



SNOWMOBILE VERMONT

Updated January 2025

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The Vermont Association of Snow Travelers, Inc (VAST)

Introduction

The Vermont Association of Snow Travelers, Inc. (VAST) is a non-profit private 501 c3 member-based organization. Mandated by the Vermont legislature in 1978, VAST administers the Statewide Snowmobile Trails Program for the State of Vermont. The organization was founded in 1967 and is committed to providing a safe and enjoyable snowmobile experience for all ages and skill levels. VAST became the first state snowmobile association responsible for administering its snowmobile trails program through a cooperative agreement with the Agency of Natural Resources. Only two other snow-belt states of this kind exist today. While all states have snowmobile associations, those other state associations do not maintain their trail systems like we do. Their trail systems are managed by their state government. However, those other state snowmobile associations manage their club systems. In Vermont, we manage all the trails, law enforcement, safety, trail signing, grooming, general maintenance, club guidelines and resources, etc.

VAST and its affiliated snowmobile clubs provide an array of quality programs and services to its membership and are organized exclusively for charitable and educational purposes. VAST is built on a foundation of dynamic volunteers, a thriving membership and supportive landowners from the private and public sectors. The more than 100 local snowmobile clubs belong to fourteen county associations and are responsible for the development and maintenance of the Statewide Snowmobile Trails System (SSTS) under the direction and coordination of VAST. The SSTS offers an extensive network of over 4,000 miles of interconnected snowmobile trails throughout Vermont. VAST's volunteer-based association has become a nationwide model for trail user groups and enthusiasts.

VAST has established credibility and has sustained long-standing positive relationships with local communities, landowners, VAST members, the Vermont recreational community and the Vermont Legislature and Administration. Through this effort of organization and cooperation, VAST promotes land stewardship by protecting water resources and establishing and following specific standards in trail design and maintenance by minimizing environmental impacts. This is accomplished by practical trail design standards, education of users, and providing maintenance efforts throughout the year. Through an aggressive construction and maintenance regime during the off-season, VAST is able to accomplish the goal of providing a safe and superb snowmobile trail system during the winter months.

VAST headquarters is located in Central Vermont and is professionally staffed by six full-time employees responsible for the organization's strategic, financial, and operational programs. VAST is run by a nineteen-member volunteer Board consisting of four elected officer positions, a Past President, and fourteen County Directors, each representing a county in the State. The VAST clubs belong to the county association, which is an affiliate club of VAST.

Vermont's snowmobile season begins on December 16th and ends on April 15th annually. The average snowfall in Vermont ranges from 100" to 350" inches.

There are several statutory requirements to snowmobile on the SSTS:

- A valid & current snowmobile registration (the State of Vermont recognizes non-resident snowmobile registrations from other jurisdictions).
- Every snowmobile is issued a valid TMA—Trails Maintenance Assessment, also known as a trail pass. By purchasing a TMA, one becomes a member of VAST.

- Mandatory Snowmobile Liability Insurance.
- Anyone born after July 1st, 1983, must take a snowmobile safety course and always carry the certification while operating on the SSTS.
- Mandatory club membership.

Funding and Budgets

VAST runs a very prudent budget and funding process. While we receive funding, we also grant most of our funds to snowmobile clubs for trail maintenance, trail and bridge repair, grooming, and equipment purchases. Costs, especially for equipment, are increasing, while our funds are static. Our primary form of funding is through Trail Pass (TMA) sales, so we rely on good snow coverage to be successful. Below is a glimpse of equipment grant requests and how much funding VAST has been able to grant out to help clubs purchase or fix existing equipment. For reference, we have more than 100 large groomers in our fleet statewide (similar machines that downhill ski areas use with a cost of between \$200,000 and \$350,000).

Below are examples of financial requests for grooming equipment from our clubs to VAST and how much we are actually able to grant due to our limited funds.

