

**NORTH COUNTRY**

# Property Owners Hold Keys To Critical OHRV Trail Corridors

**BY ROBERT BLECHL**  
Staff Writer

As some Off-Highway Recreational Vehicle (OHRV) trails officially open for the season on Sunday, some Coos County property owners who previously shut off their land to riders could do so again if what they say has been a lack of respect resurfaces.

If that happens, some critical machine corridors would be cut off.

A decade after the meteoric rise of OHRVs in the county, concerns persist from property owners, who say the machines have become a nuisance on land that has been opened up for them and when they pass by properties and create noise and dust, as well as from motorists who say there are still too many of them on town and state roads.

**"We have had local guys that can cause issues, but it just seems like we are up here running a fun time for everyone from Massachusetts on down through," said Blodgett. "That's one of the biggest things ... This ATV thing has outgrown itself. I don't think anyone ever expected anything like this."**

"I have an office in Colebrook that I open every other Saturday morning for constituents and the number one concern of the majority of the people who come in here is about the machines riding in the roads," state Rep. Dennis Thompson, R-Stewartstown, said Friday. "We sold this Ride The Wilds system as 1,000 miles of trails, but if it includes 500 miles of road it's not really trails. That's the biggest aggravation people have in the area."

Like Thompson, others support the form of recreation, but not the form it's taken in the county.

"I'm not opposed to ATVs at all," said former Coos County Commissioner Rick Samson, of Stewartstown, who as an elected official was involved in efforts to develop solutions and who

See **OHRV**, Page A10



## OHRV

Continued from Page A1

remains involved. "What I am opposed to is them on the local and state roads."

Then there are some property owners who at one time or another, after incidents that frustrated them, closed their land to the machines.

A few of those property owners in a sense hold the keys to major off-road corridors.

Critical property owners include Bruce Blodgett, who owns land in Stratford Hollow and closed it to machines before recently reopening it.

With any two of those three pivotal property owners closing their land, riders would have to go to all the way to Millsfield to get to Groveton because there would be no direct route from Stratford to Groveton, said Samson.

"If they close, it will pose a problem, but the problems are self-induced," said Samson.

In April, Blodgett was approached by Ted Burns, trail master for the North Country ATV Club, who asked him to reopen his land, because, without access to Groveton from Blodgett's land, club members would have no place to go and would essentially be on an island.

"We said we'll give it a try," said Blodgett. "If things work out, fine, but if they don't, it will be right back to trail closed."

Blodgett first opened his land to the machines 15 to 20 years ago, at a time when most riders were local and fewer in number.

He said the recent closure stemmed from a lack of respect from some riders, and even from some of the businesses that make money off of the meals, rooms, and equipment purchases and expect that the trails will be there.

Blodgett said he doesn't want money but wants landowners to be treated with a little more respect.

Another reason for temporarily closing his land stems from what he said has been a lack of clear answers from the state - which he

said also makes money, from the rooms and meals tax - particularly around who is liable if a rider is injured on private property.

At one time when his trail was closed, Blodgett put up a berm to stop riders from coming across, only to catch eight of them trying to get over it.

"They said, 'We're just up here to have fun,'" said Blodgett. "They were from Rhode Island."

He said incidents that built up over time led to him to shut off the trail on his land.

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### One Club's Success

The North Country ATV Club, at nearly a quarter-century old and the first club in the state, has striven to put its 140 total miles in the mountains, Burns said Friday.

Most property owners in the club's Coos area don't have an issue with the machines - many members, in fact, are local property owners - and the club until recently never had a problem, he said.

But anger that surfaced last year prompted one landowner, not keen on riders from out of state, to close his land, and four others followed suit, said Burns.

"They were angry about things the club has absolutely no control over," he said. "That is all turned around now and was due to nothing that was club-related. Our trail system is in the woods and that is probably one of the keys to our success."

But closing even a short segment of trail can make the club's 140-mile trail network dysfunctional and sever the system and its connectivity, said Burns.

### Wait And See

In recent years, more and more people from out of the area have been coming up to Coos and showing less respect for landowners, said Blodgett.

"They're not all bad people, 99.9 percent of these guys are decent guys, but I kind of reached the point where I had about enough," he said.

Although riders bring money into the area, that can be offset by depreciation of properties and impacts to property owners as well as needed enforcement by police, New Hampshire Fish and Game Conservation officers, and sheriff's department personnel said Samson.

As for roads, the hope remains to get the trails off of them, he said.

Before Colebrook selectmen is a proposal to open a segment of Route 26 to Fish Hatchery Road, about a half-mile after the country club, so riders can access a snack shack, said Thompson.

"I'm against that and am against opening up any more of the paved roads to four-wheelers," he said.

In Pittsburg, Marsha Clifford, who lives along Back Lake Road in Pittsburg, showed Thompson a video.

"Out of 3 1/2 hours, 690 machines went by her house," he said. "In 32 seconds, 16 went by her house."

With the help of a grant to build a trail, efforts are being made to get the machines off of Back Lake Road.

Complaints from property owners have been noise, dust and trash, and some riders venturing off trails on land opened up for them.

"There's no question it's an economic driver," said Thompson. "However, if they don't have respect for the people who pay the taxes up here and who provide the trail system in summer and winter, they will lose some of these trail systems and it will go to towns and the state to open more roads. These machines are not designed to ride on paved roads and should not be on the roads. Unfortunately, we don't have enough enforcement up here. But enforcement is not the issue. It's respect. We don't seem to be getting that."

So far, some property owners with concerns were kind enough to reopen their land, he said.

"They will wait and see what happens," said Thompson.

OHRV trails in southern and central Coos officially open Sunday and trails in northern Coos open on Friday.

On Tuesday, even before the official start of the season, New Hampshire Fish and Game conservation officers reported the arrests of three riders in Coos - one in Stratford for driving intoxicated, fleeing from officers, and having multiple violations; another found on a closed trail in Colebrook with a suspended driver's license and possessing illegal drugs; and another in Milan traveling at a high rate of speed and trying to evade police on an unregistered machine.

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