

# The Controversial Snowmobile: The Legislature Takes A Look

Michigan legislators, state police, conservation, highway and licensing officials will meet in Lansing this week with a group that doesn't want to be hemmed in—the Michigan Snowmobile Association.

Their purpose: To draft a regulatory bill satisfactory to everyone. One legislator says they aren't far apart.

It's the old problem of a technological innovation—the motor sled—that has grown in popularity faster than society's ability to cope with it.

The problems fall into several categories: Registration, regulation of how they'll be used, and the provision of space where they may be used.

"There were 50,000 of these snowmobiles at the beginning of last year, and the way they're selling, there may be 75,000 now," says a spokesman for the lawmakers.

"Some of these wild characters tear up yards, knock down shrubs and damage property, but there's no way of identifying them. So the association agrees there ought to be a bill to register snowmobiles."

"Another reason for a registration law is that if a machine is stolen, there will be some way to identify it," he added.

ANOTHER QUESTION brought up in the state officials' meeting with the snowmobilers is a minimum age for operators.

State police officials favor a minimum age, especially after hearing dealers boast that some souped-up models can attain speeds up to 100 mph. Others point out that the souped-up models are a rarity and that there's no age rule on the operation of motorboats.

An Observer-News survey, taken by Livonia snowmobile enthusiasts Gary and Tom Tokar, showed that 51 per cent of the respondents favored age of 16 or more, 13 per cent favored an age of 12 to 14 and 13 per cent favored some kind of unspecified minimum age.

A question of concern in the northern part of the state is whether snowmobiles should be used on roads.

The industry's position is that, if snowmobilers are prevented from even crossing roads, cross-country safaris would be hampered.

State police see the snowmobile as a motor vehicle but not intended for roads. If they were to be driven on roads, they would have to be equipped with such things as emergency brakes, turn signals, windshield wipers and so on.

So far, the state police rule-of-thumb is that snowmobilers may use trail-type roads that are impassable for autos in winter.

Those regulation problems are essentially a state matter.

THE PROBLEM of where to let snowmobiles run is both state and local. It's this problem that can get emotional.

Snowmobile dealers are hoping that money left from registration fees will be used to develop snowmobile trails.

One suggestion, according to the legislative source, was that the state charge registration fees of \$3 for three years.

The Conservation Department spokesman shot down that idea. Such a fee, if applied to 50,000 machines, would bring in only \$150,000. After administrative and policing



POLLSTER Thomas Tokar in his snowmobile.

costs have been deducted, there wouldn't be much left for trail development.

Locally, some snowmobilers are upset that Wayne County parks are closed to them. The Tokars' survey showed that three-fifths of their respondents felt snowmobiles should be allowed in county parks, and another one-third favored opening them "with restrictions."

As the snowmobilers see it, large areas of parks are too flat for sleds and toboggans, and no one goes on picnics in the winter; why, then, not open them to snowmobilers?

William A. Lay, a Redford snowmobile dealer, writes in a letter to the editor that "we and many others are enjoying our cabins in the winter months because we can get to them" by snowmobile.

Lay provides a page from the Michigan Snowmobiler, a monthly published in East Jordan, which helps to explain why snowmobiles are more controversial in southeastern Michigan than elsewhere: "There is much less confusion about the wonderful world of snowmobiling in the Upper Peninsula than the Lower. That's because folks there have been at it for a number of years now, and it isn't new to them." (Other, unmentioned reasons: More people and less space in southeastern Michigan.)

The same paper also reports that there is so far no single map showing all snowmobile trails in the state, although one manufacturer is preparing one.

THE PEOPLE AT Jonimo, Inc., a Livonia snowmobile dealer, point out that snowmobiles "are not banned from state parks," and another letter writer to this newspaper points to Michigan's "many thousands of acres of state land."

In a mathematical sense, that is correct, and yet the matter is not so simple.

In the first place, not all state parks are open to snowmobiles.

In the second place, any map of state-owned land shows that a large portion of those "thousands of acres" are not close to those suburbs, although western Oakland, southeastern Livingston and northwestern Washtenaw Counties have some acreage.

In the third place, even when snowmobilers do stick to state-owned land, there are problems. The Lansing State Journal, in a

recent article headlined "Snowmobiles Become Fast-Growing Headache," reported:

"Most complaints in Livingston County, however, involved trespassing violations. Many of the snowmobile operators come from nearby metropolitan areas"—an outstate euphemism for Detroit and these suburbs—"and start out in their snowmobiles from a state park or lake lot."

"The county is growing so fast that there are very few places left where snowmobiles have a wide range area, and very soon the operators find themselves traveling on private property..."

