

# SnowTRAC Groomers Meeting

## June 25, 2010

### ATTENDEES

Ben Barclay—Montana Creek Groomers  
Alan Eccles—Denali Highway Groomers  
Corky Matthews— Lake Louise Area Groomer  
Dean-Lake Louise  
Wayne Christianson—Lake Louise  
Dan Mayfield—Big Lake Trails  
Randy Crosby—Petersville Area Groomer  
Glenn Swan—Curry Ridge Riders President  
Jack Kreinheder—Juneau Area Groomer  
Vern Epps—Mid-Valley Trail Club Groomer  
Bill Luth—Willow Area Groomer, SnowTRAC Advisory Board  
Kevin Hite—President, Alaska State Snowmobile Assn.  
Cynthia Hite—SnowTRAC Advisory Board  
Mark Wilke—SnowTRAC Co-Chair  
Joe Gauna—SnowTRAC Co-Chair

### DNR STAFF

James King – Parks Director  
Andre Kaeppele—Trails Program  
Bill Luck—Trails Program  
Wayne Biessel—MatSu Park Superintendent  
Kyle Kidder—South Central Region, Easements  
Sally Davies—Admin Asst II, Note taker

### Meeting Called to Order at 8:45 a.m. and introductions made by all

- K. Hite: We are here to discuss the Grooming Trails Program and to see what is or is not working and how we can improve it. One of the things I hear is the public want good maps of trails for safety. The communities using the trails want the grooming program to function correctly. If the grooming project works then the citizens have no problem having trail fees raised.
- King: Thank you all for coming. How Parks guides the program and to keep a consistency on the trails depends on the input from the groomers. You are the front line that sees what is going on with the trails in your grooming activity. We value your views and input.
- Wilke: Is there a possibility of Parks matching the groomer's funds from the grants?
- Luth: Or matching funds with other user groups?
- King: We would be supportive of matching dollars but the matter is funding. It needs the support of users before the Legislature will look at the issue. I am willing to make the attempt for more user funds but I need the users support.
- Wilke: No one seems to be checking trail registration. How can enforcement be increased?
- King: The problem we have with registration enforcement is that Alaska trails are there for all Alaskans. There was a constituent who received a ticket because his snowmachine had no trail registration. He complained to his Legislator. We need to focus on an education process. We need to start with a possible 3-year program where years one and two focus on education and in year three the enforcement starts.
- Gauna: If you have any more registration enforcement complaints to a Legislator, let us know and we can help in educating them.

Kaeppele: Grooming trails uses the greatest portion of the grant funds. We need to come up with a plan to make the best use of those funds for the best grooming of trails.

K. Hite: Users need to see improvements to the trails for registration fees to increase. Our job today is to discuss the issues the groomers are having.

Kaeppele: Let's start with the public comments.

Kreinheder: I am a groomer program coordinator in Juneau. Groomed trails are extremely popular with the public. Our short trails get bumpy without grooming. I would like to advocate for smaller committees for more funding dollars for grooming. I am concerned about the groomer's reimbursement for smaller trails. I want to make sure any trail adoption regulations in the future don't exclude smaller operations. Registrations fee increase down here may meet resistance because there is a lesser amount of trails. I would also like to thank DNR Trails and SnowTRAC for their work on the grants. You are doing a great job.

K. Hite: Any questions for Jack? Thanks for your input.

Crosby: I am here to make sure we are progressing in our goals as groomers and that we are moving forward. I think we are doing the right thing with the standardization of the requirements. We are donating a lot of our time/money for grooming the trails. I want accountability be we need a system on data for true operating costs of each groomer for reimbursement.

Kidder: The public comments I get are regarding easement permit process timeframe, trails needing lots of maintenance, and Moose Range trail marking that may encourage too much usage into their neighborhood. I have also been asked about widening the trails for grooming. DNR has to go by state statutes on what can be done on the trails. If the trail is groomed wider than 5 feet, then an easement permit is needed if vegetation will be disturbed.

K. Hite: If we are not disturbing vegetation, we can use our groomer equipment?

Kidder: Yes.

Luth: If equipment does disturb vegetation, is that a problem?

Kidder: If the public complains.

Barclay: If we apply for a permit, how much weight does public comment carry?

