

Why Aren't Trails Open?

As soon as snow falls, calls and emails asking about open trails inundate the OFSC. No one is more eager to start trail riding than OFSC clubs and volunteers; if only opening trails was as easy as just having snow... or contacting the OFSC!

In reality, our clubs operate with finite budgets, targeted to ensure that most grooming occurs during peak riding weeks from early January to mid-March. Sometimes, like last winter, the season is longer than normal and clubs juggle dollars to get started around Christmas and also groom longer. Often, doing so means robbing Peter to pay Paul — for example, reallocating dollars tagged for purchasing a much-needed replacement groomer or for trail preparation the next fall.

Next, remember that the permit fee remains the same throughout each season, regardless of how long, so once set for an expected number of grooming weeks, the size of the pie each club has for the winter at hand does not vary much. Meanwhile, as non-profit entities, clubs have already invested left over revenues from previous seasons into paying down debts, down payments on new groomers, paying for equipment repairs, or to cover additional costs, such as grooming longer last winter. So if dollars are diverted to unexpectedly early grooming, it's easy to see why another area of planned trail operations may suffer.

Now, remember that trail operations show a \$5 million shortfall each season... that's the difference between permit revenues and the actual cost of running the OFSC provincial system. So there are no extra dollars in any pot. And until

clubs receive 2009 permit revenues to replenish their accounts (which typically start flowing in meaningful amounts after December 1st), every available dollar is being spent on preparations. As a result of all the preceding, clubs are very careful not to waste precious grooming dollars, which brings us to premature snow and trails opening early...

Forty years of weather/snowfall patterns and club experience clearly indicate that snow prior to Christmas will not last in much of Ontario. This is due to early season temperature fluctuations and ground/water not being frozen. So with melt a likelihood, clubs are understandably reluctant to spend precious resources on grooming that will be wasted. They would rather wait until everything freezes up to pack a base that will last all season. Besides, when nothing is frozen, clubs can't even get their groomers into many trails due to impassable swamps, bogs, creeks and washouts. What's more, taking groomers out prematurely frequently results in costly repairs that also diverts dollars from grooming. So what would your choice be... expending scarce cash on an early snow crapshoot or saving it for prime time?


When snow arrives as early as mid-November, as it did recently in much of central and southwestern Ontario, clubs face other challenges, too. Usually, land use permission for opening trails on private property is not effective until closer to Christmas. Keeping trails closed on private land until then is especially important in farm country, where riding too early may cause crop damage or interfere with fall farm operations. Unfortunately, almost all mid-November snow fell on these agricultural areas. These unavailable trails effectively orphaned many



other trails and links, by making them inaccessible.

Another consideration is that clubs simply often do not have time to get trails properly prepped, signed and staked before such an early snow. Also, after such a stormy and wet summer and fall, clubs have been working overtime to clear away fallen debris, repair washouts and restore trail surfaces. In many locations, soft or muddy ground and open or unsafe wet areas have delayed their work, as has the early snow. From a safety and risk management perspective, the clubs would be remiss in their duty of care to permit holders to open trails that are not ready.

So there's the story, folks. You may not like it any more than we do, but that's the consequence of dealing with Mother Nature while closing trails each spring and opening them again each winter. It's like owning a cottage... even if summer arrives early, you can't open it until the hydro is on, the water hooked up, the storms are removed, and the access road is passable.

So please be patient and understanding... you can bet that OFSC clubs are hard at work and that our volunteers will have trails open as soon as humanly possible... and as Mother Nature allows. 

- Craig Nicholson, OFSC Communications