"State Police report snowmobile operators are very apt to ignore property lines, and many complaints have come from property owners who resent the intrusion of the noisy little vehicles on their lakefront lots and across their pastures," the State Journal reported.

MOREOVER, THERE IS confusion in many minds over "state park" and "state land."

A park is a well-developed, intensively used area which commonly has picnic tables, a beach and bathhouse, ball diamonds and campgrounds. Hunting is banned. They are lightly used in winter.

Other classes of "state land" include "recreation areas" and "forests." These are less developed, if at all. Hunting and target shooting are frequently permitted. Some species may be hunted in winter.

The safety issue thus comes into focus. Snowmobiling in an unused picnic ground and ball diamond is one thing; snowmobiling around hunters is another. So far, the state hasn't made an issue of this.

THE GOLF COURSE question is one that splits even the snowmobilers.

James E. Northmore Jr., of Farmington, who with his sons owns three snowmobiles, argues in a letter to the editor that snowmobiles "would rip up the fairways when the snow gets thin." And at least one private golf course in the area has banned them after suffering costly green damage.

Yet Rouge Park Golf Course in Detroit allows them, and Redford Township police, in a stern warning to snowmobilers to stay off the streets, point to that golf course as a safe and the closest local place to use them.

ARE FROZEN LAKES a good place for snowmobilers?

Yes, say the snowmobilers. Careful, say conservation officers, pointing out that the operator of a moving vehicle can't always be sure of the ice ahead.

Jerry Chiappetta, a television outdoors commentator, reported recently that hundreds of ice fishermen at a Lake St. Clair contest were highly annoyed by the snowmobiles buzzing around. The fishermen went so far as to blame the poor catches that day on the snowmobile racket.

While public officials try to resolve the issue of what lands and lakes should or shouldn't be open to snowmobiles, some private owners are seeing an opportunity. Rising Star Farm near Milford and Crystal Valley Horse Farms in Farmington advertise their acreage for snowmobile use.

## SNOWMOBILES PROHIBITED

SNOWMOBILERS ARGUE that it's silly to prohibit them from wide open, flat park spaces such as this, because no one else uses them during the winter.

THAT THERE is some feeling about snowmobiles is demonstrated by the Tokar brothers' survey of 116 persons at shopping centers and the Schoolcraft College campus.

Asked if they had ever been "bothered" by snowmobiles, only two per cent of the 116 surveyed answered "yes." That seems small. But if it's assumed that the sample is representative, and if it's remembered that the population of this edition's circulation area is 250,000 or more, it follows that something like 5,200 persons have been bothered.

Snowmobilers—the people who sell them and buy them—are sensitive on this point.

One letter writer asks for "the facts" about snowmobiles, such as "the last issue of Newsweek showing Vice President Humphrey riding a snowmobile."

A dealer claims that "95 per cent of the snowmobile owners are family men. Thus, an outing for them keeps the family doing something together." Not only do snowmobiles strengthen family life, but "the jobs this new industry will create... alone give the snowmobile a 'place' in society," he says.

In the trade publications, the tone is a bit different. An editorial in the December Michigan Snowmobiler, charges that a tiny number of "maniac mikes" are giving snowmobiling a "bad image" and says: "Let's drive them out of our sport now, before it is too late."

The "maniac mikes" are to be "driven out" through "policing fellow riders, reporting those who refuse to accept all the responsibilities of ownership. We cannot expect state laws to stop 'maniac mikes,'" says the editorial.

Will snowmobilers police themselves? The Michigan Legislature isn't waiting around to find out.

## The Sight Tops Poetry



Snow and its beauties have enthralled poets for years.

In spite of all the writing, the sight of clean, white snow in a country setting tops the literature.

Photographer Frances Evert captured these winter scenes in Farmington on an impulse one day. No attempt has been made to identify the locations or to write captions. They can stand alone.



Jan.-Feb.

MONDAY	29	PRE-INVENTORY SALES, MONDAY BARGAIN SPECIALS
TUESDAY	30	LADIES DAY 10 a.m. free movie, Cinema I. WEIGHT WATCHERS, Community Room 12:15; SQUARE DANCING, Community Room 8 p.m.
WEDNESDAY	31	SENIOR CITIZENS, Community Room, 12 noon
THURSDAY	1	GRINNELL'S ORGAN SOCIETY, 7:30 p.m.
FRIDAY	2	BALLROOM DANCING, Community Room, 8 p.m.
SATURDAY	3	COIN CLUB in Community Room, 10 to 9 p.m. 4 p.m. auction.

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