

MANAGEMENT FACTORS TO CONSIDER REGARDING CONCURRENT TRACKED OHV USE ON GROOMED SNOWMOBILE TRAILS



**By Trails Work Consulting
For the American Council of Snowmobile Associations**

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All motorized recreational vehicle use, whether snowmobiles or OHVs, requires active management. 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. These recommendations use key findings from 2014 and 2015 field assessments to provide guidance for local trail managers to consider when dealing with existing or potential concurrent tracked OHV use on groomed snowmobile trails. These factors are intended to help local jurisdictions make informed decisions about their tracked OHV management policies; they are not intended to influence whether or not to allow concurrent tracked OHV use in local areas or to prescribe particular local management practices.

RECOMMENDED CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONCURRENT TRACKED OHV MANAGEMENT

It is recommended that local jurisdictions consider the following factors when deciding to either allow or prohibit concurrent tracked OHV 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. Maintained Trail Width:** This should be a principal decision factor when deciding whether to allow concurrent tracked OHV use on groomed snowmobile trails. OHVs become markedly wider when equipped with tracks. And all tracked ATVs and UTVs are slightly or significantly wider than a snowmobile. Therefore a snowmobile trail must have sufficient overall ‘maintained’ trail width to ensure two-way traffic for all allowed vehicle types is properly accommodated. A modern snowmobile’s maximum width typically doesn’t exceed 48 inches. Comparatively the 2014 and 2015 Assessments showed that a tracked ATV’s width ranged from being four to six inches (8 to 12.5%) wider than a snowmobile’s and that various tracked UTV models were thirteen inches (27%) to nearly twenty-three inches (48%) wider than a snowmobile. Photos 2-1 through 2-4 below show examples of tracked OHVs used during 2014 and 2015 assessments, along with their total respective wheeled and tracked vehicle widths:

**Photo 2-1: Tracked 2014 Yamaha Grizzly 700
46.5” wheeled width; 54” tracked width**



**Photo 2-2: Tracked 2014 Polaris RZR 570
50” wheeled width; 61” tracked width**



**Photo 2-3: Tracked 2009 Polaris Ranger 700 XP
60" wheeled width; 68.5" tracked width**



**Photo 2-4: Tracked 2012 John Deere Gator 825i
62" wheeled width; 70.5" tracked width**



Unlike other trails, a groomed snowmobile trail must be frequently reestablished after new snowfall or drifting – oftentimes daily or several times weekly, and normally no less than at least once weekly. Therefore a single pass with a grooming implement is what ultimately establishes a snowmobile trail’s width at the beginning of the season and then reestablishes and maintains it between subsequent snowfall or wind events. The grooming implement (drag or tiller) used on a snowmobile trail where concurrent tracked OHV use is allowed should be a key consideration since the implement’s width is a principal influencing factor of the trail’s maintained width.

Wider grooming implement may be needed when tracked ATVs or UTVs are allowed on a groomed snowmobile trail, as compared to if only 48-inch wide snowmobiles are allowed on the trail. The most commonly used trail grooming drags are eight, nine, or ten feet wide, and those areas using a tiller to groom generally have about a 10 foot wide implement. While some areas use snowmobile trail grooming drags that are twelve or even fourteen feet wide, this requires significantly larger groomer tractors and considerably wider trail clearing widths. Consequently a need for wider grooming equipment could potentially also generate greater environmental resource impacts due to an accompanying need for more tree removal, brush clearing, rock removal, and wider trail grading to accommodate wider grooming equipment.

