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Hundreds express outrage at ATV proposal

In letters, e-mails, they oppose use of state land

By Candace Page, Free Press Staff Writer

WATERBURY — More than a thousand Vermonters, many of them expressing outrage, wrote the Agency of Natural Resources in June to oppose construction of all-terrain-vehicle connector trails on state land.

By Wednesday, the agency had received 148 hard-copy letters about its ATV proposal. Writers opposed the rule by a ratio of 3-to-1: 111 opponents to 37 supporters.

Another 1,600 comments were sent by e-mail. An ANR legal intern who has reviewed the e-mails said those comments also ran 3- or 4-to-1 against ATV trails on public land. A scan of the comments Wednesday confirmed her estimate.

"ATVs are permitted by the selectmen on the Class 3 road that passes my home," ran a typical letter, from Alice Rydjeski of Barnard. "I know from experience that ATVs pollute the quiet, pollute the darkness, pollute the water, pollute the air and pollute the earth."

Other writers cited specific examples of ATV damage to mountain trails, public lands and private property in Vermont. Some sent photographs of what they described as environmental damage by the four-wheeled vehicles.

Letters from supporters emphasized the fun ATV riding can be for families, the progress made by the Vermont All-Terrain Vehicle Sportsman's Association in organizing and policing ATV riders, and the potential to attract more tourism to the state.

"I find the moose do more damage to the trails than ATVs," wrote landowner Mike Keiser of Waterbury Center, who hosts six miles of trails.

Vermont law allows the secretary of Natural Resources to designate ATV trails on state land. In May, Secretary Jonathan Wood proposed a rule establishing a process and criteria to do so, and he solicited comments from the public.

About 250 ATV riders and their supporters dominated a June public hearing, far outnumbering those who spoke against the proposal.

But the written comments have run strongly against the idea. However, ANR is not holding a vote on ATVs, and it is unclear what effect the comments, pro and con, will have on the rule's fate.

Vermont has about 16,000 registered all-terrain vehicles. The riders' association, VASA, estimates there are another 25,000 to 35,000 unregistered machines.

'The damage ATVs can do'

At least several dozen of the opposition comments were form letters circulated by environmental groups and signed by their supporters.

Hundreds of others wrote their own letters, some in the wavery writing of the elderly, others enclosing documentation in the form of photographs or information about the experiences of other states. Among those who wrote to oppose the rule were at least five current or former ANR staff members.

“As a retired forestry technician with the Department of Forest, Parks and Recreation for almost 40 years, I have seen firsthand the damage these ATVs can do,” wrote John Barrows of Stockbridge. “The damage in Eddy Brook, Coolidge State Forest, Okemo Mountain, just to name a few. I remember the four riders we caught on the West Rutland State Forest. Their case was never brought up and with less resources now that will happen again.”

“All Vermonters should be able to use the state forests in peace and quiet — they are not for a loud special group to use with their machines,” wrote Sally Laughlin, a private citizen who chairs the state Endangered Species Committee.

ATV riders found support, however, from two high-ranking state officials: Lt. Gov. Brian Dubie and Auditor Thomas Salmon. Also endorsing the rule was former ANR secretary Tom Torti.

“As an ATV owner myself, I know that these vehicles can be used in a safe and environmentally responsible manner, as long as the trails are sited thoughtfully and maintained,” Dubie wrote.

‘I beg you ...’

Opponents’ comments fell into a number of rough categories. A few cited what they saw as specific weaknesses in the proposal as drafted. They noted, for example, that a required “scientific information statement” with the rule was blank.

“I found the scientific information statement almost laughable to be completely void of any information at all,” wrote Aaron Hurst, a South Londonderry landowner. “There are reams of scientific data, publications, studies and documents related to ATV use on private and public lands.”

Others related their personal experience.

“I own an ATV and ride on a weekly basis in summer. I beg you not to let these machines get even the slightest toehold on state lands,” wrote William J. Torrey of West Bolton. He said in his experience ATV riders do not obey restrictions on their use.

Deb and Bob Sargent of Moretown wrote a five-page letter accompanied by photographs.

They noted below one photograph, “These tracks leave the public way onto private property and do not lead anywhere. ATV users will go up the smallest suggestion of a side trail, spinning their wheels until they can’t go further, creating ruts that turn into deep gullies from the erosion that results.”

Still other opponents cited philosophical objections, saying the state should not encourage more use of the internal combustion engine at a time of global warming.

“It makes no sense for the state to encourage a new recreational activity that has an inherently high carbon footprint,” ran a form letter drafted by the Center for Biological Diversity and e-mailed by Ellen Tenney of Saxtons River.

Highly responsible’

Supporters’ comments also fell into rough categories, though most included the argument that their form of recreation deserved at least a small place on state land as a matter of fairness.

A number of letter-writers emphasized how ATV trails can bring new customers to nearby businesses.

"Businesses in my community thrive for three or four months in the winter from winter tourism and starve for the balance of the year," wrote Richard Caplan, a real-estate broker in West Dover. "To have an off-season tourism opportunity to tap could make the difference between success and failure."

Several town governments weighed in, endorsing the work of their local clubs.

The Central Vermont Quad Runners "has performed an active role in both promoting the sport as well as minimizing illicit and undesirable activity," Bethel Town Manager Delbert Cloud wrote on behalf of his Selectboard. "We have found the club to be highly responsible and proactive and believe it is representative of the sport as a whole."

Still others boosted ATV riding as a family-friendly activity.

"This allows families to be together and enjoy the beautiful outdoors. It gets kids away from the video games, TV, and gives them something to do besides hanging out and getting into trouble," wrote Dee Dee Corey of West Rutland.

The Agency of Natural Resources will accept comments on the rule through Monday. (See box for e-mail address.)

Agency officials will review the comments and could change the rule before it is submitted to a legislative committee for approval or disapproval.

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