth – in support
Scott LaCombe – in support
Joe Kuchnicki – in support
Jim Kelts – absent during vote (late to meeting)

SNOW GROOMING

Joe Kuchnicki

Mr. Kuchnicki asked whether any progress had been made regarding the excessive grooming by the Gaylord Snow Club. Greg Kinser reported that after speaking with the club, they adjusted their grooming schedule to better align with current weather and snow conditions.

SNOW EQUIPMENT – ROLLING REIMBURSEMENT

Chad VanBennekom / Jessica Roehrs, DNR

The Snowmobile Equipment Subcommittee discussed whether rolling should be reimbursable and how many passes should be allowed. Currently, the subcommittee does not approve the purchase of rollers. Clarification and defined criteria for rolling reimbursements will need to be added to the handbook. Input from the SAW Workgroup is requested.

Scott LaCombe

There are a time and place to use rollers, usually in the beginning of the snow season, and they are not to be used when the ground is frozen. Scott is not in agreement that program should deny purchasing.

Karen Middendorp

Rollers may be useful for rebuilding trail systems. The snow program is not prepared at this time to approve or authorize the purchase of rollers.

Motion to amend the handbook to specifically call out rolling as a reimbursable expense was made by Chad VanBennekom and seconded by Karen Middendorp. Six of seven board members are in favor, motion carried.
Jim Kelts – opposed

GRANT REIMBURSEMENT PROCESS

Scott LaCombe / Bobbi Audette, DNR

Mr. LaCombe has concerns about the reimbursement processing time taking more than 45 days and would like to see the process improved.

Bobbi Audette, DNR

Finance has implemented a new system that allows reimbursements submitted correctly with all required documentation to be processed quickly. Staff spend half the day working on complete, accurate submissions and the other half resolving issues with incomplete ones. This system has maintained a two-week turnaround time for several weeks. Once the payment is released in SIGMA, there is an additional 3–5-day processing time for the payment to reach your account.

FOREST MANAGEMENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE – SAW VOLUNTEERS

Tim Novak, DNR

The Michigan DNR Forest Management Advisory Committee helps the DNR in balancing environmental, social, and economic considerations when managing Michigan's forest resources.

Trail advisory board members propose forming a Forest Management Subcommittee to address the connection between trails and forest management, resolve user conflicts, and develop strategies to reduce issues among trail users. Two representatives from the Snowmobile Advisory Workgroup are being sought to participate.

SAW Volunteers:

1. Karen Middendorp
2. Chad VanBennekom

SOCIAL MEDIA ETIQUETTE

Tim Novak, DNR

Tim emphasized that he is not trying to restrict what anyone says on social media but is asking for more intentional and cautious posting. Negative back-and-forth exchanges online have led to complaints being filed with the DNR, resulting in unnecessary investigations, FOIA requests, and added workload for staff. He noted that these situations waste time and divert staff from required duties and asked everyone to be mindful of how their posts may impact daily operations. He noted that the best approach is to stay positive on social media and avoid engaging with negative individuals. While some people will stir conflict regardless, limiting engagement helps reduce situations where others look for ways to create problems.

UPDATES

DNR LAW ENFORCEMENT DIVISION (LED) UPDATE

Corporal Michael Hearn, DNR LED / Jennifer Lehto, DNR LED

Corporal Michael Hearn provided an update on recent changes within the DNR Law Enforcement Division, noting his temporary role as Section Supervisor and the promotion of several staff members. Jennifer Lehto, DNR, introduced herself as the new liaison for ORV and snowmobile matters, sharing her enthusiasm for the position.

LED provided an update on major snowmobile-related activities from the past quarter, including recruit training, statewide snowmobile trainings for local law enforcement, and enforcement statistics from major events such as Tip-Up Town and the I-500. Event statistics included patrol hours, contacts, citations, warnings, and arrests. They also addressed an emerging issue in the Upper Peninsula, where some hospitals no longer report walk-in snowmobile crash injuries to law enforcement due to past legal concerns. This gap affects crash data accuracy and enforcement and may require future legislative changes. They also reported increased participation in the county law enforcement training programs and detailed the related costs. *(presentation is available upon request)*

FAILURE TO PERFORM (FTP) NOTIFICATION PROCESS UPDATE

Ron Yesney, DNR / Greg Kinser, DNR

DNR Trails staff have created a small work group and have been working to define a FTP process that will be included in the handbook so that expectations are clear and understood by everyone. Staff have been working on a form to document what has been found or reported, giving us a consistent way to capture and record information. We are also developing a template to make writing a failure-to-perform letter more consistent and easier for staff to complete.