Year	Amount Requested	Amount Granted	Difference	% Difference	# of Requests	# of Grants	% Difference	Notes
2012	\$1,884,106	\$468,482	\$1,415,624	25%	36	20	56%	
2013	\$338,408	\$168,107	\$170,301	50%	15	11	73%	
2014	\$779,059	\$308,675	\$470,384	40%	19	15	79%	
2015	\$866,963	\$284,894	\$582,069	33%	26	22	85%	
2016	\$972,856	\$259,567	\$713,289	27%	16	8	50%	
								Due to a brown winter 2015/16 we put a moratorium on equipment grants. We only allowed repair grants, in case the next winter was again bad and we needed the funds elsewhere.
2017	\$52,468	\$19,538	\$32,930	37%	4	4	100%	
2018	\$992,607	\$361,882	\$630,725	36%	29	22	76%	
2019	\$1,019,272	\$232,240	\$787,032	23%	37	20	54%	
2020	\$1,156,225	\$206,154	\$950,071	18%	40	24	60%	
2021	\$902,090	\$128,751	\$773,339	14%	18	12	67%	
2022	\$608,170	\$224,250	\$383,920	37%	28	21	75%	
2023	\$575,371.59	\$142,874	\$432,497.74	25%	22	20	91%	
2024	\$1,735,619.96	\$231,587	\$1,504,032.96	13%	40	12	30%	

VAST is financially supported through the revenue of TMAs (averaging at 20,000), the return revenue of snowmobile registrations, the Vermont Gas Tax (not to exceed \$148,000), funding through the motorized portion of the National Recreational Trails Program (RTP), VAST Snowmobile Vermont Magazine advertising (printed three to four times per year), Vermont Snowmobile Visitors Guide (produced annually) and cooperative funding through various donations, grants, partnerships including the US Forest Service, The operational budget of the entire program varies between \$3.5 Million and \$5 Million annually.

We are proud of the percentage of money we raise that goes directly into our trail system and keeping the administrative percentage way below the national average for non-profit spending. Currently, we operate our administrative side with 23% of our budget and 77% directly back into trails, trail equipment and grooming. Also, our administrative spending supports marketing, professional services (CPA, auditors, attorneys, lobbyists, web developers, cyber and computer security, office infrastructure, salaries and benefits, and other programs.

In 2024, VAST clubs received \$548,620.00 in funding from VAST, while the funds used for all VAST administrative infrastructure was \$534,734.00

Statewide Snowmobile Trails System (SSTS)

The SSTS is an extensive network of winter-use snowmobile trails encompassing the entire state of Vermont. The SSTS is located on state, federal, municipal, and privately owned lands that connect Vermont communities in an environmentally sustainable manner. Approximately 80% of the SSTS is on private property, ranging from small suburban landowners to large contiguous parcels owned by private entities and timber management companies. The remaining 20% of the SSTS is located on a conglomeration of public lands owned by the State of Vermont and federal lands managed by various agencies. State and federal landowners are critical components of the program, providing sustainable access to areas across the system. While this does not imply permanent access, the longevity and sensitivity of the trail location(s) are at a much lower risk than operating on private land. This is especially applicable to new land acquisitions and the ever-changing landscape of the private interface, resulting in many costly trail closures. Snowmobile access on public land is a significant priority for VAST as long as the partnerships between the organization and the state/federal entities continue to thrive and remain viable.

There are more than 100 local VAST snowmobile clubs that are responsible for the construction and maintenance of the trail system, including trail structures (bridges, culverts, and other drainage devices), trail signing, grooming, trail alignment, permit acquisition, securing landowner permission and compliance with all organizational, state and federal guidelines and regulations. These clubs vary from twenty-five members to two thousand plus members annually. The 100+ VAST clubs have an annual grooming contractual agreement outlining the club's responsibility for the winter grooming the more than 4,000-mile SSTS. VAST reimburses the clubs for grooming their contractual areas, which vary from 10 miles to 170 miles per club. Clubs are also eligible for funding through several VAST grant-in-aid programs for trail maintenance, construction, trail de-brushing, signing, and the purchase of grooming equipment. Approximately \$500,000 in grant funding is available annually to the clubs for trail construction and maintenance, and roughly \$400,000 is available to assist in purchasing grooming equipment. The cost of snowmobile trail groomers ranges from \$30,000 to \$350,000 per unit, and the VAST grooming fleet consists of 100+ of these power units with a cumulative acquisition total of \$12 Million.

Cooperative Partnerships

The extensive VAST trail network is dependent on the local and statewide support of snowmobiling. This is accomplished through the support of the 9,000+ landowners (private, corporate, municipal, state, and federal). These individuals, entities, and organizations allow snowmobilers to enjoy their passion for snowmobiling and their ability to recreate throughout the entire state. VAST has forged positive working relationships with municipal, state, and federal governmental agencies through many cooperative partnerships. VAST has also worked closely with other recreational groups in the Vermont Trails & Greenways Council (VTGC) and the Vermont Trails Alliance (VTA). The VTGC and VTA comprise the leading recreational trail groups representing the motorized and non-motorized trails community. We also work with, share, and learn from our professional commitment to the International Association of Snowmobile Administrators (IASA).

