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A chilling forecast for the \$550 million snowmobile industry

January 7, 2007

By *Brent Curtis* Staff Writer

A \$550 million industry in Vermont that's being brought to its knees by Mother Nature.

For the third year in a row, snowmobile dealers and tour companies along with the hotels, motels, restaurants, convenience stores and other businesses that lie along the 4,500 miles of snowmobile trails in the state, are watching the skies and waiting for snow.



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But in the midst of what is shaping up to be the worst winter that anyone in the industry can remember, the question is how long can businesses that rely on the sport for their livelihood afford to wait?

The answer, according to Bryant Watson, executive director of the Vermont Association of Snow Travelers, is that it's probably already too late to salvage some snowmobile-related enterprises.

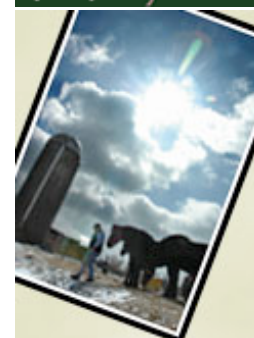
"If this year turns out to be what the forecasters are projecting, then I would expect as much as 50 percent of the dealers out there to close or to drop or lose one or more of their manufacturers franchises," he said. "I'm worried that in the long-term, if we have more winters like this, a lot of the mom-and-pop operations that are almost totally reliant on snowmobiles for their winter business would be forced to close."

With few exceptions, those businesses are sitting idle as temperatures continue to hover around 50 degrees in the state. Watson said that of the state's 4,500 miles of VAST-maintained snowmobile trails only about 30 miles of trails in the Jay and Richford areas have opened this season.

As of Friday, there was a little bit of snow forecast for Vermont this week, but no sign of the big storms those in the industry want to see.

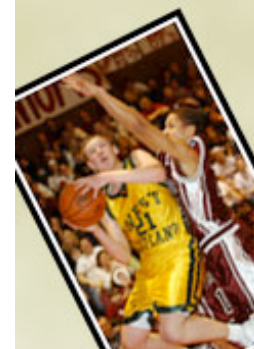
Most business owners reached last week said they were struggling, but making ends meet through a variety of means. However, one of the owners at Pearl Street Motors in Montpelier said that two weeks ago, the shop discontinued its snowmobile dealership after a 20-year run because of the weather.

"If you can't sell them, you're still paying interest on them," said a man who identified himself as one of the owners at the family-owned shop. "We usually sell



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maybe 15 to 20 machines a year. This year we've sold none."

Spencer Hudson, owner of All Around Power Equipment in St. Johnsbury, said what's passing for winter this year has been tough on his trade as well. But unlike Pearl Street Motors, Hudson said he planned to hang onto his snowmobile dealership.

"I've got units that are one to two years old that haven't sold because of the lack of snow," he said. "It's been very tough hanging on, but we've been trying to be versatile with our ATVs, side-by-sides and Rangers. Those sales have helped us survive."

Klaus Weirether wishes his business had that kind of diversity.

But as one of the owners of Killington Snowmobile Tours, he said he's limited to just one option.

"I feel like we're affected the worst because that's all I have to sell is a ride on the snow," he said.

Right now, the only snow he has to tour on is the artificial powder laid down by Killington resort. On a normal winter, Weirether said his tours cover 30 miles of trails. Thus far this winter, he has been limited to running tours in the evening on Killington's slopes.

At Stowe Snowmobile Tours, general manager John Lynds said his usually wide-ranging runs have been greatly curtailed this year.

"We're operating a minimum trail system on a section of park road," he said. "It's been really quiet up here."

Like any tourist industry, snowmobiling puts dollars into the registers of a wide range of businesses.

At places like Marty's First Stop in Danville, the snow travelers that typically converge on the store near the intersection of three trails have been sorely missed, according to owner Martin Beattie. While he said his winter business was regular enough for him to get along without the extra snowmobile-related revenues, he said their absence was felt by more than just his shop.

"I've had to cut my employees back so even the kids in school are feeling this. The vendors who sell me coffee or chili are feeling this and my fuel supplier, Marble Gas, is feeling it too," he said.

It's a pinch that Beattie and others fear could outlast the warm spell.

With no snow in sight and the midpoint of the winter season nigh, Beattie, Watson and others predict that many snowmobilers would pack it in early this year — even if it starts snowing this month.

VAST has issued fewer than 20,000 trail passes so far this year — compared to 45,000 passes in a good year, Watson said. Trail passes cost \$65 for Vermont residents and \$95 for non-Vermont residents.

The association has coped with the loss in fees by tapping into contingency funds to make ends meet this year. Watson said he believes many snowmobilers are waiting to see if it's worthwhile to buy passes they might have little opportunity to use this season.

"It's not a cheap sport and after disappointments the previous two seasons, I don't expect to see much at the end of the year unless we get some snow," he said.

If Mother Nature continues to withhold snow for seasons to come, Watson's forecast

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was even more chilling.

"It would probably lead to a lot of individuals rethinking the sport," he said. "People might think twice about making an investment in a snowmobile because it's not a cheap sport. I hope we don't see those kinds of serious impacts, but I do have a concern in that area."

Contact Brent Curtis at brent.curtis@rutlandherald.com.



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