

Sharing the Rising Cost of Trails

By now, most snowmobilers have accepted the user pay system. This is where each individual rider pays a small share of the total cost of providing snowmobile trails to ride. Each small share is partly reflected in the fee for a Snowmobile Trail Permit (I say partly, because in fact, the fee does not cover the full annual cost, as you will see.) The basic idea is that since every sled entering OFSC trails contributes some damage to the trail surface, every sled should have a permit to help defray the expense of making that surface smooth again.

Of course, operating trails is much more than grooming. It's also about simply keeping them open, available, marked, mapped and connected. From planning the trail to negotiating land use with property owners, and from building the trail to opening and operating it every winter, costs are incurred at every step. Every time a weather event happens in any season, more costs are incurred re-clearing and re-repairing the trails. It's a never-ending process that is a bit of a money pit, because Mother Nature is unpredictable.

OFSC snowmobilers often wonder where their permit dollars go. According to operations reports filed by OFSC clubs for 2008/09, clubs logged 102,394 hours of grooming last winter, using 339 industrial groomers with a fleet value of about \$22 million. The amount of fuel used was 1.2 million litres – a big cost that balloons even more when other expenses like insurance, maintenance, repairs, trail prep and repairs, and wages are added on.

With all operating costs factored in, including the value of volunteer contributions, the average investment to open and operate OFSC Prescribed Snowmobile Trails is *\$496 per kilometre, per year*. Multiply that by the OFSC's 39,742 kilometres of trails and the annual operating tally was *almost \$20 million last winter alone!* Plug in another \$2.5 million for the OFSC, district and club costs

for organizing, administering and supporting trail operations, and the 2008/09 total is closer to \$22.5 million.

Even with strong 2009 permit sales, last winter's permit revenues topped out at \$17.2 million, leaving a shortfall of \$5.3 million. While volunteer efforts, fundraising and sponsorships make up part of this gap, a considerable deficit still exists between actual trail-related revenues and expenses. What's more, this gap has not diminished during the past five years, when all operating costs have increased dramatically (as you know from your own daily living experience), while snowmobile trail permit fees have stayed the same (not even a cost of living increase to cover inflation).

To cut expenses during this time, OFSC clubs have decommissioned some trails, made their operations much more efficient, developed new ways of sharing expenses, and expanded bulk buying. But despite all this belt-tightening, at some point cuts to the bottom line alone are not enough, unless we riders are willing to accept far fewer trails to ride.

So for 2010, snowmobile trail permit fees are increasing for the first time since 2004. Yes, the timing may be unfortunate, economy-wise. But the OFSC initiated the process for permit fee approval with the Government of Ontario almost a year ago before the downturn, and the business case is based on a demonstrated long-term need, not on the economic climate of the day. The approval process took many months to complete and the approved fee increase directly reflects the constantly rising costs associated with opening, operating and maintaining the trails you and I ride each winter.


Think of it this way: your full season permit fee just went up 20 bucks for the first time since 2004: averaged out over the past five years of no increases, that's only \$4 per season, a small additional amount to pay for the snowmobiling fun you have already had!



There's another factor to consider. The entire operation of snowmobile clubs and trails has become significantly more complex in recent years. One result is a much greater workload for club volunteers, without a corresponding increase in the overall number of volunteers.

These committed and *unpaid* snowmobilers can only do so much on their own. Unless many more snowmobilers offer to lend a hand too, outside workers have to be hired or contracted to take the increased load. At some point, and that time is now, this means a permit fee increase.

So before you complain about the permit fee going up after five years of staying the same, ask yourself what you've done to help your local snowmobile club recently? If your answer is not much, then you shouldn't be surprised about paying a bit more. The cost of opening, operating and maintaining snowmobile trails has to be covered by user pay – and that means each one of us chips in a little more.

Finally, remember that as not for profit organizations, the OFSC, its district and clubs are mandated to invest all permit revenues to support trail operations. There is no profit motive here. Every dollar of the fee increase will be invested to pay costs associated with making great trails available for you. It's all about snowmobilers helping snowmobilers: if for most of us that means contributing a few more dollars to keep on riding the best snowmobile trails in the world, then so be it. A 20-buck hike is a small price to pay for this privilege. 

- Craig Nicholson, OFSC Communications

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