



Crossing Farmers' Fields

Story by Craig Nicholson with Graham Snyder of Snyder Acres, Inc. Photos by Martin Lortz for Ontario Tourism.

66% of OFSC trails cross private property, much of it on agricultural land in rural Ontario. Here's what every snowmobiler needs to know about snowmobile trails in farm country.

At the beginning of every winter, snowmobilers are chomping at the bit to hit the trails. So it's frustrating when snow starts falling but many snowmobile trails keep on showing "Red" on the OFSC Interactive Trail Guide. Why do some trails remain unavailable for riding longer than others every year?

There's no one, simple answer. But broadly speaking, early-opening trails tend to happen where terrain is smoother, flatter and more easily accessible – places that don't need as much snow coverage as others for grooming to get started, places like abandoned rail lines, unused municipal road allowances, utility corridors – and fields.

So at first glance, one would think that snowmobile trails on farm fields would naturally be included among early-opening trails. But the fact is that trails in agricultural regions are rarely among the first to be ready and here's why...

Trail Permission: About 66% of OFSC trails are on private property, not public land. Over 14,000 private property owners generously allow snowmobile trails on their land. The when, where and how of this land use permission is totally at the discretion of each individual landowner, and the permission does not include ATV use at any time. It's also important to remember that these snowmobile trails are seasonal, not year round – they're for winter use only, and only by snowmobiles.

Designated Corridors: Much of the private property that allows snowmobile trails is farmland, fertile ground whose top priority and primary purpose is growing crops or raising livestock. So we snowmobilers need to understand the primary reason a trail corridor is designated and permission given: so that there is only ONE route across each field, as opposed to sleds running all over the place. That's why there

are so many stakes to mark the way – and why running down stakes or short cutting corners causes huge landowner problems for clubs trying to keep trails open.

Trail Availability: We also need to understand that on these rural lands, the business of farming comes first and snowmobile trails can only be put in place after business is done. While farmers work hard throughout the fall to finish up prior to the onset of winter, Mother Nature doesn't always cooperate. Sometimes completion can take longer than usual, and this can make trail availability later than in non-agricultural areas. And remember, even after a farmer gives the okay to put a snowmobile trail in place for the coming season, there's still plenty of work to be done by the local club before it can even show "Yellow" on the Interactive Trail Guide. So please stay off trails across farmlands until they are showing Yellow or Green.

Getting Trails Ready: What preparations need to be made? Let's start by looking at what happens at the end of each winter. After the snow melts, many snowmobile trails on private land in farm country cease to exist, reverting back to their primary use for crops or livestock. To facilitate



this annual transition, snowmobile clubs take down tens of thousands of stakes and signs, close gates, replace fences, repair any damage, and pick up any garbage to restore that winter's trail for farming (Note that one of the worst garbage problems is old drive belts thrown away by riders; these can do expensive damage to farm machinery.). All of this work needs to be reversed before a trail is ready to ride for the next winter. But unlike on public land and many non-agricultural properties, much or all of what is usually autumn work elsewhere can't get underway on farmland until that season's agriculture business is over.

Trail Location: Every new season starts with local snowmobile clubs finding out whether or not each section of its previous snowmobile trails will be located in the same place as last winter. Depending on the previous season's land use, upcoming field rotation, livestock location, and which land becomes available first for the coming winter, trail placement can shift from one side of a field to another or even to a different field from winter to winter. It's kind of like trying to make a giant patchwork quilt where all of the individual pieces may not be clearly defined or available until the very last minute. The seamstress can't start sewing them in the proper pattern until all the pieces are ready.

When Trail Work Starts: Snowmobile clubs face a similar patchwork challenge in farm country. For instance, thanks to a very wet season last

year, many farmers were later than usual getting some crops off. Some fields were never harvested. These factors meant that the location of many trails for last winter weren't determined until much later than usual. The crop delay also meant that many of the snowmobile club volunteers, who are also farmers, weren't available to start trail prep as early as usual. Only when the farm work was done could club volunteers get on the land to prepare trails for the winter, including any necessary detours or re-routes, all the while ensuring trail connectivity.

Stay on Trail: As you can see, there is no deliberate intention from either farmers or snowmobile clubs to interfere with or delay the availability of snowmobile trails in agricultural regions. Many farmers are also avid snowmobilers and understand that the earlier trail preparations can get started, the better. But rural businesses and family livelihoods take precedence over recreation, so the rest of us need to understand the realities of farm country trails and learn to be patient.

With Mother Nature's cooperation, snowmobile trails will be ready as soon as humanly possible this winter. Some of our best trail riding is in farm country, so to keep these trails open, please remember that the single most important thing we can do is to *Stay On The Trail!* GSOM

Graham Snyder is a custom crop farmer and life long snowmobiler who currently volunteers as the 1st vice president of the OFSC.

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