Kidder: We have to address every public comment that will affect the public.

Kaeppele: We have to acknowledge the fact that the groomers maintain 1,000 miles of trails on a \$200,000 budget. The reason our budget is so constrained is because our registration fees are so low. There is a lot of room for improvement to the trails and there is a need for more fees. At the end of the season if there is a heavy snowfall we may have a lack of funds. We get requests for additional funding so groomers need to get their bills into the state in a timelier manner.

Mayfield: Big Lake Trails is a newer organization. We assumed the trail grooming from Big Lake Chamber of Commerce. We inherited a lot of headaches with the trails. We need more equipment, better signage, but we do have great community support. We need more funds to groom the trails properly. We also would like input and support from SnowTRAC and DNR. We have the Iron Dog using our trails so we have lots of holes that need fixing. The Big Lake groups do support a raise in registration fees.

Biessel: Who is rating these trails?

Luth: You need to ride with Andre and see them for yourself. The state needs to ride with the groomers and talk about the conditions of them.

Swan: We have very little trees on our trails. Our needs are for more signage to keep the public safe and not get lost because our area is treeless.

C. Hite: We always talk about raising registration fees. I don't want the higher fees to come with more regulations.

Mayfield: My area is in favor of higher registration fees. The general public loves our trails and they understand needing higher fees.

Wilke: It is time for Alaska to have a modern grooming program. The people here are dedicated to this. Let's start making a good program. I hear lots of complaints about the current rules. Let's put our heads together to change them.

Luth: If registration goes up I don't want paperwork to multiply or constantly change.

Swan: A trail doesn't have to be groomed to be a trail. The problem is lack of signs. We need to come up with a sign standard. We build trails for multi-users and it is only fair that we have funding backing. The state funds the single use trails so why not us? We are the only group that charge ourselves to get funds for everyone to use the trails.

K. Hite: We feel the money that we gather should be used for trails grooming and signage programs.

Barclay: Does registration prove that it helps when your snowmachine is stolen?

K. Hite: If it is registered, this has helped the Troopers in returning the snowmachine back to the owner.

Eccles: Mark mentioned widening trails from 5 ft. to 20 ft. What if we cross from state land into federal land?

Kaeppele: The federal guidelines will have to be followed.

Wilke: Is there a state statute that can be changed?

Kidder: If it is over 5 ft. you have to get an easement.

Luth: All trails should have a 20 ft. corridor.

Crosby: When MatSu Borough started creating trails, the state got involved and said easements were needed. We were under the impression that when easements are granted that we were ok to groom a wider path.

Kaeppele: You can stipulate what your needs are in these easements to take into consideration on what you have to do to groom the trails.

Luck: I feel the biggest issue you are having is ML&W is overwhelmed and under staffed to deal with a faster easement process. The state has the same problem with BLM not wanting us crossing their land.

K. Hite: Is there a list of sections of the trails competing with the groomer dollars?

- Gauna: We need a list of potential easements so we can see if any are relative to our group. We can help make the process faster by providing the required paperwork or questions answered.
- Luth: From the funds that were allocated, what was used?
- Kaeppele: We started with a fund total of \$237,443. Of those funds, \$202,000 was used for grooming. While the remainder was used for other projects. This winter we ended up with a surplus of grooming funds due to lack of snow.
- Biessel: We had very little snowfall in the Mat-Su that created the surplus. We could have spent it all if the surplus could be used for requests other than grooming.
- Crosby: It would be better to get denied for extra funds for grooming in Nov./Dec. instead of in April when we have large snowfall and have no money. We need to have the option to use the reserve at the beginning of the snow year instead of at the end.
- Wilke: If we don't use our reserve we need to have a back up plan to spend it. Whether it is for signs, education, etc. If the legislature keeps seeing this surplus they are not going to keep funding us.
- Crosby: I would like to see the clubs getting the grooming funds.
- Mayfield: I would like to see the reserves used for equip if it isn't going to be used for grooming.
- Gauna: I would rather rent a dozer or hire someone to do the trail repair work.
- Luth: A local guy charges more.
- Gauna: Fine. Then the job is done and we can move on.
- Barclay: The problem with hiring others is that they need a plan.
- Kaeppele: The Wyoming groups have built groomer sheds at major trail heads to house equipment that was purchased with registration funds. Trail users can decide where they want their yearly registration fees to go and which trail to groom. It is a large initial investment.
- Wilke: How much is the registration fee in Wyoming.
- Kaeppele: Around \$24.50 a year.
- K. Hite: Wyoming, Michigan, Wisconsin have million dollar budgets. We aren't there yet but we might need to work toward that direction.
- Wilke: After initial investment, then we only have yearly maintenance. If it is a matter of money, let's work towards getting more.
- Luth: A good Groomer Shed storage area would be the Willow area.
- Wilke: Can we talk about how much equipment we would actually need for a state operated equipment house.

