



SNOWMOBILE VERMONT

Testimony for the Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental
Regulation

"Outdoor Recreation Opportunities on State, Local and Federal Lands"

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Submitted by: Alexis C. Nelson, Executive Director

The Vermont Association of Snow Travelers, Inc (VAST)

Introduction

The Vermont Association of Snow Travelers, Inc (VAST) is a non-profit private 501 c3 member based organization. Mandated by the Vermont legislature in 1978, VAST is responsible for administering the Statewide Snowmobile Trails Program for the State of Vermont. The organization was founded in 1967 and is committed to providing a safe and enjoyable snowmobile experience for all ages and skill levels. VAST became the first state snowmobile association responsible for administering its own snowmobile trails program through a cooperative agreement with the Agency of Natural Resources. Only two other snow-belt states of this kind exist today.

VAST and its affiliated snowmobile clubs provide an array of quality programs and services to its membership and is organized exclusively for charitable and education purposes. VAST is built on a foundation of dynamic volunteers, a thriving membership and supportive landowners from the private and public sector. The 128 local snowmobile clubs belong to fourteen county associations and are responsible for the development and maintenance of the Statewide Snowmobile Trails System (SSTS). The SSTS offers an extensive network of 4,700 miles of interconnected snowmobile trails throughout Vermont. VAST's volunteer-based association has become a national model for trail user groups and enthusiasts across the country.

VAST has established credibility and has sustained long-standing positive relationships with local communities, landowners, VAST members, the Vermont recreational community and the Vermont legislature. Through this effort of organization and cooperation, VAST promotes land stewardship by protecting water resources, establishing and following specific standards in trail design and maintenance by minimizing environmental impacts. This is accomplished by effective trail design standards, education of users, and providing maintenance efforts throughout the year. Through an aggressive construction and maintenance regime during the off season, VAST is able to accomplish the goal of providing a safe and superb snowmobile trail system during the winter months.

VAST headquarters is located in central Vermont and is professionally staffed by six full time employees responsible for the strategic, financial and operational programs of the organization. VAST is run by a nineteen member volunteer Board consisting of four elected officer positions, a Past President, and fourteen county Directors each representing a county in the state. The VAST clubs belong to the county association which is an affiliate club of VAST.

Vermont's snowmobile season begins on December 16th and ends on April 15th annually. The average snowfall in Vermont ranges from 100" – 350" inches of snow.

There are several statutory requirements in order to snowmobile on the SSTS:

- A valid & current snowmobile registration (the State of Vermont recognizes non-resident snowmobile registrations from other jurisdictions).
- A valid TMA – Trails Maintenance Assessment, also known as a trails pass. This is issued to every snowmobile and by purchasing a TMA - one becomes a member of VAST.
- Mandatory Liability Insurance.
- Anyone born after July 1st, 1983 is required to take a snowmobile safety course and carry the certification at all time while operating on the SSTS.

VAST is financially supported through the revenue of TMAs (ranging from 45,000 members in 2003 to 23,000 members in 2012), the return revenue of snowmobile registrations, the Vermont Gas Tax (not to exceed \$148,000), funding through the motorized portion of the National Recreational Trails Program (RTP), VAST News advertising (monthly publication printed seven times per year), and cooperative funding through various donations, grants, partnerships including the USDA Forest Service, and a grant received in 2006 for the development of the four season recreation trail, also known as the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail. The operational budget of the entire program varies between \$3 Million and \$4 Million annually.

Statewide Snowmobile Trails System (SSTS)

The SSTS is an extensive network of winter use snowmobile trails that encompass the entire state of Vermont. The SSTS is located on state, federal, municipal and privately owned lands that connect Vermont communities in an environmentally sustainable manner. Approximately 75% of the SSTS is located on private property; ranging from the small suburban landowner to large contiguous parcels owned by private entities and timber management companies. The remaining 25% of the SSTS is located on a conglomeration of public lands owned by the State of Vermont, and federal lands managed by various agencies. The state and federal landowners serve as a critical component of the program providing sustainable access to areas across the system. While this does not imply permanent access, the longevity and sensitivity of the trail location(s) are at a much lower risk than operating on private land. This is especially applicable with new land acquisitions and the ever changing landscape of the private interface resulting in many costly trail closures. Snowmobile access on public land is a significant priority for VAST as long as the partnerships between the organization and the state/federal entities continue to thrive and remain viable.