The ‘maintained’ trail width should generally be at least twice as wide as the widest vehicle allowed to operate on a trail, in order to best accommodate two-way traffic. Maintained trail width essentially refers to ‘clearance width’ which may or may not always be in a groomed condition. Table 2-1 below provides example recommended maintained trail widths for the various vehicles observed during the 2014 and 2015 Assessments:

Table 2-1: Recommended Minimum Maintained Trail Widths for Various Tracked Vehicles

Width Factor	Snowmobile	Tracked ATV	Tracked 50" ‘trail model’ RZR	Tracked Ranger	Tracked Gator
Tracked Vehicle Width	48"	52" to 54"	61"	67.5" to 68.5"	70.5"
Minimum Drag Width – to best provide optimum maintained trail width for 2-way traffic with a single grooming pass	8 feet	9 feet	10 feet	12 feet	12 feet

The best way to ensure a sufficient trail width is consistently maintained is to use a drag or tiller that's wide enough to provide the desired width with a single grooming pass. Otherwise two consecutive passes with a narrower drag or tiller, timed very closely together and over-lapped to widen the trail, would be needed to provide a trail width sufficient for two-way traffic on groomed snowmobile trails. It is important to recognize that the subsequent 'widening passes' may not be able to be depended upon to provide wider trails unless the second widening pass occurs almost immediately after the first pass. Photo 2-5 demonstrates how adding tracked UTV use on a narrow snowmobile trail could potentially create issues.



Photo 2-5: A tracked UTV beside a snowmobile on an 8'-6" (102") wide groomed snowmobile trail

If snowmobile trails must be maintained wider than they currently are for snowmobile use in order to accommodate tracked OHVs, operating costs could likely increase. Potential increased operating costs could be caused by: 1) a need to purchase wider grooming drags, 2) a need to purchase larger horsepower grooming tractors to pull wider grooming drags, 3) increased fuel, maintenance, repair and equipment depreciation costs due to pulling wider (and heavier) grooming drags, and/or 4) extra grooming repetitions required to provide desired trail width through 'double-pass/widening' of trails. Extra grooming repetitions may also be needed to accommodate increased traffic from added OHV use, which will also increase a trail system's operating costs.

- 2. Funding Assistance:** Funding assistance from OHV riders must accompany any decision to allow concurrent tracked OHV use on groomed snowmobile trails. There should be no winter concurrent OHV use without some degree of cost sharing or funding support from OHV riders to help share trail grooming costs.

Snow trails must be regularly groomed to restore them to a condition where they are generally safe and enjoyable to ride. Winter trail grooming is expensive, so any increase in use may likely necessitate more trail grooming – not because tracked OHVs cause more damage but because traffic by all vehicles simply wears the snow surface out, requiring that it be reprocessed by grooming equipment.

Snowmobile trails are funded solely by snowmobilers' registration fees, user fees, and/or gas taxes. If tracked OHVs are added to trails, OHV riders should be asked to also contribute their fair share toward on-going trail maintenance costs. Additionally many snowmobile trails were developed by volunteers and/or are operated by volunteer organizations – which further necessitates sensitivity to snowmobilers' 'ownership' in trail systems they've helped develop and maintain. All trail users should help pay and volunteer time for trail maintenance.

Funding assistance from OHV riders is critically important and can be achieved several different ways:

- A. Direct Payment:** by requiring all winter users to purchase a 'snowmobile' trail permit/trail pass to operate during winter on groomed snowmobile trails.

- B. **Indirectly:** by using funds from a jurisdiction's OHV/ORV account (funds received from the sale of OHV/ORV permits, registrations and/or gas tax) to help support a degree of snowmobile trail grooming, maintenance and operating costs where concurrent OHV use is allowed on groomed snowmobile trails during winter.
- C. **Grants:** by utilizing federally funded grant programs like the Recreational Trails Program (RTP) or state/provincially funded recreation grants that help manage multiple use on trails.

'Who manages OHV permit/license sales' in a jurisdiction may determine how difficult it may be to achieve joint funding support from OHV riders for concurrent snowmobile/OHV use. Attaining funding assistance may be less difficult in jurisdictions where snowmobile trails, OHV trails, and their respective permit/license programs are all managed by the same agency or organization. It may be more difficult in jurisdictions where snowmobile and OHV permit/license programs are administered by different entities and/or are directly tied to vehicle titling laws. It will likely be the most difficult to attain winter tracked OHV funding support in jurisdictions where OHV licensing or permitting is not currently required since OHV riders may not support the 'pay to ride' principle. The key in all situations will be to build a coalition with OHV riders who desire winter access and are supportive of helping fund concurrent use.