GROOMING REIMBURSEMENT FORMULA UPDATE

Jessica Roehrs, DNR / Tim Novak, DNR

Grant sponsors/clubs must fully complete all required forms and paperwork for the formula to accurately calculate reimbursement rates. DNR staff have analyzed the current formula against today's standards; however, the review is not yet complete, and staff are still working through the comparison.

DNR DEVELOP FORMS UPDATE

Chad VanBennekom / Jessica Roehrs, DNR

Chad and Jessica have been working on both the new equipment delivery inspection form and the annual inspection form, and believe they are now ready to be rolled out. They plan to present them to the Snowmobile Equipment Subcommittee first and then bring them to the SAW Workgroup for approval. The forms are very close to completion, with one of them essentially finished.

MOTORIZED TRAIL SURVEY UPDATE

Jessica Roehrs, DNR

The team (Lary Toth, Chad VanBennekom, Karen Middendorp, Jessica Roehrs) is still working on the motorized trail survey, which is modeled after the recently developed non-motorized survey, and focuses on general maintenance and funding. The team began drafting it and made good initial progress, completing about half to three-quarters of the work. However, several scheduled meetings were postponed, slowing momentum. The group plans to resume meetings to finish the survey and move it forward. Once completed, the survey will be sent out to Michigan state park staff.

LAND USE ORDER (LUOD) SNOWMOBILE WIDTH UPDATE

Nicole Hunt, DNR

No update.

SNOW EQUIPMENT SUBCOMMITTEE

Karl Davenport

There are nearly $600,000 above and beyond annual repair needs, and it appears an additional $600,000 in repairs is still unfunded. It is anticipated that because of these costs and lack of available funds, no new equipment is expected to be purchased this year.

Bobbi Audette, DNR

Grooming rollback has not occurred yet, the dollar amount is unsure at this time but will assist with some repair or equipment funding.

Tim Novak, DNR

We applied for the snow supplemental funding but have not yet received approval from the House Appropriations Committee. Next year, we expect increased revenue from the gas tax, and trail permit fees will rise to either $62 or $65, depending on the CPI.

PINNEY BRIDGE
Greg Kinser, DNR
No significant changes.

CARMEUSE / ROGERS CITY SPUR
Greg Kinser, DNR
We are continuing to finalize the easement with Carmeuse, and construction on the Swan River Bridge is moving forward. After a long wait, the project is progressing, surveying of the site is scheduled, and tree removal is expected to begin in late March to prepare the area for the contractor. This will allow construction to start next year. The Swan River Bridge project is funded through RTP.

VERIZON FLEET UPDATE
Jessica Roehrs, DNR
Over the past few months, more users have been using the Verizon Fleet mobile application to track groomers. Verizon released an updated version of the app in January. Contact Jessica if you need help logging in or updating the app. Jessica has been exploring the app's features. Five clubs are still not connected.

Karen Middendorp
Karen expressed concern that not enough clubs are using the Verizon Fleet application and its features to justify the costs to the snow program. With funds needed for equipment repairs, the program must evaluate whether the application is performing as expected after three years. Karen and Jessica will continue monitoring usage and provide updates at the SAW meetings.

RIDE RIGHT / GAS STATION MARKETING
Ron Yesney, DNR / Heather Durocher, DNR
Ride Right signs are now available through the sign order form. Presidents Day marketing focused on the snowmobile Ride Right campaign, with posters sent to dealers and rental agencies. Trail permits will include Ride Right information printed on the back. A social media campaign has launched, and Ride Right cloth towels are being distributed. Printable resources are available on the public webpage in the tool kit.

For the 1,000-mile challenge, 12 riders participated and a permit application was submitted, but insurance covered only Canadian land.

The next priority is enhancing the ORV Ride Right safety campaign, especially since ORV-related fatalities exceeded snowmobile fatalities last year.

Heather Durocher reported that a Ride Right billboard near I-75 in Mackinaw City went up on January 15. A rotating digital billboard (eight-second spot) will run through March 18, and 19 gas station toppers and pump nozzles are currently displaying Ride Right snowmobile advertising.

2026 GROOMER WORKSHOP

Karen Middendorp

Forty-two clubs registered this year, the highest participation to date, resulting in about 180 attendees. The group had productive discussions, and Karl Davneport and Richard Kennedy, DNR, did an excellent job clarifying paperwork and funding issues, helping many participants gain a better understanding of the process.

ADJOURNMENT

Meeting adjourned at 11:55 a.m.