

## WASHBURN COUNTY FOREST

### FOREST ADMINISTRATOR

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Dear Members of State Trails Policy Committee:

I would like to express my appreciation to the Joint Legislative Committee for forming this group. It is a step in the right direction towards recognizing the importance of public trails in Wisconsin, as well as the issues that surround their development and maintenance. I would also like to thank the members of this Committee for giving their time towards this effort.

I would also like to express my deep concern about the lack of representation on this Committee from public lands managers. Given the complexity of securing easements for trails across private lands, public lands have become the focus for trails and land managers are key to these discussions.

I have been the County Forest Administrator in Washburn County for nearly ten years. Our department manages 149,000 acres of forestlands for forestry and recreation. This acreage is only a small part of the 2.3 million acres of County Forest Lands in Wisconsin. Our County alone administers 250 miles of snowmobile trails, 100 miles of ATV trails, 3 ski trails, 1 equestrian trail, 2 canoe portage routes, 3 nature trails, and hosts a portion of the Ice Age Trail. Our ATV trail system is growing in accordance with an ATV master plan that we developed 5 years ago.

In addition to my role as a county forest administrator, I am also the chair of the WCFA Legislative Committee and also member of the state ORV council.

As I'm sure has been stated in previous testimony, Counties are the sponsors of most motorized trail systems with WDNR snowmobile and ATV funds contracted to the County, not individual clubs.

With our extensive background in public use trails, I would like to offer some of my observations to share with the Committee:

- Users of our public lands can be distinctly separated into two groups, they are either motorized or non-motorized. This split seems to be an even balance, with little overlap. This leads many northern Counties to try to give equal consideration to both motorized and non-motorized uses on the forest and on our trails. Uses are often segregated.
- County level government tends to favor motorized trail developments as they bring their own funding source to the table. Motorized clubs tend to be better organized and have more long term, committed members willing to work on trails. Our experience with non-motorized clubs has been that of offering sporadic and varying levels of support to the County for maintenance of trail facilities.
- Local units of government generally fund non-motorized trails and no system of user-generated funds is available. Securing funds from any existing grants is often difficult.

- Motorized funding programs generally work well, with funding well distributed and wisely spent. I personally see no need to reorganize or alter the basic system under which registration funds are distributed. As with any program, there are minor flaws that we continue to try to correct.
- Most trail development efforts, especially motorized trails, seem to be occurring on County lands. It is my opinion that the State is not providing a reasonable share of trails on State lands. We are struggling to manage a tremendous demand for more trails and it is not equitable for only the County Forests to be attempting to provide for motorized uses. I am not an ATV enthusiast, nor do I own one. I do, however recognize that motorized vehicles are a legitimate use of public lands as long as it is balanced and environmental damage is minimize or eliminated.
- Motorized users and clubs have become much more proactive in promoting ethics and responsibility. Programs like the Trail Ambassadors have been very effective in “self policing” motorized users.
- The policy of the Washburn County Forestry Department has been to provide viable, well designed trail systems as a means of reducing illegal ATV uses. This has been effective and we have noted a sharp reduction in unauthorized and damaging uses in areas where trail systems are present.
- Many non-motorized user groups claim that motorized (ATV) uses are completely inconsistent with non-motorized, and all uses should be segregated. We have made efforts to create trails in such a segregated manner. It is important to note, however, that ALL of our trails designed for motorized uses are used fairly extensively by non-motorized uses as well.

My suggested needs for trails in Wisconsin are as follows:

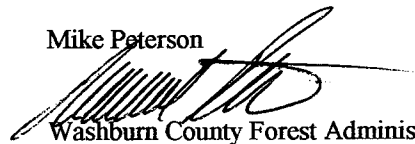
- Develop an initiative for either statewide or region wide planning. Planning efforts should be aimed especially at a comprehensive plan for ATV trail development and maintenance. No such effort currently exists and there is no mechanism for ensuring that trails systems connect from County to County.
- Consider some form of user-generated funds to provide maintenance dollars for non-motorized trails. Funds should be targeted towards local units of government and other land agencies.
- Develop internal guidelines for WDNR staff that provides consistency among regulatory staff. My opinion is that DNR staff should be in a role of facilitating permit processes for trail systems. I have noted certain employees within DNR that tend to use the regulatory process as barriers to trail construction. Each trail development proposal goes through a fairly extensive review procedure within DNR. Certain staff act as facilitators and others look for ways to stop the projects. Some years ago, we had a resource professional try to deny a trail project because, “public lands are not the place for motorized trails”. We have to comply with water regulations, endangered resources, and other issues. This is appropriate and necessary. A personal bias by a DNR employee should not be an issue we have to address.
- Statewide trail policy efforts should look at northern Wisconsin and southern Wisconsin separately as the issues are distinctly different.
- DNR needs to create a consistent policy on uses of abandoned rail grades under the Rails to Trails program. Old railroad grades are often the most appropriate and environmentally friendly location for ATV trails. We have found it much easier to construct new trails, on other than railroad grades, for non-motorized uses than for motorized.
- LAW ENFORCEMENT IS KEY to the success of any motorized program. Also, we have heard comments that ATV funds should be utilized to repair damages occurring as a result of illegal uses. This is a law enforcement issue, and any change in funding allocations should target law enforcement and education efforts. To simply divert funds to repair damages is not a solution to the problem.
- Look to organized groups for support and advice on this project. My suggestions are, WATVA, WCFA, and possibly the ORV Council.

I have followed some of the testimony that has previously been submitted to this Committee and would like to offer some responses:

- The Wisconsin ATV Association (WATVA) is well respected within the County Forest group. They are well organized and well informed on most issues. I recommend suspicion of any testimony that claims to be on behalf of the ATV users and is in direct conflict with WATVA's testimony.
- Testimony that claims the Counties are misusing ATV funds for other purposes is insulting. These funding programs are audited and the County is legally responsible to ensure that funds are allocated in the manner intended. The only cases where I have had suspicions of misuse of motorized funds have been isolated and only in cases where a County allows local clubs to dispose of funds at their discretion.
- Of the 100 miles of ATV trail in Washburn County, 60 miles is on County Forest. If the current program is changed so that contracts and funds bypass the County, we will likely not participate nor allow trails on County lands.
- LAW ENFORCEMENT IS KEY to the success of ATV trail programs. DNR provides little to no direct law enforcement help for ATV enforcement and nearly the entire burden has fallen on local units of government. Any testimony "on behalf of the ATV community" that indicates that money spent on law enforcement is wasted, is not representing the official stance of WATVA or the Wisconsin County Forests Association.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide comments to this Committee.

Mike Peterson



Washburn County Forest Administrator