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Senator Roger Breske  
Capitol 310 South  
Madison, WI 53707

Re: State Trails Policy

Dear Senator Breske:

I am writing to you to express my concern regarding efforts to develop ATV trails in Vilas County and specifically within the borders of the Northern Highland American Legion State Forest.

Over one year ago, the residents of Vilas County, in an advisory referendum, overwhelmingly voted against the development of ATV trails in Vilas County. At a State Forest Planning Session held at the community building in Boulder Junction, speaker after speaker voiced their objections to ATV trails within their community and to trails proposed as part of the Northern Highland American Legion State Forest Development Plan. Despite the objections of many area residents, the State of Wisconsin DNR seems determined to develop ATV trails within the State Forest.

The people speaking against ATV trails came from a wide range of ages and backgrounds. They were not just a "bunch of old folks" trying to resist progress or hinder business. They were people showing their heartfelt concern for the environment and a quality of life that brought them and others to the northwoods. For decades people have come to the Northern Highland American Legion State Forest to escape the pressures, noise, and pollution of the cities. They have come to enjoy both the sounds and stillness of nature. They have come to enjoy a forest that is one of the absolute jewels of our state.

I believe ATV's are a danger to the environment and have no place in a forest whose very purpose is to serve as a reserve for our "natural world" which is all too quickly disappearing. It is easy to find places full of exhaust, noise, and traffic. Areas that offer clean air, undisturbed wildlife, and a motor free environment are becoming rarer every day. I believe we should make an effort to protect areas that still offer the best nature has to give.

I am not suggesting we close our forest to human activity. Rather, why not promote uses already popular and compatible with the forest as it is? A recent article in the Lakeland Times newspaper started with the following statement: "Did you know that recent studies show travelers with an interest in silent sports and environmental issues are the fastest growing segment of the tourism industry." Why would we potentially ruin an area with ATV trails that already offer a perfect tourist destination in its current "natural" state? I realize that some business owners feel they are losing out as ATV owners pass our community by. My concern is what tourism dollars will we lose if we introduce the very type of noise and pollution that many people come here to escape?

ATV's cause erosion, noise pollution, and air pollution. They disturb wildlife, cause bodily injuries, and add extra burdens to local and state law enforcement agencies. They have a history of not staying on designated trails whether trails are available or not. They have trespassed on my personally owned property which lies within the Northern Highland American Legion State Forest (where ATV's are not legally operated). They have also damaged the gravel town road that leads to my property with their spinning wheels. Are all ATV operators' thoughtless criminals? Of course not. Will having designated ATV trails in our state forest and in our community resolve the improper or illegal use of ATV's? Once again, of course not. Watch almost any ATV promotion—speed and power are highlighted. Super tough suspensions are strong selling points. Sad to say, but more than a few ATV operators will want to put these monster machines to the test on something other than a “safe” groomed state trail.

I frequently hear about the rapid growth in the registration of ATV's. Should this alone generate the need for more and more trails? Should Wisconsin taxpayers be responsible for building more trails to satisfy a specific industry and product? Should we encourage an activity that literally by its very nature damages our resources? The more trails we provide, the more ATV's will be purchased. The more ATV's purchased, etc... ATV's are a great utility vehicle on the farm. If you want to challenge a hill and spin your knobby tires to make the dirt fly (just like in the commercials) on private property, go for it. Please leave our State Forest alone.

Despite the best efforts of the ATV stake holders group, there is no great place for an ATV trail. No matter where a trail is placed, it will likely conflict with the current uses, negatively affect nearby landowners, and cause damage to sensitive soils. Anyone unfortunate enough to have an ATV trail placed near their home will have their peace and quiet sacrificed. The negative impact of a motorized trail will go well beyond just a thin ribbon of land through the woods. It is not a question of whether or not ATV trails will cause damage to the forest and create conflicts within our community, but rather how much damage will be done by these powerful, earth-churning machines.

The world of politics often relies on compromise. ATV advocates talk of their rights to use state property and say they only want one or two trails in the State Forest. I recently saw an ATV license that stated there are already 600 miles of ATV trails in the State of Wisconsin. Given that the state is already filled with thousands of miles of roads and hundreds of miles of ATV trails, perhaps the compromise is in allowing just a few choice areas of the state to remain “ATV free”.

Please protect our forests. Allow us, our children, and grandchildren to have a few precious places where our ability to enjoy nature for what it is, is more important than our need to conquer it with a machine.

Sincerely,

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