- 3. **Risk Management:** Proper risk management is a critical part of managing any recreational activity. If concurrent tracked OHV use is added to a groomed snowmobile trail system, it may constitute a 'change in use' which could trigger a new risk management assessment by the trail's manager 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 a government entity manages the trail, special liability insurance is not generally required for operation of the snowmobile trail. However proper risk management that includes following 'best management practices' for trail management along with regular 'risk assessments' performed by qualified risk management professionals are often required. Trail managers must ensure all new activities or trail management policy changes are closely coordinated with their agency's risk management office.

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

- 4. **Landowner/Land Manager Permission:** Private (including corporate) landowners and public land managers must be involved in any decision to allow concurrent tracked OHV use on existing snowmobile trails. Permission for private lands access is always especially sensitive since each landowner is but one link in a chain of many owners required to connect destinations. It takes a lot of effort to make things work, with extreme sensitivity to landowners' varied perspectives and their other land uses during both winter and non-winter months.

A landowner's use of their property during non-winter months is often a principal reason for their owning that property. Since snowmobile trail routes across private lands are generally for 'winter-only' snowmobile use, trail managers must often help ensure steps are taken to prevent use conflicts outside the snowmobiling season – or they risk losing the trail route altogether for snowmobiling.

Unfortunately OHV trespass onto private lands during non-winter months is a leading cause of why landowners cancel snowmobile trail access agreements. Trail managers must recognize that allowing concurrent OHV use on snowmobile trails could potentially further exacerbate what is already a tenuous situation with landowners

in some areas. If OHV use is added, trail managers must ensure even greater efforts are made to prevent off-season OHV trespass onto private lands.

While permission from private landowners remains the single largest barrier to establishing concurrent OHV use on groomed snowmobile trails in many areas, it's interesting to note that – in some areas – landowners who have historically opposed OHV use are beginning to change their position to being supportive of concurrent uses – because they own OHVs and want to be able to run them on the trails they're permitting across their private property. This has resulted in those landowners forcing trail managers to compromise and allow joint OHV use during winter – or lose snowmobile access. While this situation is certainly not the norm, it could potentially grow as more landowners purchase OHVs. Private lands access will overall remain a constantly moving target, so it's critically important to be continually adaptive to landowners' changing needs and attitudes in order to keep trail access open.

Public lands access requires permissive motorized vehicle use policies, which may or may not treat snowmobiles and other OHVs the same. If a snowmobile trail route is located on what's designated as a motorized road or trail during the non-winter season, concurrent winter OHV use may likely be permitted during winter – unless the area's motorized travel plan restricts or eliminates year-round OHV use through 'season of use' dates. More often than not, designated motorized routes typically provide year-round multiple use trail opportunities.

If an authorized snowmobile trail route on public lands is located on what's a nonmotorized trail during non-winter months, the nonmotorized designation must be respected enforced during the non-winter season. Likewise if a snowmobile trail follows a cross-country route not open to motorized travel the rest of the year, off-season management that prevents unauthorized OHV use must be provided.

The bottom line is that if winter concurrent OHV use is added on a route not open to motorized use during non-winter months, trail managers must work proactively to ensure off-season OHV trespass does not occur. While this issue can generally be addressed with on-the-ground signing, barriers, education and enforcement, it requires concentrated efforts by all trail managing partners to be successful.

