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Minnesota DNR drives millions in gas tax off road

Minnesotans for Responsible Recreation, a group that has opposed motorized recreation on public lands, wants the state to stop giving money to programs aimed at snowmobiles, ATVs, motorboats and dirt bikes.

By **MIKE KASZUBA**, Star Tribune

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At a time when Minnesota is scraping for money to maintain vital roads and bridges, state officials confirmed Tuesday that they annually use millions in gas tax money for programs aimed at snowmobiles, ATVs, motorboats and dirt bikes.

A private advocacy group is releasing a report Wednesday that shows \$350 million has been used to benefit motorized recreation dating to the early 1960s. The year-long study by Minnesotans for Responsible Recreation, a group that has opposed motorized recreation on public lands, notes that of that amount, \$150 million was allocated to recreation in just the

past nine years.

The dedicated DNR funds are collected as a portion of the tax Minnesotans pay on every gallon of gas. MRR argues those programs violate provisions of the Minnesota Constitution that reserve gas tax revenues for use on highway projects. But snowmobilers and other users of motorized recreation vehicles defend the statutes that allocate some gas tax money for trails and other programs.

Jeff Brown, executive director of the group that prepared the report, said the program should be terminated. "We don't think our state can sustain [it], he said." The problem here is one of entitlement. People are afraid and intimidated to speak out. It's taboo in northern Minnesota."

Colleen Coyne, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Natural Resources, confirmed the state had spent about \$350 million in gas tax revenues on recreation projects over the years, but said the money was spent on necessary trail upkeep and management, as well as enforcement efforts on trails and waterways.

She said the group's report illustrates the differing and sometimes "passionate

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interests" between those who use snowmobiles and ATVs and those who do not. "That's not to say one group is right or wrong," Coyne said.

According to the report, \$191 million in state gas tax money has gone to motorboat programs in Minnesota since 1961. Since 1973, \$115 million has flowed to snowmobile projects. About \$18 million was used on behalf of all-terrain vehicles since 1984.

The report notes that the \$18.5 million used for motorized recreation in 2009 represented 3 percent of all state gas tax revenues collected that year. A third of that went to snowmobiling.

The group projected that the amount of money used on motorized recreation programs could total \$185 million in the coming decade.

Kevin Gutknecht, a spokesman for the Minnesota Department of Transportation, said the agency does not get involved with the allocation. "The decision on where the funding in question is spent is made well before it gets to MnDOT," he said. "Our job is to take the funding we receive and use it to operate and maintain the state's

transportation infrastructure."

Chuck Doherty, treasurer of the Minnesota United Snowmobilers Association (MUSA), defended the program that collects money from the gas he buys to fuel his car and his snowmobile.

"I think it's a beautiful plan, and I like the way it works," he said. "A chunk of that tax that I pay when I fill my car fixes the roads and bridges. But when I drive my snowmobile, I'm not using those roads and bridges. I'm using the trail system."

Doherty said he was frustrated with snowmobile critics. Maybe, he said, "we should peel up all the blacktop around Lake Calhoun then, too. Where do we draw the line?"

But Scott McLaughlin, a board member of Minnesotans for Responsible Recreation who lives in Minneapolis, said the policy is unfair to him and others who do not own recreational vehicles but who do contend with deteriorating bridges and roadways.

"I'm very hard pressed to find anyone in my whole neighborhood of 1,500 households [with a] trailer with snowmobiles or ATVs on it," McLaughlin said. "Yet every one of us who

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lives in this community is paying for motorized recreation."

Advocates said the new study amplifies the findings of a 2003 legislative auditor's report that faulted the gas tax usage. The auditor's report said the 1 percent gas tax allocation for snowmobiles was "too high because it is based on gas consumption in [one] winter with an unusually long snowmobile season."

The 2003 study said annual gas usage by snowmobilers was based on estimates and surveys, and might not be accurate. "Nobody keeps records on how many gallons of gas are purchased by snowmobilers" and off-road vehicles, the report said.

"We dump a lot [of money] back into the economy," said Keith Twombly, president of MUSA. Snowmobiling is a \$1 billion industry in Minnesota. "This keeps a lot of businesses open."

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