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Snowmobiling clubs paying their dues

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Before the Lyman Snowmobile Club formed two years ago, riders in this southern Maine town would drive across barren winter snowfields without signs, bridges or groomed trails.

Because of the 45 miles of trails the club has since created, Lyman now connects the state's trails near the coast to

Interstate 89, Maine's major snowmobile artery that leads to Aroostook County.

Before the trails were put in, riders had to "sneak" to get from one side of town to the other, according to Lyman club member Keith Loomer.

"They were using a hunt-and-peck method at Swan Pond, trying to get there to recreate. It was getting very difficult," Loomer said. "It's not everybody (who) has money to load sleds and go to Millinocket and Jackman. It's an expensive sport."

Putting in the trail system was not easy for the new club.

RESOURCE GUIDE

The Maine Snowmobile Association offers membership to potential members who cannot easily contact a local club. Interested riders can contact the association to find a club in their area. All clubs are listed on the association's Web site. Mail your request to The Maine Snowmobile Association, P.O. Box 80, Augusta ME 04332; or msa@mesnow.com; or call 622-6983.

For more information, go to <http://www.mesnow.com/MSACLUBS.html>

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About 94 percent of Maine's certified snowmobile trails are on private land, according to the Maine Snowmobile Association. Loomer said landowner permission is the biggest problem faced by new Maine clubs.

Part of what makes landowner relations difficult to establish is a steady stream of news reports on snowmobile accidents and fatalities. There have been 10 snowmobile fatalities so far this winter, two shy of the state record of 12.

"There's been a lot of negative press with the 10 deaths in Maine on snowmobiles," Loomer said. "Bad press affects the clubs. People get nervous and we hear a lot more from landowners."

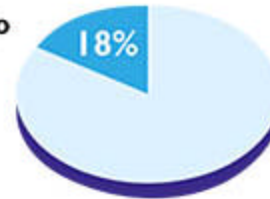
State statistics on snowmobile accidents also show that few of those involved in reported accidents are members of clubs, suggesting that club riders are among the safest snowmobilers in Maine.

In the past five years, fewer than 20 percent of the riders involved in roughly 1,700 snowmobile accidents were members of Maine snowmobile clubs, according to the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife.

SNOWMOBILE ACCIDENTS 1997-98 to 2001-02

Few of the riders involved in snowmobile accidents in the past five years were members of snowmobile clubs, which focus on teaching safety. In addition, the majority of the 1,737 snowmobile accidents that occurred in Maine in that time involved riders who wore helmets and who were not under the influence of alcohol at the time of the accident.

Riders who belong to club



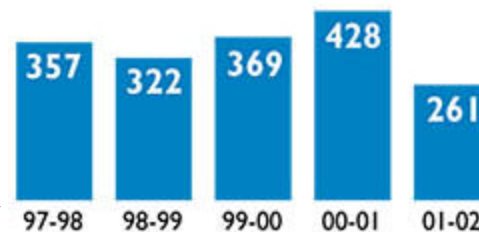
Riders wearing helmets



Alcohol not involved in accident



REPORTED ACCIDENTS



A total of 1,737 snowmobile accidents were reported in Maine for the past five seasons.

Source: Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife

Staff art

Bob Meyers, executive director of the Maine Snowmobile Association, said the primary reason accidents are up this year is because of the early start to the snowmobiling season, which began in November 2002. Last

year, he said, riders couldn't get out in force until the end of January.

But Meyers said the number of fatalities and accidents would drop if more riders belonged to clubs. He estimated that about 30 percent of the roughly 95,000 registered Maine snowmobilers belong to one of Maine's 297 clubs.

"In clubs, they learn a lot about safety by osmosis," Meyers said. "Wherever there's a local club, they work hard on getting the safety message out."

Meanwhile, the negative publicity in the sport elevates public fears about hazards.

"I haven't heard complaints about safety" here, said Nancy Wyman, who works in the town office in Lebanon, where a new snowmobile club was formed last year. "But I've read so much about accidents happening throughout the state, I see it as a problem."

The rash of snowmobile fatalities this winter was one reason Sen. David Carpenter, R-York, altered the bill he is sponsoring to include snowmobiles in addition to ATVs.

