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Group seeks end to diversion of Minnesota gas taxes

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A group that opposes the use of motorized recreational vehicles on public lands has asked Minnesota to stop spending millions of gas tax dollars on programs for snowmobiles, boats, dirt bikes and all-terrain vehicles and fix deteriorating roads and bridges instead.

The Minnesota Constitution says gas tax dollars are supposed go to the state's highway fund. The Legislature has long interpreted that to mean the tax on gas that powers boats can go for boat landings and taxes for gas burned in ATVs can be spent on ATV trails.

Minnesota's gas tax raised \$745 million last year. Jeff Brown, executive director of Minnesotans for Responsible Recreation, said Tuesday that too much of it benefits riders of off-road vehicles.

"Almost 3 percent of our state's annual gas tax is diverted to motorized recreation," Brown said. "Minnesotans have paid out \$350 million to promote motorized recreation — \$18.5 million each year."

The group released a study and launched a public education campaign Tuesday to urge voters to persuade lawmakers to end the diversions. The group also is getting involved in the governor's race, surveying candidates on where they stand on

the issue.

"Our state is in a financial crisis," Brown said. "Our roads and bridges are falling apart."

The use of gas tax revenues for recreational purposes dates back to the 1960s when money was first diverted for boating infrastructure and water-based law enforcement. Brown said speaking out against

the practice is a taboo subject in northern Minnesota.

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

Coyne said the group's report illustrates the differing and sometimes "passionate interests" between those who use snowmobiles and ATVs and those who do not.

Chuck Doherty, treasurer of the Minnesota United Snowmobilers Association, defended the system.

"I think it's a beautiful plan, and I like the way it works," Doherty 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."

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 don't own recreational vehicles but must

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contend with deteriorating bridges and roads.

"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 lives in this community is paying for motorized recreation."

Sen. Tom Bakk, DFL-Cook, is an ATV owner and chairman of the Senate Tax Committee. He said the tax diversion system has provided Minnesota with high-quality boating opportunities and motorized recreational trails that benefit the rural economy. And he doesn't see support in the Legislature for changing that system.

"They've built an incredible trail system, and they've paid for a lot of enforcement. ... There's a lot of good that's come out of it and it's really been paid by the users," he said.

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