

MANAGEMENT FACTORS TO CONSIDER REGARDING CONCURRENT FAT TIRE BICYCLE USE ON GROOMED SNOWMOBILE TRAILS



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All recreational trail use, whether motorized or nonmotorized, requires active management. Trail management should ensure adherence to private or public land use prescriptions, adequate resource protection, and that appropriate visitor experiences are provided. Trail management policies should be set at the local level to ensure they best fit local circumstances. The following suggested management considerations are not intended to prescribe whether or not to allow concurrent fat bike use on groomed snowmobile trails; rather the intent is to help local jurisdictions make informed decisions about fat tire bicycle management practices on their trails.

It is recommended that local jurisdictions consider the following factors when deciding to either allow or disallow fat tire bicycle use on groomed snowmobile trails. While the importance of each factor will vary by locale, all should be fully considered for informed and objective local decision making.

- 1. LANDOWNER / LAND MANAGER PERMISSION:** Private (including corporate) landowners and public land managers must be involved in any decision to add/allow concurrent fat tire bicycle use on existing groomed snowmobile trails.

Private Lands

Permission for private lands access is especially sensitive since each landowner is often only one link in a chain of many landowners required to piece together trail destinations. The vast majority of current private land access agreements specifically stipulate that permission is only for 'snowmobile use' and do not include landowner permission for additional recreational activities such as bicycle or OHV riding. Consequently the language in written access agreements may need to be broadened if the goal becomes adding other recreational uses on the groomed snow trail.

Any added use will require agreement from all involved private landowners along the trail corridor. Coordinating, gaining, and keeping trail access from multiple private landowners often requires immense effort which must also be sustained over the long-term. There must be extreme sensitivity to landowners' varied perspectives, including their other land uses during both winter and non-winter months.

Private landowners' use of their property during non-winter months is often a principal reason why they own that land. When snowmobile trails across private lands are for 'winter-only' snowmobile use, trail managers must often take steps to help prevent trespass conflicts outside the actual snowmobiling season.

Despite extra efforts by many trail managers, trespass by other recreational users onto private lands during non-winter months continues to be a leading cause of why landowners cancel snowmobile trail access.

Trail managers must recognize that allowing any other concurrent use such as bicycles on snowmobile trails could lead to bike riders believing they can also use that route during other seasons. Consequently if fat bike use is added to an existing groomed snowmobile trail, managers must ensure effective efforts are made to prevent 'carry-over' off-season recreational trespass onto those private lands. Off-season trespass prevention efforts are extremely important and can sometimes become a large challenge for landowners and trail managers alike. Consequently this issue should be carefully considered – particularly if landowner relations are already stressed due to trespass – to ensure adding other recreational uses doesn't make continued winter trail access even more challenging.

Public Lands

While public lands generally have more permissive multiple use trail management policies, this cannot be taken for granted. Consequently close attention must be paid to each agency's land management plan and its recreational use prescriptions. While designated motorized trail routes are often open and used for non-motorized recreational activities, many areas disallow bicycle use if either 'wheeled vehicle' or 'mechanized use' closures are in effect.

Significant portions of public lands are generally zoned/managed for only non-motorized recreational use – meaning that snowmobiling and other motorized use is prohibited. Consequently public land managers should be challenged/pushed to first consider using existing 'non-motorized use only' zones for fat tire bicycle use before allowing/forcing fat bike use onto groomed snowmobile trails. Multiple use trail sharing should start with similar uses in similarly zoned 'non-motorized-only' areas rather than starting the discussion with allowing/forcing new non-motorized use onto existing motorized trail routes – i.e., just because cross-country skiers 'don't want fat bikes on *their* trails' should not become the reason land managers justify allowing fat bikes on groomed snowmobile trails.

- 2. RIDER SAFETY:** Rider safety must be the paramount importance when considering the addition of very low speed fat tire bikes to trails used by significantly higher speed snowmobiles.

There is a definite, very substantive speed differential between snowmobiles and bicycles whereby fat bikes will always be traveling much slower than snowmobiles. Fat bike use is also much different than other 'slow pedestrian travel' modes (skiing, snowshoeing or walking) which may be common on some winter trails. In particular, fat bike riders typically focus their attention down at the trail, directly in front of their front tire, to help them safely navigate around obstacles and imperfections along a snowy travel route. This concentrated 'downward focus' is an important use distinction that could potentially cause bike riders to not pay close enough attention to snowmobile traffic approaching from the front or rear at much higher speeds. Bicycling can also be a social activity whereby groups of riders travel side-by-side down the trail in conversation with one another.

