



**Position Statement of the
Minnesota Chapter of The Wildlife Society
3/22/07**

Off-Highway Vehicles and Wildlife Impacts in Minnesota

The Minnesota Chapter of The Wildlife Society recognizes the popularity of off-highway vehicles (OHV's¹) in the state. We also believe that managed use of OHV's for work and recreation--including use for hunting and management purposes--can be supported, as long as that use occurs with full consideration of the potential for OHV use to have a negative impact on wildlife, wildlife habitat, and wildlife-oriented recreation.

MN TWS believes that sufficient evidence exists to be concerned about the potential for negative impacts on wildlife and wildlife habitat due to current OHV riding in the state.^{2 3 4 5}

We also are aware of evidence suggesting that the presence of OHV trails can often be incompatible with many traditional forms of outdoor recreation in the state, including wildlife-oriented recreation.⁶

MN TWS has watched as Minnesota's legislators and land managers have grappled with the rising popularity of OHV's and the complex issues they present, and we acknowledge that some progress to incorporate wildlife concerns has been made in recent years.

¹ OHV's include all-terrain vehicles, off-highway motorcycles, and off-road vehicles

² Joslin, G., and H. Youmans, coordinators. 1999. Effects of recreation on Rocky Mountain wildlife: A Review for Montana. Committee on Effects of Recreation on Wildlife, Montana Chapter of the Wildlife Society.

³ Stokowski, P.A. and C. B. LaPointe. 2000. Environmental and Social Effects of ATVs and ORVs: An Annotated Bibliography and Research Assessment. School of Natural Resources, University of Vermont. 31 p.

⁴ Taylor, Richard B. 2006. The Effects of Off-Road Vehicles on Ecosystems. Texas Parks and Wildlife P.O. Box 207, Uvalde, TX 78802 12p.

⁵ Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection. 2002. Interim Wildlife Guidelines for Commercial Backcountry Recreation in British Columbia. British Columbia Ministry of Water, Land, and Air Protection, Victoria British Columbia, Canada.

⁶ Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. 2005. Compatibility and Conflict in Wisconsin Outdoor Recreation. Pages 4-1 to 4-13 in The 2005-2010 Wisconsin Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan : SCORP/ Wisconsin. WI Gov. Pub. NAT.1/6:R 27/2010

However, MN TWS remains concerned that negative impacts of OHV use on wildlife, wildlife habitat, and wildlife-oriented recreation are still not being adequately acknowledged and mitigation needs are not being fully addressed in OHV trail location decisions or by those responsible for OHV regulation and management in the state.

To remedy this situation, MN TWS believes the following must occur:

- 1) Require that *all* public land OHV trails be managed under a “closed to motorized use unless posted open” policy (e.g. the MN DNR “limited” classification), with trail systems sited, designed, and signed in a manner that allows for sustainable use. Current practice often leads to a confusing mix of policies as OHV riders travel between public lands that are managed differently (e.g. from managed state forest lands onto federal forest lands, or from open county lands onto limited state lands), which greatly complicates enforcement efforts.
- 2) Where resource protection needs are impacted by OHV trail riding impacts, those trails should be closed to OHV’s unless solutions allowing sustainable use can be found.
- 3) Allow for full consideration of direct (e.g. collision-induced mortality, increased hunting mortality, poaching mortality, displacement, nest disruption, abandonment of offspring, migration or travel route barriers,) *and* indirect (e.g. reduced reproductive success, habitat destruction, reduced habitat effectiveness, habitat fragmentation, spread of exotic species) wildlife impacts during trail siting decisions.
- 4) Additional staff and funding for ongoing research and monitoring of OHV riding impacts on wildlife, wildlife habitat, and wildlife-oriented recreation in Minnesota are essential, and results of such research and monitoring should be used in OHV trail management decisions and regulation. MN TWS is particularly concerned by reports that the best professional judgment of resource professionals during trail siting and management decisions is being discounted due to lack of direct evidence of current problems and/or lack of regionally specific research.
- 5) To fully assess potential for wildlife impacts due to OHV trails, the cumulative impact of all roads and trails (e.g. road/trail density analysis) and off-trail impacts must be considered. MN TWS is concerned that current OHV impact review processes focus primarily on impacts added via OHV trails, while neglecting cumulative impact analysis of all roads and trails.
- 6) Enforcement officers should be provided with more tools for enforcement of riding within road rights of way. Seasonal restrictions on riding within road rights of way to protect nesting wildlife currently apply only in the agricultural portion of the state, and should be extended statewide. Seasonal right of way restriction enforcement efforts are also hampered by exemptions to the law. A restriction requiring that roadside riding occur only on the shoulder of selected, mapped and signed roads—as occurs in portions of Wisconsin—would help mitigate many right of way impacts.

