

“Climate Change and its Impact on Recreation”

**Presentation**  
**Of**  
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**Vermont Association of Snow Travelers, Inc.**  
**Berlin, Vermont**  
**Before the**  
**Senate Committee on the Environment and Public Works**  
**Thursday, May 24, 2007**  
**Hearing Subject:**  
**“Climate Change and its Impact on Recreation”**

Good morning Senators, my name is Bryant Watson and I am the Executive Director of the Vermont Association of Snow Travelers, Inc. (VAST), located in Berlin, Vermont. It is indeed a pleasure, privilege, and honor to come before you today to address the issue of *“Climate Change and its Impact on Recreation.”*

Vermont is a Mecca for winter recreation: downhill skiing; cross country skiing; dog sledding; ice fishing; hunting and of course I can't forget my favorite recreation, snowmobiling.

There are 24 states, throughout the United States, that operate snowmobile trail programs. VAST is very unique; it is the only private not-for-profit organization, in the United States that is charged with the development, management, and maintenance of its state snowmobile trail system. In the remaining 23 states, state agencies are responsible for the development and maintenance of their snowmobile trail programs.

VAST was established in November of 1967. We will celebrate our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary this fall. In 1977 VAST entered into a cooperative agreement with the

Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation. This agreement transferred responsibility for Vermont’s Statewide Snowmobile Trail Program (SSTP) to VAST. At the time the agreement was signed there were only 77-miles of snowmobile trails that were classified as a part of the Statewide Snowmobile Trail System (SSTS). Today, the SSTS consists of more than 4,750-miles of groomed corridor snowmobile trails. Local clubs and contractors groom and maintain these trails under contract on behalf of VAST. An additional 2,500-miles of secondary snowmobile trails exist, and local snowmobile clubs maintain these trails. This system of snowmobile trails allows Vermont snowmobilers to snowmobile from the Massachusetts border in the south to the Canadian border in the north. It also allows them to snowmobile from the New Hampshire border in the east, to the New York border in the west. This makes the Vermont SSTS the only true statewide snowmobile trail system in the nation.

Snowmobiling is a way of life in Vermont. Each year as many as 46,000 individuals take to the snowmobile trail system in Vermont. Many of these snowmobilers come to Vermont from other states and countries, and some years as many as 20,000. They not only spend great amounts of money while they are in Vermont, but many of them buy second homes and/or move their formal residence to Vermont due to snowmobiling and Vermont’s quality of life.

The latest economic impact study, conducted in 2001, indicates that snowmobiling contributes more than \$500,000,000 annually to Vermont’s economy, second only to downhill skiing in the category of winter recreation. Vermont is a very small state and it relies on recreation and tourism to fuel a major portion of its economic engine. Recreation as a whole contributes more than \$2,500,000,000 to Vermont’s economy, annually. However, the time frame in which these funds can be generated is very short; especially, the time frame for winter recreation.

The legal snowmobile season in Vermont starts on December 16 and the official ending date is April 15. In four short months, VAST generates more than \$500,000,000

for Vermont’s economy. In recent years this has become a great challenge. Winter has not arrived in Vermont at its normal time! When we should be seeing lots of snow and temperatures well below freezing, we have seen rain and temperatures above freezing. It takes plenty of snow and cold weather to enable the opening of Vermont’s SSTS and the ski trails at Vermont’s ski areas, that offer superb downhill skiing to tens of thousands of visitors each year. Much of the income generated from snowmobiling and downhill skiing is created during holiday periods. Christmas and New Years are very important, as are the weeks surrounding Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birth date; President’s Day and St. Patrick’s Day; Easter is a bonus for both forms of recreation. We must be able to offer snowmobiling and downhill skiing during the above periods. If we cannot, the season is normally lost and the state’s economy feels the pinch.

This past winter is a perfect example. December and the first half of January were well above normal, both in temperature as well as precipitation in the form of rain. The second half of January was cold, but we did not have much or any natural snow in most locations in Vermont. The first part of February delivered normal temperatures, but not much snow. Then came the “Valentine’s Day Blizzard!” It delivered more than 36-inches of snow statewide and finally allowed for all of the SSTS to open. Prior to that time, only ten percent of the SSTS had been open. Then came another blizzard on St. Patrick’s Day; this storm left more than 24-inches of snow over most of Vermont. The day before the close of the season, April 14, much of the state got more than 18-inches of wet, heavy snow.

An observation that I have made is that winter storms now seem to come later in the season and they are much more intense than in the past. Several of this year’s storms were strong Nor-easters and created losses for many private and public landowners, hundreds of acres of forestland were devastated by the heavy snow and strong northeast winds, causing millions of dollars of damage.

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Based on the above, both the snowmobile industry and the downhill ski industry missed the first half of winter and have suffered significant financial losses. VAST must generate between four and five million dollars in revenue in order to have a successful snowmobile season. The majority of income supporting the SSTS is derived from the sale of trail passes. These trail passes are similar to season or day ski passes that are purchased and allow the buyer to use downhill ski areas. The VAST trail pass enables Vermont snowmobilers to legally ride Vermont’s SSTS. The sale of trail passes were down nearly 40 percent this last winter. This leaves VAST with a huge dilemma, how do we cope with the changing climate and survive for the future?

One way that VAST is currently pursuing the future is with the development and management of four-season recreational trails; this is being accomplished with the assistance of Senator Sanders and the United States Congress. VAST is in the process of converting an old abandoned 96-mile long rail bed into a four-season recreational trail. Senator Sanders was instrumental in working with VAST and Congress to obtain a federal high priority grant for this project. VAST has been designated, by the Vermont Legislature, as the Developer and Manager of this project. We have signed a long-term lease with the Vermont Agency of Transportation for the use of this state owned treasure. The trail, when completed, will become one of the longest rail trails in the nation and it will span the width of Vermont, starting in the east near the Connecticut River in St. Johnsbury and ending in Swanton to the west, at Lake Champlain. Currently, we are developing the final plans that will allow this dream to become a reality. Once completed, the trail will draw thousands annually to Vermont, throughout the four seasons; the trail will enable them to enjoy the majestic, pastoral beauty that is Vermont.

Thank you for this opportunity.