The bill Carpenter is sponsoring requires owners of ATVs or snowmobiles to have liability insurance and to wear a helmet. It also prohibits those 15 and younger from operating a snowmobile or ATV; those 16 years of age and older would need an operator's license.

Currently, any rider of any age can ride a snowmobile without an operator's license or a safety course.

"At 16 you can't drive an automobile, and some (automobiles) don't go as fast as these snowmobiles," Carpenter said.

But Meyers argues that the only way to change behavior is through education, not legislation, and the most effective forum for teaching young riders is local snowmobile clubs.

In the past two years, Meyers said his association voted in nine new clubs. Members of these new clubs said their primary focus the first year was educating members on safety.

Janice Tutt, an administrative assistant in the Clifton town office, said the year-old Clifton Snowmobile Club has had a positive influence on her small community, which is at the crossroads leading to Brewer and Ellsworth.

Tutt said the club's new trails have kept riders off the roads.

Many snowmobilers, she said, used to use local roads to get to nearby Chemo Pond.

"It's making it much safer all the way around," Tutt said.

Debbie Lee, secretary of the Clifton Snowmobile Club, said the club was formed because of the need for trails between Brewer and the Milford area, which is north of Bangor.

The club started with 15 members and now has about 90 due to the popularity of the new trail system. That's fast growth according to Meyers, who said Maine's older clubs have about 150 members.

But in some areas, convincing landowners that snowmobilers are safe and respectful remains a challenge for new clubs trying to establish trails.

In the small town of Freedom, south of Augusta, landowner Sally Hadyniak is involved in a disagreement with the newly formed North Star Riders over use of a back road.

Carol Richardson, first selectman in Freedom, said officials in the town office determined through a 1956 document that the road is open as a public way to snowmobile use.

For now, the trail remains open.

But Hadyniak, who opposes its use by snowmobilers according to Richardson, would not comment on the situation.

Others, like Richardson, are happy to open their land to snowmobiles.

Richardson has allowed the North Star Riders to use 50 acres of her land to access trails that lead to Sandy Pond and Palermo.

Richardson said she can't afford a snowmobile herself, but she's happy to have them on her land. She even bakes for riders.

"(People) are afraid that a drunk will come up. They're afraid they're going to hit the snowmobile with their cars. All of those fears are unrealistic," Richardson said.

Loomer said getting landowner permission sometimes takes nothing more than informing landowners of the state's landowner liability law, which does not hold them accountable for people injured crossing their land when they have allowed access.

The generosity of more than 100 landowners allowed the Lyman

Snowmobile Club to establish 45 miles of certified state trails around Lyman. It took two years to gain permission, Loomer said.

Shirley Harrison of Lyman said the new club approached her and her husband last year about using some of their 100 acres for trails. The Harrisons didn't want ATVs on their land, but agreed to allow snowmobiles.

"(ATVs) have a tendency to dig and I think they do more damage," Harrison said. "Our land is agricultural. That's one reason we didn't want ATVs on our property. We didn't want to close it off. At one time, with ATVs, we were contemplating doing that."

Harrison now notices more snowmobilers on her way to work. But she said those she sees near the road appear to be patient.

"I haven't noticed anyone scooting ahead to beat the traffic," Harrison said. "The comments I've heard are that they're happy with the trails, they're nicely groomed. It's a good indication."

What groomed snowmobile trails offer a community is significant. The packed paths through fields and woodlands can be used by Nordic skiers, walkers, snowshoers and even wildlife.

Last year, the Lyman club put in 10 bridges and a half dozen the year before to provide access to the new trail system. Dues from club members and donations from local businesses paid for the infrastructure, Loomer said.

When a new snowmobile club shows it will bring recreational enjoyment, rather than grief to a community, the support for the club also can be significant.

Loomer said residents of Lyman voted to provide \$4,000 for the new club to buy grooming equipment. Donations from area businesses helped raise another \$6,000, he said.

The Lyman club is currently planning its first winter carnival to provide locals the opportunity to watch snowmobile games and get information on safety measures and local trail systems.

But even while the new Lyman club tries to grow its membership, the burden to provide a positive influence within the sport is constant.

"We still get calls from landowners about snowmobilers who don't stay on the trail," Loomer said. "It's an issue we deal with. But (relations with the community) works well."

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