

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, my name is Ron Potter. On January 8, 2013 I retired from full-time employment with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) after 37 years. During that time I worked primarily for the Division of Parks and Trails focusing on recreational trails. The Department of Natural Resources provides recreational trails for equestrians, mountain bikers, hikers, paved trail users, snowmobilers, off-highway vehicle enthusiasts, and water trails. These opportunities were all provided through the section that I managed during the last 8 years of my service with the State of Minnesota.

Minnesota is blessed with an abundance of public lands, located mainly in the northern 1/3 of the state. Of this public land base, Counties manage about four million acres for timber and recreation, the state manages about five million acres for forestry and recreation purposes, and the United States Forest Service has about 4.6 million acres in two national forests, Chippewa National Forest and the Superior National Forest. The Chippewa National Forest is about 1.6 million acres and located in the north central part of the state. The Superior National Forest is about 3 million acres in size, of which about 1.1 million acres lie within the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

The snowmobile program in Minnesota is one of the largest and best in the nation with a current trail mileage of 22,253 miles. We have more miles of snowmobile trails than we have of State Highways. Of this opportunity, the Minnesota DNR maintains about 1000 miles of the trail system, with most of the system being maintained by local snowmobile clubs, working with and through local government units.

The grant program to maintain this extensive system is set up so the DNR receives the funding from the State Legislature as part of the annual budget. The DNR must contract with a local government unit that is a subdivision of the State like a County, Township or City. These local government units then contract with a local snowmobile club to actually complete the work on the ground. This effort promotes partnerships and working together cooperatively from the club through the state agency. This effort currently involves 180 clubs, 81 out of the 87 counties are involved with the program, one townships and 19 cities. The details of this program and how it operates are explained in the Minnesota Trail Assistance manual which was provided to the committee.

The Minnesota DNR administers a similar program for cross country skiers, all-terrain vehicles (ATV), off-highway motorcycles (OHM) and trucks and jeeps or off road vehicles (ORV) as we refer to them in Minnesota. The cross country ski program has been around for about thirty years, is not a large program but is important to the clubs and communities that it serves.

The off-highway vehicle (OHV) program includes ATV's, OHM's and ORV's. Each of these groups has a grant program designed to assist them with developing and maintaining riding opportunities. Funding for these programs comes from a state vehicle registration as well as a portion of the state gas tax attributable to that particular group and type of off road use. These programs are all modeled after the snowmobile program because it has been so successful.

The ATV grant-in-aid program, as Minnesota Trail Assistance Program is called, was first established in about 1984 and maintained a fairly stable involvement by about 20 clubs. In the late 1990's this motorized summer activity started coming under closer scrutiny and many traditional riding areas

starting getting closed. In response to this more clubs became involved and starting working towards getting their favorite riding areas into the grant-in-aid program. It became apparent rather quickly that the traditional way of dealing with these new projects was not working.

These new projects, although not really different from earlier projects, were having a very low success rate as they moved from proposals to actually funded and maintained trails. Only about 10% of the projects were successful, the majority of the projects failed to be completed. So we started to follow up and see why this was happening.

There were several issues, one being these projects are moved forward by the trail administrator for the clubs. Even if the club had a local government unit as a sponsor, it didn't have extra staff time to work on these projects so the club had to champion its project if it wanted it to happen. These club members were, for the most part, working citizens that did this club work as volunteers, above and beyond their normal job(s) and family duties and therefore had limited time to dedicate to it.

The other factor that was coming into play at this time was more regulations regarding this type of activity on both public and private lands. More counties were requiring planning and zoning approval, more and extensive approval processes were needed for use of public lands and more agencies were getting involved and having sign-off authority. Clubs were getting frustrated and were having trouble figuring out how to navigate through the layers of governmental involvement and after a couple of years would just give up and walk away from the project.

This wasn't helpful for the public or the agencies because the activity was not going away and without providing more riding opportunities the existing sites were getting over used. I met with the motorized groups to figure out a way to address this opportunity. The Minnesota DNR was split into four regions statewide and we were seeing this issue in all four regions and the clubs were getting so frustrated they did not want to even try getting a new project approved and funded.

I proposed to the groups that if they would support getting two full time positions funded I would turn this trend around. During the 2006 legislative session they convinced the legislature to provide enough funding for two full-time equivalents (FTE) from the OHV dedicated accounts. Upon receiving that funding I then matched it up with other funding we had available and took the funding for 2 FTE's and turned into funding for four FTE's, putting a regional acquisition and development specialist in each region.

The work needed for the OHV projects was the same type of work that was needed for most of the recreational program projects. These staff persons were now required to spend half of their time working on OHV projects and moving them through the process. Staff not only had a better understanding of the agencies involved, understood the different processes each agency required and also had a close working relationship with the clubs and their sponsors. The employee's success was directly linked to the success of the projects they worked on. In a matter of a couple years we were able to take a 10% success rate on OHV club projects and turn that around to a 90%+ success rate.

Minnesota is also very fortunate to have two major OHV manufacturers located within the state, Polaris Industries Inc. and Arctic Cat Inc. These companies continue to be great partners in our efforts. Often times we need to get agency staff and/or regulators on site to view these linear projects, which can be a challenge. Just finding enough machines to get these staff on site is often more than the DNR or clubs can do by themselves. With such advance planning and working with these corporate partners we can have an adequate number of new machines available to complete field inspection in a safe and timely manner. These corporate partners, as well as others, have grant programs allowing clubs to receive grants that can be used as a match or to totally fund projects. Through these efforts they have enabled clubs to complete projects that were stalled because of funding issues.

The recreation programs in Minnesota continue to live and die on partnerships at all levels, but some partnerships just can't be maintained by volunteers on a part time basis, they need some assistance. Trail systems span all public ownerships and involve corporate and private stakeholders as well. Partnerships aren't just nice to have and do, they are absolutely necessary if you want to meet demand of providing sustainable trails and provide a quality experience for everyone.