



# BACKCOUNTRY HUNTERS AND ANGLERS ALASKA CHAPTER



Inre: DNR Rex Trail Administrative Decision

May 26, 2008

To: DNR Northern Region Staff  
CC: Commissioner Irwin

Dear DNR Northern Region Staff,

Alaska Backcountry Hunters and Anglers (AK BHA) **supports** the recent Administrative decision to *temporarily* restrict summer access this year on the eastern portions of the Rex Trail to only allow off-road vehicles with a curb weight of less than 1,500 lbs.

We recognize that this was not an easy decision to make, and that it is an unpopular decision among the user groups affected. However, this decision at this time is the only solution we can see that will curb further degradation of the Rex Trail and surrounding lands so that DNR, other agencies and the public can evaluate impacts by all users and plan how to best mitigate those impacts in future.

Much of our current problems with the Rex (and trails in other areas) stems from no clear definitions of the Generally Allowed Uses on state lands, along with no real enforcement authority. This has placed DNR in the position of acting only after considerable trail damage and damage to areas off trail has occurred.

Clearly, part of the long-term solution involves legislation (currently pending) to define the Generally Allowed Uses of state lands as to what constitutes things like “significant rutting” and “thermal erosion,” and to give enforcement authority to the state so that any offenders can be legally cited and fined. AK BHA will continue to be involved in commenting on this legislation and working with other groups and orgs to come up with GAUs we can all agree on.

A warming Alaska combined with increases in motorized use of all kinds along the unimproved Rex Trail, particularly during moose hunting season,

has shown that the Rex Trail in an unimproved state cannot absorb this increased motorized use when the ground is thawed. It has become motorized “abuse.” If DNR is really to continue to protect long-term public access opportunities for all, one of the best short and long term solutions we envision involves trail maintenance and repair, or possible realignment in certain areas where feasible, along with dedicated funding to ensure that will happen.

We would like DNR to explore the possibilities of upgrading and repairing sections of the eastern Rex Trail where feasible, and pursuing funding of these upgrades. AK BHA would support legislation to fund trail improvements with General Fund monies, and also would help to try to secure funding from other sources.

Larger, heavier ORVs are being targeted for restrictions but they are certainly not responsible for all the trail damage done. It is likely that it’s a combination of all users and that sheer numbers alone have finally reached a point where the trails and land can’t absorb and sustain this increase.

Part of finding solutions involves determining what caused the problem in the first place, and why this increase in motorized use is happening. In large part the Rex Trail damage now is a product of our Intensive Management (IM) law that mandates certain populations and harvests of moose and caribou. AK BHA has always expressed deep concerns over how the harvest objectives of IM law lead to motorized abuse on state lands, and how it can even lead to more access restrictions.

It’s a huge catch-22 for the state to produce more wild game meat for hunters and their families when we know that the only way most hunters can get to that food source will likely cause widespread trail and habitat damage. Another long-term solution would be for DNR to work cooperatively with ADFG and the Board of Game to evaluate what kinds of game harvests can be sustained without causing widespread trail and habitat damage.

This may involve reconsideration of the IM goals, or spreading out hunting seasons even more over the winter months. It could involve redefining when and where vehicles can go off trail; it’s not just the Rex Trail itself being damaged but evermore areas off trail as well. We have growing motorized abuse problems in many more areas of interior Alaska that can also be attributed to our IM goals and the current antlerless hunts. This type of game

management increases user-group conflicts and will inevitably lead to more trail and habitat damage and subsequent access restrictions if we don't come up with a different overall sustainable management plan for state lands that involves all agencies and boards coordinating and working with each other.

Another part of the solution involves more education efforts by the state, and especially by other access-oriented groups and orgs, as to what type of motorized access is both prudent and sustainable in certain areas. There is an overriding philosophy among too many motorized users these days that motorized access is a "right" devoid of any responsibilities. Many motorized-access groups oppose creating more "hardened" or sustainable trails because their members view that as *"...like riding on a road. Who would want to do that; it's no fun."*

In essence, if there is no "mud bogging" and "challenge" for riders...if the state begins to lean toward upgrading and hardening certain trails...this is viewed as a bad thing by many motorized users and groups who are looking for fun and challenge. This attitude and mindset must change so that everyone can work together to come up with solutions to a growing motorized abuse problem. Thus, education across the board on sustainable motorized uses of Alaska lands needs to be a part of any solution.

In closing, AK BHA reiterates our support of the Administrative decision by DNR to temporarily restrict access this summer along the eastern Rex Trail to only allow vehicles less than 1500 lbs in weight. We urge the Commissioner to hold firm to this decision so further degradation and a subsequent longer recovery period doesn't ensue, but to also begin to work toward finding real short and long term solutions so that this access restriction is lifted.

We welcome involvement and participation in any future committee or workgroup concerning motorized use of the Rex Trail and surrounding lands.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

Mark Richards

Co-Chair AK BHA