### **FINDINGS:**

<b>Kenai</b>	<b>MatSu/Petersville</b>	<b>Denali Hwy</b>	<b>Fairbanks</b>	<b>Lake Louise</b>	<b>Valdez</b>	<b>Haines</b>	<b>Turnagain Pass</b>
3 pieces	3 pieces—MatSu	2 pieces	1 piece	3 pieces	2 pieces	1 piece	1 piece

- Wilke: If these were all new pieces of equipment with sheds it is about 4 million dollars.
- Kaeppele: A good starting point if this is done in stages. It would be wise to start with the Willow station.
- Crosby: I would rather have a portion of the money we are talking about. I could work wonders on the trails.
- K. Hite: Instead of buying new state equip, we could contract out the operators that already have this equipment.
- Luck: It seems it might be a better use of state funds to utilize the skilled and competent businesses that already have the equipment and know how to work the trails.
- Barclay: If we could get the trail easements in place we can generate more usage.
- Swan: The state needs to put in place 5-year contracts for the groomers instead of yearly contracts.
- K. Hite: We need the help of state backing to implement this. We also have to knock on doors, talk with legislature to push this forward. We don't have enough equipment in place to do everything we want to get done. An immediate fix would be to contract out the grooming and ease into the housed equipment at the trailheads. If we had more funding we could do a much better job.
- There are 2 major issues we need to work on and they are right-of-ways and adjudication. We have to work out these issues so we can move forward.
- We have to set expectations for the regulated groomer's guidelines. We need to be better at getting the paperwork done, the billing need to be on time in for getting the trail problems fixed.
- There has to be more money available to the groomers to do the trails properly and we need a multi-seasonal contract. This contract needs to include minimal grooming services.
- Eccles: What is the drawback of having a 5-year contract?
- Kaeppele: Our funding is yearly and is given by the Legislature.
- Wilke: Isn't all state funding annual?
- K. Hite: Any contract has "out" language in it. If a groomer is not meeting contract stipulations, they can be let go.
- Luth: Wouldn't it be less paperwork for the state with a 5-year contract?
- C. Hite: If we got a 5-year contract for grooming we wouldn't have to spend SnowTRAC time every year on this issue.
- Biessel: A 5-year contract to be renegotiated yearly and standards met in the current grooming year.
- K. Hite: Groomers need to tell us what the price per mile each section of the trail costs.
- Crosby: It would be nice to know at the end of the fiscal year what the next years funding will be so the groomers can plan the year's expenses. For things like new tires, blades, grooming, etc.
- Gauna: I'd rather see some good trails groomed at higher quality all year versus a lot of crappy groomed trails.