Distinct operational differences could potentially cause catastrophic rider safety issues in some areas, particularly on narrow, wooded, winding, or hilly trails which have limited sight distance.

- 3. FUNDING ASSISTANCE:** Some type of funding assistance from bicycle riders should accompany any decision to allow their use on groomed snowmobile trails.

Snowmobile trails must be groomed on a daily to no more than a weekly basis to respond to winter weather conditions, wear from trail users, and to keep them maintained in a firmly packed condition that is enjoyable to ride. Snowmobile trail grooming is quite expensive, often costing up to ten to twenty dollars per mile per single grooming repetition – so it's fair to expect this maintenance cost to be shared by all trail users.

Adding other recreational uses such as fat tire bicycles typically requires additional signing be added to help regulate use and inform trail users. This increases overall trail development and maintenance costs.

Snowmobile trails are generally funded 100% by a 'user pay' model whereby snowmobile registration fees, trail user fees, and/or gas taxes paid by snowmobilers pay for all trail development, maintenance and grooming costs. Consequently all fat bike riders who use groomed snowmobile trails should also be required to contribute a fair share toward those trails' on-going development, grooming and maintenance costs.

Consideration must also be given to the fact most snowmobile trails were generally developed by volunteers and/or are operated by volunteer organizations. This necessitates sensitivity to snowmobilers' 'high degree of ownership' in trail systems they've developed and maintain. Consequently if the groomed trail is maintained by volunteers, fat tire bike riders should also expect to get involved with volunteer efforts.

Financial assistance from fat tire bike riders is critically important and can potentially be achieved in a variety of ways that include:

- A. **Direct Payment:** requiring all winter users, including bicycle riders, to purchase either a 'snowmobile' trail permit/trail pass or a special 'bike pass' to operate during winter on groomed snow trails.
 - B. **Grants:** utilizing federally funded grant programs such as Recreational Trails Program (RTP) Diversified (multiple use) project funds or state/provincially funded recreation grants to help manage multiple use on trails.
 - C. **Other Fundraising:** fat tire bike groups, individuals and/or clubs undertaking special fundraising (donations, events, etc.) that is donated to grooming programs to help defray trail grooming, signing and maintenance costs.
4. **RISK MANAGEMENT:** Proper risk management is a critical part of managing any recreational activity. If concurrent fat tire bicycle use is added to a groomed snowmobile trail system, it could constitute a 'change in use' that may trigger the need for a new risk management assessment by the trail's manager and/or insurer. Risk management factors, including liability insurance requirements, may be different depending upon whether the trail is managed by a government entity or by a snowmobile club/association.

Government Agency Managed Trail: if the snowmobile trail is managed by a government entity, additional special liability insurance is generally not required for operation of the trail. However proper risk management practices that include regular 'risk assessments' performed by qualified risk management professionals are often required. Trail managers must ensure all new activities and trail management policy changes are closely coordinated with their agency's risk management office.

Snowmobile Club or Association Managed Trail: if day-to-day trail management is provided by a snowmobile club or association, they typically are required to purchase special liability insurance covering their trail activities. Trail managers must check with their insurance agent *prior to any decision to add bicycle use (or any other new managed use) to their snowmobile trail system* to ensure their liability insurance policy includes coverage for concurrent bicycle use. It is essential for this issue be carefully researched since a formal 'risk assessment' may be required by the insurer.

5. **POTENTIAL TRAIL USE PATTERNS:** Potential trail use patterns that consider possible mixtures of use (snowmobiles versus bicycles ratio, plus other uses) along with projected total traffic volumes from each user group should be carefully considered prior to formally authorizing fat tire bike use on a groomed snowmobile trail. Use management zoning policies based upon 'time of day' or 'days of the week' when mixed use is allowed or disallowed may also warrant consideration in some areas.
6. **POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS:** The potential for local partnerships should be considered when weighing the pros and cons of concurrent fat tire bike use on groomed snowmobile trails. Where common ground can be found, coalitions working together can generally help protect and enhance overall recreation access and funding more effectively than individual groups working alone. While concurrent use is certainly not appropriate for every local situation, there may be suitable opportunities in some areas which could advance multiple use objectives. When feasible, these opportunities should be given fair consideration.