There are 128 local VAST snowmobile clubs that are responsible for the construction and maintenance of the trail system; including trail structures (bridges, culverts, and other drainage devices), trail signing, grooming, trail alignment, permit acquisition, securing landowner permission and compliance with all organizational, state and federal guidelines and regulations. These clubs vary from twenty-five members to two-thousand plus members annually. Of the 128 VAST clubs, there are 114 clubs that have an annual grooming contractual agreement that outlines the club's responsible for the winter grooming of the 4,700 mile SSTS. VAST reimburses the clubs for grooming their contractual areas, which vary from 10 miles to 170 miles per club. Clubs are also eligible for funding through several VAST grant-in-aid programs for trail maintenance, construction, trail debrushing, signing, and for the purchase of grooming equipment. Approximately \$1 Million in grant funding is available annually to the clubs for trail construction and maintenance and approximately \$400,000 is available to assist in purchasing grooming equipment. The cost of snowmobile trail groomers range from \$30,000 to \$220,000 per unit and the VAST grooming fleet consists of 120+ power units with a cumulative acquisition total of \$8 Million.

The following represents the breakdown in mileage across the SSTS:

Type	Mileage
Municipal – Town Forest	25
Class IV – Town Roads	250
Green Mtn National Forest	505
State Lands	360
Private Lands Total	3560
Public Lands Total	1140
TOTAL	4700

Cooperative Partnerships

The extensive VAST trail network is dependent on the local and statewide support of snowmobiling. This is accomplished through the support of the 8,000+ landowners (private, corporate, municipal, state and federal). These individuals, entities and organizations make it possible for snowmobilers to enjoy their passion for snowmobiling and ability to recreate throughout the entire state. VAST has forged positive working relationships with governmental agencies at the municipal, state and federal levels through many cooperative partnerships. VAST has also worked closely with other recreational groups that are part of the Vermont Trails & Greenways Council. The Council is comprised of the many recreational groups that represent the motorized and non-motorized community. This includes the OHV group (VASA & VORA), cross country skiing (Catamount Trails Association), hiking (the Green Mountain Club and the Appalachian Mountain Club), the Northern Forest Canoe Trail, mountain biking (VMBA & Kingdom Trails), the Lamoille Valley Recreational Trail Committee, regional planning commissions, the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps, the Vermont Land Trust and the Nature Conservancy.

Another entity that VAST works closely with is the Governor’s Snowmobile Council. Mandated by the legislature, the Governor’s Snowmobile Council is a separate entity composed of an array of partners and legislative support including representatives from the law enforcement community, the Department of Motor Vehicles, a member from the Vermont Senate, a member of the Vermont House, the Secretary or her designee of the Agency of Natural Resources, the Commissioner of the Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation, and appointees from the snowmobile community. The Council meets once a month to discuss law enforcement needs and support, legislative action, statewide policy and initiatives that are brought forth by any of the participants.

State of Vermont – Agency of Natural Resources

The Statewide Snowmobile Trails Program (SSTP) is a cooperative program between the State of Vermont and VAST. Under this program, VAST and the Agency of Natural Resources (ANR), Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation (FP&R), Department of Fish & Wildlife, and the Department of Environmental Conservation operate the Statewide Snowmobile Trail System (SSTS). This is accomplished through a cooperative agreement that outlines the responsibilities of both parties. The cooperative agreement specifically states that ANR and VAST consider it mutually advantageous to cooperate with development, maintenance, protection, and enforcement related to the SSTS and associated structures;

- Both entities agree to work collaboratively by providing technical assistance and share pertinent information for the SSTS.
- Identify in long range management plans pertinent to state land and the SSTS to ensure access.
- Identify all planning, safety and enforcement issues related to the SSTS.
- Permission is granted by the State to perform work on the state land under the terms of the agreement and in accordance to the latest version of the Guide for the Development of Snowmobile Trail Construction and follow the current version of ANR's Acceptable Management Practices.
- Continuous dialogue between the entities, collaboration and ability to carry out mutual responsibilities identified in the agreement.

The funding mechanism for this cooperative agreement is the return of 100% of snowmobile registration receipts and 100% of all snowmobile related fines and penalties collected by the state and returned to ANR and FP&R, for use by VAST, to operate the Statewide Snowmobile Trails Program. The program is funded through authority granted by §3214, Chapter 29 of Title 23 of Vermont Statutes. Each year, VAST develops a budget based on projected snowmobile registrations, fines and penalties for the ensuing fiscal year. The SSTP budget also includes a share of the Vermont state gas tax of 40% of the amount appropriated under the Vermont Trails Act. It is the responsibility of the Governor's Snowmobile Council to review, advise, and approve the annual budget for the expenditure of funds for the SSTP.

The SSTP is in compliance with all federal and state regulations and will continue open lines of communication with all partner organizations to ensure the most current federal and state regulations are understood and adhered to on a regular basis. The SSTP will continue its aggressive information program consisting of but not limited to mandatory annual construction meetings, field inspections of projects and regularly scheduled monthly meetings to apprise clubs of areas of concern.