Another entity that VAST works closely with is the Governor's Snowmobile Council. Mandated by the legislature, the Governor's Snowmobile Council is a separate entity composed of an array of partners and legislative support including representatives from the Vermont Department of Public Safety,

Department of Fish & Wildlife, Vermont Sheriff's Association, the Department of Motor Vehicles, a member from the Vermont Senate, a member of the Vermont House, the Secretary or her designee of the Agency of Natural Resources, the Commissioner of the Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation, and appointees from the snowmobile community. The Council meets once a month to discuss law enforcement needs and support, legislative action, statewide policy, and initiatives brought forth by any participants.

State of Vermont – Agency of Natural Resources

The Statewide Snowmobile Trails Program (SSTP) is a cooperative program between the State of Vermont and VAST. Under this program, VAST and the Agency of Natural Resources (ANR), the Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation (FP&R), the Department of Fish & Wildlife, and the Department of Environmental Conservation operate the Statewide Snowmobile Trail System (SSTS). This is accomplished through a cooperative agreement outlining both parties' responsibilities. The cooperative agreement states explicitly that ANR and VAST consider it mutually advantageous to cooperate with the development, maintenance, protection, and enforcement related to the SSTS and associated structures;

- Both entities agree to work collaboratively by providing technical assistance and sharing pertinent information for the SSTS.
- Identify in long range management plans pertinent to state land and the SSTS to ensure access.
- Identify all planning, safety, and enforcement issues related to the SSTS.
- The state grants permission to perform work on state land under the terms of the agreement in accordance with the latest version of the Guide for the Development of Snowmobile Trail Construction and following the current version of ANR's Acceptable Management Practices.
- There is also a continuous dialogue between the entities, collaboration, and the ability to carry out mutual responsibilities identified in the agreement.

The funding mechanism for this cooperative agreement is the return of 100% of snowmobile registration receipts and 100% of all snowmobile-related fines and penalties collected by the state and returned to ANR and FP&R for use by VAST to operate the Statewide Snowmobile Trails Program. The program is funded through authority granted by §3214, Chapter 29 of Title 23 of Vermont Statutes. Each year, VAST develops a budget based on projected snowmobile registrations, fines, and penalties for the ensuing fiscal year. The SSTP budget also includes a share of the Vermont state gas tax of 40% of the amount appropriated under the Vermont Trails Act. The Governor's Snowmobile Council is responsible for reviewing, advising, and approving the annual budget for the expenditure of funds for the SSTP. A portion of this budget is designated for law enforcement funding. This is also the budget used to provide funding for insurance and equipment grants.

The SSTP complies with all federal and state regulations and will continue open lines of communication with all partner organizations to ensure the most current federal and state laws are understood and adhered to regularly. The SSTP will continue its aggressive information program, consisting of, but not limited to, mandatory annual construction meetings, project field inspections, and regularly scheduled monthly meetings to apprise clubs of areas of concern.

The State of Vermont is divided into regions, and local VAST clubs in their respective regions work with VAST staff and agency personnel to identify issues, concerns, and potential projects annually. These meetings entail discussion on trail projects, potential closures for winter management activities,

harvesting plans, and anything pertaining to snowmobiling on state land. This level of collaboration is beneficial for all parties, keeping open lines of communication and reducing any conflict between user groups and other management activities. Several naturally declared disasters have occurred over the last decade, and any repair work to the SSTS on state land is administered by the Department of FPR.

State of Vermont – Dept of Environmental Conservation

The majority of the permitting and regulatory rules applicable to the SSTS are administered through the Department of Environmental Conservation. VAST clubs are responsible (with the assistance of VAST staff) for securing the necessary permits required for trail construction and maintenance activities. Specifically, any bridge construction or placement of drainage structures requires a site visit by River Engineers, submittal of the required permit application, and authorization of a streambank alteration permit before construction takes place. VAST and its affiliated clubs have an excellent track record regarding regulation compliance set forth by the Agency. This level of accountability has given VAST credibility within the Agency, the Vermont legislature, the environmental community, and the landowners that support snowmobiling.

