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ATV riders want access to state land

*By Candace Page
Free Press Staff Writer*

MONTPELIER — An enthusiastic crowd of more than 250 all-terrain vehicle riders urged the Agency of Natural Resources on Monday to allow ATV connector trails on state land.

“There is room for all to share use of our lands and water,” said David Lewis of Royalton, summing up the sentiment of many of those who testified at a public hearing.

<http://tinyurl.com/ngexo5>">• **Blog: ATVs: Case study in political organizing**

“ATV users are depicted as minority users that don’t count. We pay taxes like everybody else,” added Ernie Pappas of Morgan.

Natural Resources Secretary Jonathan Wood has proposed a rule that would allow him to designate ATV connector trails on state land, after considering a number of factors. Those include a proposed trail’s potential environmental impact and the possibility of conflicts with other users of the land.

Most of those in the audience wore stickers announcing their support of the Vermont All-Terrain Vehicles Sportsman’s Association, the group that wants access to state land.

VASA’s goal is a statewide network that would allow riders to travel long distances. The group says in some areas state lands create a barrier to connecting trail segments on private land.

About 15 people opposed the new rule.

Michael Colby, who described himself as a member of Horse Loggers for Peace and Quiet, was one of those — and brought a bit of theater to the evening. He startled the audience by starting his chain saw, filling the auditorium with the stink of petroleum as he made his point that not all uses should be allowed on state land.

ATV riders are aware of public perception of ATV “renegade” riders who go off trail and do damage. They said that reputation is undeserved, and they emphasized the volunteer work and charitable fundraising done by local ATV clubs.

“We don’t witness any reckless riding or tearing up territory,” said Sherry Smith of West Rutland, a rider, ATV club member and landowner who allows ATV access. “The average age in our group is 54. We don’t fit stereotype of reckless riders. We always pick up and leave places looking the same as when we got there.”

Claire Willette of Fairfax, an officer of the North Country ATV Association, was among those who made a case that a statewide network of trails — including connectors on state land - would be an economic boon.

“In 2007 a group of 12 members drove 20 hours one way to visit the Hatfield/McCoy trails of West

Virginia for eight days,” she said of her club. “We spent thousands of dollars between us all for that trip. This is all money Vermont misses out on because it is not as ATV friendly or has trails as easily connected due to some of the state land barriers.”

Riders also made the case that ATVs provide a way for elderly or disabled people to spend time in the woods.

Vaughn Hadwen of Springfield said he has limited movement in his knees. “I can’t walk in the wood. This is how I enjoy the woods,” he said of his ATV riding.

Anthony Iarrapino of the Conservation Law Foundation was among those who opposed the new rule.

“It’s disingenuous to claim this is a rule about small trails,” he said. He said documents he obtained from the Agency of Natural Resources indicate there is interest in trails as long as eight to 15 miles on state land.

“ATVs gouge up land, pollute the air, increase erosion, muddy streams, wreck trails and disturb wildlife,” said Mollie Matteson of Richmond and the Center for Biological Diversity.

Agency lawyer Warren Coleman, who conducted the hearing, said the agency will respond to the comments before it submits the rule for review by a legislative committee.

Contact Candace Page at 660-1865 or cpage@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com. Sign up for Free Press headlines, delivered free to your e-mail, at www.burlingtonfreepress.com/newsletters.

Additional Facts

What's next

- The state Agency of Natural Resources will accept written comments until June 22 on the proposed rule to allow designation of all-terrain vehicle connector trails on state land.
 - Send comments to Warren Coleman, Agency of Natural Resources, 103 South Main St., Waterbury, Vt. 05671 or to ATVRULE@state.vt.us
 - The agency may modify the proposed rule in light of public comments. Then it must be submitted to the Legislative Committee on Administrative Rules, which has 45 days to consider it.
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