The State of Vermont is divided into regions and local VAST clubs in their respective regions work with VAST staff and agency personnel in identifying issues, concerns and potential projects on an annual basis. These meetings entail discussion on trail projects, potential closures for winter management activities, harvesting plans, and anything pertaining to snowmobiling on state land. This level of collaboration is beneficial for all parties to keep open lines of communication and reduce any conflict between user groups and other management activities. Several naturally declared disasters have occurred over the last decade and any repair work to the SSTS on state land is administered through the Department of FPR.

State of Vermont – Dept of Environmental Conservation

The majority of the permitting and regulatory rules applicable to the SSTS are administered through the Department of Environmental Conservation. VAST clubs are responsible (with the assistance of staff) for securing the necessary permits required for trail construction and maintenance activities. Specifically, any bridge construction or placement of drainage structures require a site visit by River Engineers, submittal of the required permit application, and authorization of a streambank alteration permit before construction takes place. VAST and its affiliated clubs have an excellent track record in terms of regulation compliance set forth by the Agency. This level of accountability has given VAST credibility

within the agency, the Vermont legislature, the environmental community and with the landowners that support snowmobiling.

State of Vermont – Agency of Transportation

In 2003, The Vermont General Assembly authorized the Vermont Agency of Transportation to enter into a long-term lease with VAST for the State owned railroad line that spans the northern width of the state that is 93 miles in length. Since this lease was executed for the management of a state owned right away, VAST made the commitment to create a year-round, multi-use recreation trail. It was a requirement that the rail-line be rail-banked and to be used for interim trail use in accordance with authorization from the federal Surface Transportation Board (STB), thus creating the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail (LVRT).

Through the support of Senator Bernie Sanders, VAST received a federal surface transportation grant in 2005. Earlier that year, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) was enacted, and Bernie was successful in his efforts for VAST and the LVRT. A grant for approximately \$5.2 million was approved for the development of the LVRT. The terms of the grant require a sponsor match from VAST of 20%, for a grand total of \$6.5 million to be applied towards the project. A balance of \$4.1 million remains, while \$1.1 has been used on legal and engineering fees in obtaining all necessary permits and design plans. These fees are eligible to be used as in-kind for the LVRT project. Donations of materials and labor qualify for a 20% match of in-kind funds, while cash qualifies for 25% for matching funds.

The Lamoille Valley Rail Trail Committee (LVRTC) was formed for the purpose for advising and participating in the planning and funding for the conversion and management of the Lamoille Valley Railroad into a year-round multi-use recreation serving the needs of those who recreate in Vermont as well as the communities and their residents. The LVRTC has representation from the motorized & non-motorized communities, regional planning commissions, and members of the communities adjacent to the LVRT. The LVRTC is charged with developing and implementing the Development Management Plan for the purpose of overseeing the year-to-year maintenance, and facilitating the day-to-day management as well as developing a policy for resolving issues and conflicts as they arise.

Actual construction of the LVRT is scheduled to begin in August 2013. Two sections of Phase I which encompass approximately 15 miles of trail and the construction of two bridges are expected to be completed before the snowmobile season begins on December 16th. The LVRT will benefit local businesses and promote economic growth throughout many communities across Northern Vermont. This will also have everlasting positive effects on local users and visitors from all over the country.

State of Vermont Dept. of Public Safety & the Department of Fish & Wildlife Law Enforcement Unit

VAST operates under a Cooperative Agreement between the Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation, Vermont State Police, Fish and Wildlife Department and the Vermont Sheriffs' Association for the purpose of providing law enforcement patrols on the SSTS. The safety of all snowmobilers on the SSTS is the foremost priority in managing the snowmobile program. The growth of both the SSTS and the popularity of snowmobiling over the past fifteen years have significantly increased the need for active trail law enforcement. \$5 of every snowmobile registration sold (per year) is applied directly for the purpose of funding law enforcement through the cooperative agreement.

USDA Forest Service

VAST has a special partnership with the USDA Forest Service and operates on the Green Mountain National Forest (GMNF) under an annual cooperative agreement. Through this important partnership, local clubs maintain over 500 miles of groomed corridor trails and work with federal personnel in trail maintenance and construction projects. All grooming, construction and maintenance activities are accomplished by local clubs and volunteers and are financially supported through the VAST grant-in-aid program. There is limited federal funding that is also applied to the winter maintenance program through the cooperative agreement with the Forest Service. Snowmobiling is recognized as an important use on the GMNF and plays an important role in the sustaining the recreational objectives as outlined in the GMNF management plan. During the plan revision process, VAST played a vital role in protecting snowmobile access and keeping trails open that otherwise would have been lost in the designation of wilderness areas. VAST officials and club members attended numerous public hearings and meetings and ensured that snowmobiling remain a viable recreational activity on public land.