State of Vermont Dept. of Public Safety & the Department of Fish & Wildlife Law Enforcement Unit

VAST operates under a Cooperative Agreement between the Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation, Vermont State Police, Fish and Wildlife Department, and the Vermont Sheriffs' Association for the purpose of providing law enforcement patrols on the SSTS. The safety of all snowmobilers on the SSTS is the foremost priority in managing the snowmobile program. The SSTS's growth and snowmobiling's popularity over the past twenty-five years have significantly increased the need for active trail law enforcement. \$5 of every snowmobile registration sold (per year) is applied directly to fund law enforcement through the cooperative agreement.

USDA Forest Service

VAST has a special partnership with the USDA Forest Service and operates in the Green Mountain National Forest (GMNF) under an annual cooperative agreement. Through this critical partnership, local clubs maintain over 500 miles of groomed corridor trails and work with federal personnel in trail maintenance and construction projects. Local clubs and volunteers accomplish all grooming, construction, and maintenance activities and are financially supported through the VAST grant-in-aid program. There is limited federal funding that is also applied to the winter maintenance program through the cooperative agreement with the Forest Service. Snowmobiling is recognized as an important use on the GMNF and plays a vital role in the sustaining the recreational objectives outlined in the GMNF management plan. During the plan revision process, VAST was crucial in protecting snowmobile access and keeping trails open that otherwise would have been lost in designated wilderness areas. VAST officials and club members attended numerous public hearings and meetings and ensured snowmobiling remained a viable recreational activity on public land.

Through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), VAST served as a contractor through the partnership and cooperative agreement with the Forest Service and was able to complete 20 trail projects located throughout the northern and southern half of the GMNF. The total spent on these projects exceeded \$530,000, and through the partnership, costs were reduced, jobs were created, and the work was accomplished with a combination of volunteer and contractor efforts.

Private Landowners

A critical piece to the program, private landowners are essential to the sustainability of operating an interconnected trail system. There is a growing challenge in terms of managing the changing landscape through development, regulations, and management objectives. Most of the SSTS is located on private land, requiring attentive and careful consideration when addressing issues, conflict, and trail closures. Consequently, consistent access to trails on public property is critical in maintaining trails and connections throughout the state that comprise the entire SSTS. The stability of the SSTS is constantly being challenged. VAST has managed to maintain the system through volunteer efforts, assistance and advisement from the Vermont legislature & governmental entities, and a solid understanding of how vital recreation is to the local communities and the State of Vermont. We require our clubs to get landowner permission forms signed and to submit those forms when grant monies are requested.

Legislative Support

The State of Vermont recognizes the importance of outdoor recreation and snowmobiling and relies on the respective organizations to implement successful programs. Under Vermont Statute, Title 23 VSA, Chapter 29 3206(d) provides all landowners allowing snowmobile use of their land the following protection:

“No public or private landowner or their agents shall be liable for any property damage or personal injury sustained by any person operating or riding as a passenger of a snowmobile, or upon a vehicle or other device drawn by a snowmobile upon the public or private landowner’s property, whether or not the public or private landowner has given permission to use the land, unless the public or private landowner charges a cash fee for use of the property, or unless said damage or injury is intentionally inflicted by the landowner.”

In addition, public and private landowners are covered from liability under several other statutes, including the Vermont Trails System; the VAST SSTS is one of the first trail systems to be part of the original designation. This is another important component of maintaining such an extensive system across private and public lands.

Snowmobilers' responsibility and law enforcement is also covered in state statutes.

<https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/fullchapter/23/029>

Economic Impact

In 1995, VAST undertook its first-ever survey of the impact of snowmobiling on Vermont's economy. At that time, VAST was managing approximately 2,500 miles of corridor trails. It was determined that the total economic impact exceeded \$162,000,000 annually. In 2003, Johnson State College conducted an Economic Impact Study on Snowmobiling in Vermont. The overall economic impact to the State of Vermont is over \$550 Million annually.