While there is potentially something to be gained from snowmobilers strengthening alliances with other user groups, success begins and is ultimately judged at the grassroots level. Local partnerships must function well on the ground to be truly beneficial and successful long-term.

7. **OFF-SEASON MANAGEMENT:** Winter trail users – snowmobilers, bike riders, OHV riders, or any other recreation group legally allowed during winter – often have a mistaken perception that the over-snow winter trail route they're on is a public trail also open to their year-round use for other recreational activities. While groomed winter snow trails may sometimes be open to other year-round uses, they often are not.

Consequently public familiarity with winter trail routes can sometimes require aggressive education efforts to help prevent improper off-season use if those snowmobile trail routes aren't open to other uses during non-winter seasons. If education efforts do not sufficiently prevent unauthorized use, more aggressive on-the-ground signing, law enforcement, and/or gate/barrier installations may be required.

Authorizing concurrent fat bike use on groomed snowmobile trails may likely require snowmobile trail managers to provide extra effort that: A) educates all users regarding when groomed snowmobile trail routes are open or closed to various uses, and B) works more closely with private landowners and public land managers to prevent unauthorized use of snowmobile trail routes during the non-winter seasons.

8. **SPECIAL REGULATIONS FOR FAT TIRE BIKE RIDERS ON GROOMED SNOWMOBILE TRAILS:** It may be beneficial for trail managers to consider establishing special rules or regulations that fat tire bicycle riders must follow when operating on groomed snowmobile trails. Potential rules may include some or all of the following:

- Fat tire bikes must be equipped with a front white blinking light and a rear red blinking light; both lights should be operated in the 'on' position at all times when riding on snowmobile trails.
- All fat tire bike riders must wear brightly colored clothing with reflective material on both the front and back to increase their visibility to other trail users.
- All bike riders must stay to the far right of the trail and yield to all snowmobiles and other trail users – rather than being allowed to ride elsewhere on the trail in search of the firmest packed snow base.
- Side-by-side bike riding is prohibited; all bicyclists should be required to ride single file, on the right-hand, outside edge of the trail.
- No headphones/ear buds of any sort are allowed to be used by bike riders.
- Bike riders should not be allowed to ride on trails when the air temperature is above freezing.
- It should be suggested that if bike riders leave a rut deeper than one inch or are having a hard time riding in a straight line – it's likely too soft for them to safely operate without trail resource damage, so they should quit riding until such time conditions improve / trails firm up.
- Fat bikes operated on groomed snowmobile trails should not be allowed to have a tire pressure greater than 10 psi to prevent unnecessary trail rutting.
- Fat bikes should not be allowed to operate on snowmobile trails on powder (fresh fallen snow) days or before any fresh snowfall over three inches deep has been groomed and compacted.
- On warm days (spring conditions or during thawing periods), fat bikes should generally not be allowed in the afternoon when the trail base typically becomes soft.

- If the parking lot is muddy, bike riders should be instructed to clean their bike tires in a snowbank (or otherwise) to avoid tracking mud onto the groomed trail's snow surface since mud and dirt cause the trail's snow surface to quickly deteriorate.
- Only genuine fat tire bikes that have tires at least 3.7 inches wide should be allowed to operate on snowmobile trails (i.e., regular mountain bikes are prohibited).
- Bike riders must pay all required trail fees; if fees are not required they should be required to make a donation to the local grooming program.

9. START SMALL: When trying to get fat tire bicycle use established on existing groomed trails (snowmobile or Nordic), trail managers should likely start with a small scale pilot project or 'test' area to keep the project manageable until proven to be safe and successful for multiple use. Also consider the following when experimenting with pilot projects or test areas:

- Avoid snowmobiling areas which are already heavily used or congested.
- Avoid trail areas which are extremely hilly, curvy, and/or narrow.
- Avoid allowing 'bike rentals' to operate in any new pilot project or test areas.
- Ensure there is adequate parking for any new or added uses – and that parking areas are properly designed so that user conflicts aren't unnecessarily created during egress/ingress from parking areas where a mixture of motorized and non-motorized trail uses are allowed.
- Have an easy exit strategy (required benchmarks that must be met, etc.) if a test area doesn't work well or doesn't have enough support (financially, volunteer-wise, and/or use-wise) to sustain its long-term existence.
- Remember that the safety of all snowmobile and bicycle riders must always be the paramount consideration.