5. **Trail Grooming:** Irrespective of a trail's maintained width, an evenly compacted base is crucial to trail durability and the ability to successfully increase use. Frequent trail grooming will be required at a level commensurate with a trail's overall traffic volume, as well as the frequency and amounts of new snowfall received. Trails with heavy traffic and/or regular big snowfalls require more frequent and aggressive grooming repetitions as use increases compared to trails where traffic is lower or snowfall less frequent. Unless a trail has generally low traffic or is located in a low snowfall area, it's likely that adding new tracked OHV use on a groomed snowmobile trail may necessitate increased grooming frequencies as OHV use increases. Any additional grooming repetitions will increase overall trail operating costs.
6. **Potential Trail Use Patterns:** Potential trail use patterns that consider possible mixtures of vehicles (snowmobiles as well as various OHV types) along with projected total traffic volumes from each vehicle type should be analyzed prior to establishing or expanding concurrent tracked OHV use on a trail.

There is a definite speed differential between snowmobiles and tracked OHVs that may be an important factor in some areas. Assessments confirmed that tracked OHVs lose one-third of their top-end speed compared to when operated with wheels. Consequently tracked OHVs will typically be traveling slower than snowmobiles.

The 2014 Assessment's Trail Manager Survey showed existing OHV use on concurrent use trail systems in the U.S. ranges from 'minimal to nil;' most managers estimate winter OHV use to be in a range between '5 to 10 percent' of total trail use where it's currently allowed. Many trail managers commented that the majority of winter OHV use typically occurs within a few miles of parking areas or communities, contrasted with snowmobilers who typically venture longer distances during a typical outing. Survey feedback also indicated

the volume of winter OHV use could potentially be higher in low to marginal snow areas, in low snowfall years, and during periods of warmer (cold but not frigid) temperatures.

7. **Potential Partnerships:** The potential for local partnerships should be considered when weighing the pros and cons of concurrent OHV use. Where common ground can be found, coalitions working together can generally help protect and enhance overall motorized recreation access more effectively than individual groups working alone. While concurrent use is certainly not appropriate for every local situation, there are likely suitable opportunities in many areas which could advance multiple use objectives. When possible, these opportunities should be given consideration.

Beyond the local perspective, it's important to cultivate alliances between snowmobile and OHV users. It's estimated there are over 12 million OHVs in the United States, and that number continues to grow every year. Comparably there are about 1.4 million registered snowmobiles in the U.S. and only 2.7 million worldwide. Coalitions of snowmobilers working where appropriate with OHV riders have the potential to be very influential. And since the 12 million OHV owners are scattered across all 50 states and snowmobilers cover only about half of the country, an alliance is crucial to helping broaden snowmobiling's support base.

There is potentially much to be gained from snowmobilers strengthening national alliances with other user groups. But since success begins and is ultimately judged at the grassroots level, local partnerships must not only exist but also function well – otherwise even the best national alliances are fruitless. Since 'divide and conquer' continues to be a tactic used by motorized opponents, the old adage 'united we stand, divided we fall' continues to be an important consideration for future snowmobiling access.

8. **Shoulder Season and Off-Season Management:** Many OHV riders are familiar with snowmobile trails because they are also either current or former snowmobile owners. Consequently OHV riders sometimes mistakenly believe OHVs can be operated on snowmobile trail routes, winter or otherwise, simply because in their mind they are 'public trails.' This familiarity sometimes requires aggressive education efforts to help safeguard against improper use of trail routes during shoulder seasons, as well as year-round if OHV use is prohibited. 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.

If tracked OHV use is allowed, there should be a distinct 'snowmobile season' during which snowmobile trails are groomed and OHVs are allowed. Outside this 'season' snowmobile trails themselves cease to exist and consequently trail routes either transition to other prescribed trail uses or they cease to exist until the next snow season. Concurrent tracked OHV use requires that trail managers provide extra effort to:

- A. Educate all users as to when snowmobile trail routes are open or closed to various uses.
- B. Work with landowners and land managers to heighten awareness and sensitivity to other prescribed uses along trail routes, including during non-winter seasons.
- C. Work with landowners and land managers to help prevent unauthorized OHV use on snowmobile trail routes during the non-winter seasons.