The following categories were considered during the study:

- Purchase of fuel for snowmobiles and trail groomers
- Total snowmobile purchases
- Snowmobile accessories and parts
- Trailers, options, and parts
- Tow vehicles, sales, parts, and service
- Lodging, meals, snacks

- Real estate purchases and annual expenses
- Registration and membership fees
- Tax revenue
- Indirect factors: VAST Operations, grooming equipment purchases, groomer insurance, grooming expenses, and trail construction and maintenance

Snowmobiling in Vermont is recognized as a significant economic driver during the winter months, second only to the \$2 billion ski industry. The benefit of snowmobiling is extended throughout the entire state, where local businesses that provide services such as fuel, food, repairs, lodging, and other related services are bustling with activity during the coldest months of the year. The SSTS reaches almost every community in Vermont, from small family businesses to large dealerships and restaurants that fuel snowmobiling's economic engine.

Safety

VAST Safety Ambassador Program (VSAP)

In 2017, VAST began a safety ambassador program (VSAP). VSAP was started with two distinct goals: to make our trails safer and to assist riders and first responders when needed.

Currently, we have approximately forty safety ambassadors statewide. Some team members ride around where they live, and some travel to other parts of the state.

While out riding, our VSAP team does the following tasks:

- Look for hazards in the trail, mark them, and let the club know if they cannot fix it themselves.
- Fix damaged or missing signs, or let the club know so the club can fix it right away.
- Help people on the trails who need any assistance or direction
- Be available to assist law enforcement or first responders at an accident scene by securing the parameter, helping to get law enforcement to the scene, and directing sled traffic.
- Ride with folks who are unfamiliar with our trails to show them around and give them some company while they enjoy all that Vermont has to offer.

VASP team members are not law enforcement officers in this capacity. They are trained to know that their role is simply to be helpful. Each team member is given a list of all club presidents and trail masters with contact information so they can reach out to you if they need to. Each team member wears a reflective vest with the VSAP insignia so they can be seen and identified, and each member must attend the organizational planning meeting each fall. Most have also had different levels of first aid training.

Law Enforcement

VAST contracts with law enforcement agencies to patrol our trail system. This is done with the Department of Fish & Wildlife (Wardens), Department of Public Safety (State Police), Vermont Sheriffs Association, and Southern Vermont Snowmobile Taskforce. In addition to patrolling our trails and performing safety checks of snowmobiles in the field, the Department of Public Safety also provides mandatory snowmobile safety classes held during the fall and winter. VAST has a Law Enforcement Committee that works hard to continue to grow this program, set standards, and offer changes to legislation. Currently, we have a budget for law enforcement that is approximately over \$100,000

annually. We have already grown this program to be quite dynamic with training, communication, partial equipment grants to law enforcement agencies, and augmented relationships with law enforcement and our "boots on the ground" safety ambassadors. In addition, we have built an online system for law enforcement to run safety checks using their smartphones, which will increase their ability to investigate infractions and decrease the amount of paperwork they are required to do as wardens, troopers, sheriffs, and police officers.

Insurance

According to the US Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis ("BEA"), "U.S. data show that the outdoor recreation economy accounted for 1.8% (\$374 billion) of current-dollar gross domestic product ("GDP") for the nation in 2020. Outdoor recreational activities include but aren't limited to boating & canoeing & fishing, bicycling, hiking & camping, RVing, hunting & shooting & trapping, motorcycling & ATVing, equestrian, skiing & snowboarding & snowmobiling, rock climbing, etc. Very few commercial insurance companies have been willing to provide coverage despite their favorable claims history as an industry.

After years of drastically increasing premium rates and a dwindling number of providers in the market, VAST began investigating alternatives to traditional insurance policies in 2018. VAST's research concluded that a Risk Retention Group would be the best alternative, and the American Outdoors Risk Retention Group was formed in 2021. VAST has since invested significant resources to get AORRG licensed in early 2022.

A Risk Retention Group ("RRG") is a type of captive insurance company. Organized pursuant to the Federal Liability Risk Retention Act of 1986 ("LRRRA"), an RRG is licensed and subject to regulation in the state where it is domiciled. An RRG may register and do business in other states without being subject to all of the nondomiciliary state's insurance laws and regulations. As of early 2022, there are 239 RRGs in the country, with a combined annual premium close to \$4 billion. Vermont is the largest RRG domicile in the US.

Summary

VAST is a dynamic organization that thrives on the support of volunteers, members, and landowners. This essential combination provides the key ingredients that contribute to the success of the program and the continuance of the Statewide Snowmobile Trails System. With a solid base of volunteers, members, and landowners and the continuation of supporting partnerships from public and private entities, snowmobiling will continue to be a traditional, fun, and family recreational activity for many generations.