Through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), VAST served as a contractor through the partnership and cooperative agreement with the Forest Service and was able to complete 20 trail projects located throughout the northern and southern half of the GMNF. The total spent on these projects exceeded \$530,000 and through the partnership, costs were reduced, jobs were created and the work was accomplished with a combination of volunteer and contractor efforts.

Private Landowners

A critical piece to the program, private landowners are essential to the sustainability of operating an interconnected trail system. There is a growing challenge in terms of managing the changing landscape through development, regulations and management objectives. The majority of the SSTS is located on private land which requires attentive and careful consideration when addressing issues, conflict and trail closures. Consequently, having consistent access to trails on public property plays a critical piece in the importance of maintaining trails and connections through the state that comprise the entire SSTS. The stability of the SSTS is constantly being challenged and VAST has managed to maintain the system through volunteer efforts, assistance and advisement from the Vermont legislature & governmental entities, and a solid understanding of how important recreation is to the local communities and the State of Vermont.

Legislative Support

The State of Vermont recognizes the importance of outdoor recreation and snowmobiling and relies on the respective organizations to implement successful programs. Under Vermont Statute, Title 23 VSA, Chapter 29 3206(d) provides all landowners allowing snowmobile use of their land the following protection:

“No public or private landowner or their agents shall be liable for any property damage or personal injury sustained by any person operating or riding as a passenger of a snowmobile, or upon a vehicle or other device drawn by a snowmobile upon the public or private landowner’s property, whether or not the public or private landowner has given permission to use the land, unless the public or private landowner charges a cash fee for use of the property, or unless said damage or injury is intentionally inflicted by the landowner.”

In addition, public and private landowners are covered from liability under several other statutes that include the Vermont Trails System; the VAST SSTS is one of the first trail systems to be part of the original designation. This is another important component of maintaining such an extensive system across private and public lands.

Economic Impact

In 1995, VAST undertook its first ever survey of the impact of snowmobiling on Vermont's economy. At that time, VAST was managing approximately 2,500 miles of corridor trails. It was determined that the total economic impact exceeded \$162,000,000 annually. In 2003, Johnson State College conducted an Economic Impact Study on Snowmobiling in Vermont. The overall economic impact to the State of Vermont is over \$550 Million annually. This amount has been adjusted to \$350 Million annually.

The following categories were considered during the study:

- Purchase of fuel for snowmobiles and trail groomers
- Total snowmobile purchases
- Snowmobile accessories and parts
- Trailers, options and parts
- Tow vehicles, sales, parts and service
- Lodging, meals, snacks
- Real estate purchases and annual expenses
- Registration and membership fees
- Tax revenue
- Indirect factors: VAST Operations, grooming equipment purchases, groomer insurance, grooming expenses, and trail construction and maintenance

Snowmobiling in Vermont is recognized as a significant economic driver during the winter months. This is second to the \$2 Billion ski industry. The benefit of snowmobiling is extended throughout the entire state where local businesses that provide services such as fuel, food, repairs, lodging and other related services are bustling with activity during the coldest months of the year. The SSTS reaches almost every community in Vermont from small family businesses to large dealerships and restaurants that fuel snowmobiling's economic engine.

Public Relations

VAST has gained public support through media outlets such as local and regional newspapers, radio and news stations throughout the state, social media, website and through various VAST campaigns. Media coverage varies from weekly radio trail reports throughout the season highlighting events and trail conditions, the opening/closing of the season and press releases for club events such as charitable fund raisers, landowner appreciation dinners and special partnerships that exist between VAST and its cooperators. Recently, VAST developed a PR campaign highlighting the organization, members, volunteers and landowners, and snowmobile safety through ten short video clips that aired across the state and throughout New England. On the state and local level, VAST has supported safety and responsible riding at events across the state where members and the communities are encouraged to participate. Every year, VAST clubs donate to their local charities and VAST has a major event where all

proceeds benefit a charity of choice. This past season, snowmobilers raised over \$5,000 for the Vermont Make-A-Wish Foundation.

Summary

VAST is a dynamic organization that thrives on the support of volunteers, members and landowners. This essential combination provides the key ingredients that contribute to the success of the program and the continuance of the Statewide Snowmobile Trails System. There are many challenges that the organization and International Snowmobile Community continue to address and will face in the future. However, with a solid base of volunteers, members, landowners, and the continuation of supporting partnerships from public and private entities, snowmobiling will continue to be a traditional, fun and family recreational activity for many generations.