- 7) Increase funding for OHV enforcement efforts and additional dedicated OHV enforcement officers without utilizing state Game and Fish funds. MN TWS is concerned that traditional fish and wildlife enforcement efforts are suffering due to an increased OHV enforcement workload, and believes that state Game and Fish funds should not be spent on OHV enforcement efforts which are not directly related to hunting or fishing.
- 8) The placement of “mudder” truck or aggressive riding “challenge area” OHV trails should be restricted to lands specifically acquired and designed to prevent off-site impacts. The impact of such trails on wildlife and potential for displacement of traditional wildlife-oriented recreation make them a poor fit for siting on existing public lands with a history of multiple use. Similar restrictions on use of the larger, more powerful and heavier atv’s may become necessary as their popularity grows and the difference narrows between their impact and those of mudder trucks.
- 9) The ability to drive OHV’s within wetlands subject to the Wetland Conservation Act⁷ in a manner that causes damage to those wetlands should be restricted on public lands. Current law allows for wetland damage below a defined “de-minimus” exemption, which starts at 400 square feet and can rise in counties which retain more than 80% of their historical wetlands.
- 10) Restore the requirement for mandatory Environmental Assessment Worksheets (EAW’s) for OHV system plans. This was recommended in a 2003 legislative audit of OHV fund expenditures and was in effect at one time, but was removed through subsequent legislation.
- 11) Physical developments (e.g. roads, trails, and ditch banks) on state Wildlife Management Areas (WMA’s), Scientific and Natural Areas (SNA’s), and state parks should be managed consistent with statutory requirements⁸ (e.g. statutory requirements to manage WMA habitat “for maximum production of a variety of wildlife species”, and that physical improvements “shall be developed so as to minimize intrusion on the natural environment”).
- 12) Take the following actions to address problems created by the current hunting and trapping exemptions for OHV travel off of designated trails: a) efforts to tighten regulations to prevent abuse of the exemption by non-hunters and non-trappers; b) actively monitor the extent of negative impacts created by the exemption, (e.g. habitat degradation, the effect on “trail creep” or unauthorized trail creation, the extent to which the exemption contributes to other problems such as illegal permanent deer stand creation); and c) based on monitoring results, consider changes to the exemption (such as limiting the exemption to big game retrieval only).

⁷ see MS Chapter 103G.2241

⁸ see MS Chapter 86A.05

Addendum 1:

The Minnesota Chapter of The Wildlife Society (MN TWS) is a professional organization of biologists dedicated to the sustainable management of wildlife resources and their habitats. The Wildlife Society is an international, non-profit, scientific and educational organization serving and representing wildlife professionals in all areas of wildlife conservation and resource management.

MN TWS subscribes to the objectives set forth by the parent organization of The Wildlife Society, which are to:

- Develop and promote sound stewardship of wildlife resources and of the environments upon which wildlife and humans depend;
- Undertake an active role in preventing human-induced environmental degradation;
- Increase awareness and appreciation of wildlife values; and
- Seek the highest standards in all activities of the wildlife profession.

The Minnesota Chapter objectives are to:

- Manage wildlife resources on a sound biological basis that benefits ecosystems and people; and
- Encourage the highest possible professional standards in those working with wildlife resources.

More information about the Minnesota Chapter of the Wildlife Society can be found on our website, including chapter contacts: <http://www.umcrookston.edu/tws/mn/>