- K. Hite: Decisions need to be made by the state on which trails the majority of the funding needs to be used for grooming.
- Kaeppele: We are collecting data by survey to isolate the most used trails to make the grooming decision. We need this for trail classification.
- Wilke: Let's just make the decision now on what trails are high priorities and not wait until 2-3 years down the road when all the data is finally collected.
- Luth: The groomer already makes these decisions on the lesser used trails.
- Crosby: My complaint is all the paperwork. Because there isn't a set document in place, we lose small data—i.e., changes of address. Make the paperwork document on a spreadsheet that can accept information changes. There is just no easy way for the state and groomers to get all that paperwork done.
- Biessel: Once grant agreements get out then the paperwork process gets smoother.
- Kaeppele: This is the way it is set up for processing. We get the request, we set up the paperwork for the grant and then we give the funds to the areas for dividing up.
- Wilke: In the grooming contract the businessman and the snowmachine clubs should be paid on a different scale and not the same across the board.
- Kaeppele: It is going to take a few years to revamp this program. What can we do now from an operator's standpoint to make everything go smoother?
- Mayfield: There have been existing trails for 40 years. Why do we have to go through the grant process?
- Kaeppele: the grant process application lets us see if we have funding for grooming.
- Mayfield: On the existing trail application, DNR still reviews older existing trails?
- Barclay: How about an addendum to the application to add an older existing trail so we don't have to go through the entire application?
- Mayfield: There is a difference between an existing trail and establishing a trail.
- Gauna: There is always going to be paperwork even if it is an existing trail.
- K. Hite: Big Lake area is a separate area that we won't be able to fix today. We will help you as much as we can because Big Lake is a huge recreation area. So much paperwork has been lost from the change-over from the Big Lake Chamber to the Big Lake Trail Club.
- Kidder: I am pulling all the Big Lake easement documents and working on them to get them to Andre.
- Crosby: On the new paperwork there should be a line stating how many miles total you are grooming versus miles one-way.
- Luth: The new paperwork doesn't say how many miles it is to the trail that needs grooming.
- Crosby: Cost per mile can't be only one-way. Some groomers only go one-way, but others go different directions that overlap.

- Gauna: You can up the linear mile and assign an arbitrary price per mile.
- K. Hite: How about a structure for grooming and preparation?
- Kaeppele: Users of the trail want to know the trail conditions and how many miles are groomed.
- K. Hite: do all groomers have documents for how long it takes or how many miles that they groom to set a standard price per mile? We need to figure out an equitable way to pay everyone.
- Swan: I see two problems. You have grooming and you have maintenance.
- Kaeppele: I feel that the contractor should figure out the cost maintenance. We want to know the bottom line of cost per mile for the trail.
- Crosby: Glenn has a good point. Some trails have different grooming tasks that have to be done. I think man-hours need to be figured in the per mile cost. To get more money we need to show the Legislature that we can't continue to groom 1,000 miles of trails without more money. We need to pay equitable wages to the groomers and only groom the miles of trails that the funds can provide. If we can only groom 500 miles with the amount of funds, so be it. There needs to be more funds.
- Biessel: We need one person to do the grant process dedicated exclusively for allocations. I would also like your input on the surplus at the end of the year. If you want me to release more of the allocated funds, let me know. How do you want to handle this?
- C. Hite: Are you holding back funds for a certain reason? Have you denied special requests for the funding?
- Biessel: Yes and then we re-allocate if there is a need for more. We don't give them the full amount up front.
- Gauna: I think they should get the full amount of allocation up front. If you run out of funds at the end of the grooming season, the extra funding should come out of the prudent reserve.

### **Defining a Statewide Winter Trail System**

- K. Hite: What do we see as a beginning of establishing a winter trail system? As we work toward a system we need to make sure the trails are the main point.
- Kaeppele: What is a trail system? How do we define a trail system? Didn't State Parks start a trails system and are there maps?
- Luck: There is a document and it has all trails – municipal, borough, and state trails. A state system for SnowTRAC is a start and then we can branch out.
- K. Hite: We have to define a statewide trail system before we discuss it
- Kidder: A winter trail system for transportation or recreation is a simple explanation.
- Swan: It is out of the scope of this group to take on.
- Wilke: We can't leave off trails that are eligible.
- K. Hite: At a minimum, we need to define what a statewide trail system is.

Crosby: It is an inventory of recreation trails throughout the state.

Wilke: Do we have a map with just the current groomed trails?

Barclay: Could RS2477 help us in the listing?

Biessel: What is SnowTRAC's mission statement? Shouldn't this be one of your goals?

K. Hite: We won't be able to have a connecting snowmobile trail system from Kenai to Fairbanks because Anchorage sits in the middle of the trail system.

Wilke: Is this series of trails ready for classifications?

Luth: It is important to get public information out for education.

Biessel: How does the board make decisions? What are your criteria for funding for the statewide trail program if you don't have a definition of what it is?

Mayfield: My concern is for the Old Iditarod Trail. We don't have funding to groom that trail. How do we get support funding for it?

C. Hite: It is the responsibility of each club to lobby for their funds with the legislators in their areas.

K. Hite: We are asking to expand and we need to have everything in place for the Director to answer legislature questions.

