

**SAM
COOK**
ON THE OUTSIDE



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State trail should remain closed to ATVs

The North Shore State Trail is an excellent snowmobile trail, but it shouldn't be used as an all-terrain vehicle trail. Wet in many places and crossing numerous trout streams, the trail would be subject to serious erosion and wetland degradation.

In late December, the St. Louis County Board, at the urging of a local ATV club, passed a resolution supporting ATV use on the county's portion of the state trail. The trail runs 146 miles from Duluth to Grand Marais and includes about 20 miles in St. Louis County. The Lake County Board has passed a similar resolution.

The St. Louis County resolution came as a surprise to some who oppose opening the trail to ATVs. The item was not listed on the board's meeting agenda for Dec. 22 and passed unanimously after little discussion.

On Tuesday, the county board listened to supporters and opponents of ATV use on the trail, then voted not to rescind its original resolution. The county has no jurisdiction over the trail, which is managed by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. However, the board's resolution has prompted DNR officials to say they will consider ATV use on the trail.

Let's step back and look at the bigger picture for a minute. ATV use is rising rapidly, with more than 205,000 machines registered in the state. In each of the past two years, 35,000 first-time registrations were recorded.

As ordered by the Legislature, the DNR is in the process of designating trails where the machines may be ridden. ATV users are frustrated because they want designated trails where they can ride, and they deserve to have those trails. At first glance, the North Shore State Trail might seem a logical choice. But a snowmobile trail and an ATV trail are two distinctly different kinds of trails — or should be.

A snowmobile trail, used only when the ground is frozen and snow-covered, hardly affects the terrain beneath it. An ATV trail, on the other hand, is used during spring, summer and fall, when the ground is exposed and sometimes wet. The DNR's description of the North Shore State Trail on its Web site includes this paragraph: "The portion of the trail suggested for summer use is from the town of Finland to Grand Marais (70 miles). The remainder of the trail may have standing water on it during the summer months."

The North Shore State Trail crosses about 40 streams between Duluth and Grand Marais, most of them trout streams.

"From what I understand, there's quite a few wetlands along the trail," said Don Schreiner, DNR Lake Superior area fisheries supervisor. "As fisheries people, we'd be concerned about ATVs in wetlands and stream areas where they might cause increased siltation and sedimentation into these streams."

Andy Holak, forest recreation specialist for the St. Louis County Land Department, has similar concerns.

"We have some concerns regarding the amount of wetland areas involved where the North Shore Trail goes through St. Louis County," Holak said. "It may be a significant issue ... There already is rutting on the trail from illegal ATV use in the summertime."

ATV trails need to be designated on lands where they will be both enjoyable to ride and do the least damage to the countryside. The North Shore Trail, especially in its southernmost portions, is not such a place. It's too wet and subject to erosion.

There's little doubt it would be extremely popular with ATV riders, but the trail wasn't designed for that kind of summer use. The DNR should continue to make the evaluation and designation of ATV trails a priority, but it should let the North Shore State Trail remain a snowmobile trail.

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