Biessel: There needs to be criteria in place so each area doesn't start competing against each other for funds.

Wilke: Some of the trails got funded because equipment and groomers were in that trail area.

Kaeppele: How do we get a trail established? Let's talk about application, adjudication and trail paperwork.

Wilke: There has always been a problem with these grants for applicants not proving the legality of the access. Can you tell what needs to be done prior to submitting the application?

Luck: Topo maps are essential, finding out before hand if there are any problems with the trail selection area and easements.

Kaeppele: For you to get legal access you will need to fill out the state paperwork and then the state determines the legality of the request.

Crosby: Can a simple manual be put together to tell us what needs to come with the submitted application once we have gone home and forgotten all of this?

K. Hite: It is nice to be on trails that will show you how to get from point A to point B. We need consistency in the signs.

Gauna: On the website it would be helpful to have a list of vendors who make signs in accordance to IASA standards. It would help out the grant applicants.

Kaeppele: Do we rely on groomers to put up the signs?

Gauna: Who puts up the signs when it is not winter?



Biessel: Our maintenance crews.

C. Hite: If the grant could have signs a part of the grant request and then that becomes part of the safety funding.

Gauna: the IASA standard is the minimum in required signs needed.

Luth: Specialty signs may be needed for safety purposes.

Luck: Signs could be used as a safety component to the grant application or a structural component to the grant application.

C. Hite: Grooming and signs should go together to make the process smoother.

Crosby: There has to be financial compensation if groomers or volunteers are putting up signs. It takes a large amount of time to install signs.

Biessel: How about 3% of your allocation to be used for signs?

Kaeppele: Add another page to your application for signs. You can say how many you need or any specialty signs you need.

K. Hite: Equipment type and operations. How do you want to handle this?

Kaeppele: Do we have the equipment we need on the trails for grooming?

Gauna: I think what we have for grooming is adequate.

Eccles: if the public is happy with the grooming then we don't need to spend time on discussing this.

Wilke: Is it appropriate for SnowTRAC to be funding grants to buy grooming equipment?

Crosby: As long as the funds are shared fairly.

Mayfield: I was discouraged to apply to get funding from SnowTRAC for equipment.

Wilke: Were you encouraged to apply for funding from and ORTAB grant?

Mayfield: Yes

K. Hite: ORTAB has been the route to secure equipment.

Luck: ORTAB is required to use 30% of their funds for motorized vehicle trail use. Some of this funding could be used to secure grooming equipment or maintenance of trails.

Mayfield: Big Lake Trails received a grant from ORTAB to re-route and maintain the Iron Dog Trail.

Luck: If we went to contract with groomers we would be required to pay Davis Bacon wages, which would greatly increase the cost of grooming, thus reducing the amount of trails we could groom.

Wilke: It will only be a matter of time before the groomers will have to follow state contracting requirements, which will make business a bit more complex.

Swan: What exactly are the liability implications of volunteer efforts?

### **Increasing Funding to the Pool**

Wilke: What is the possibility of moving RTP funds to the grooming pool?

Luck: Money funneled to SnowTRAC from RTP is possible. RTP funds must be spent if allocated. Generally RTP funds would be used for equipment purchases and trail construction.

Wilke: What about a percentage of RTP funds for the grooming pool, and a percentage for development projects?

Luck: Percentage allocations sound more appropriate because of a variation in the funding amount.

K. Hite: Funding should be secured for a full time administrative position. Ideally the program could use a full time easement adjudicator as well.

Luth: I agree, there is an 8 year backlog of trail easements which needs to be addressed.

Gauna: It would be very helpful to develop a list of trail adjudication priorities.

K. Hite: Three ways to increase funding include a registration fee increase, a percentage of funding from RTP, and a legislative match to registration funds.

In order to support the registration fee increase, we will need support from the Fairbanks and interior areas.

Wilke: There should be a mechanism in place for expending the prudent reserve. A good use of prudent reserve funds would be to purchase and stock pile signs.

Anderson: One thing to note is that people just aren't educated about the registration program.

K. Hite: One way to educate the public would be to send out information in the Snowriders Magazine.

**Meeting Adjourned 5:30 pm.**