

Transportation Plan of Nord-du-Québec

Technical Study

Overview of Safety in the Use of Off-Road Vehicles in Nord-du-Québec

WORKING PAPER

Summary

This technical study draws an overview of safety in the use of *off-road vehicles* (ORVs), more specifically snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) in the Nord-du-Québec region (Region 10). It is part of the development process of the *Transportation Plan of Nord-du-Québec*. This safety overview is being completed using the database of accident reports from the Société de l'assurance automobile du Québec (SAAQ), for accidents that occurred between January 1, 1995 and December 31, 1999.

The Use of Snowmobiles and All-Terrain Vehicles

The use of ORVs is very important in Nord-du-Québec. For MBJ and the enclaved towns, there is approximately one snowmobile per 5.3 residents and one ATV per 11.5 residents, which is much higher than in the rest of Québec (one snowmobile per 46.2 residents and one ATV per 44.8 residents). In Inuit and Cree villages, the ownership rate for snowmobiles and ATVs is probably higher; there is no reliable data to confirm this however (the majority does not register their ORV).

Regional Overview of Safety for Snowmobiles and All-Terrain Vehicles

From 1995 to 1999, 248 snowmobile and ATV accidents occurred in the Nord-du-Québec region, 12 of which were *fatal*. This accident count is high with reference to the regional population, especially in Nunavik where one accident occurred per 75 residents over the last five years. Moreover, it should be considered that the reported accidents are only one part of all the accidents which occur. In fact, certain accidents are not reported in particular because the Société d'assurance automobile du Québec (SAAQ) insurance coverage applies only when a car is implied and to the fact that, several owners do not have insurance for their vehicle.

The majority of accidents (160 out of 248 accidents) took place on a *public road*, only 12 of those occurred on the MTQ road network. A road vehicle was involved in 37.5% of ORV accidents, while in 38.7% of cases, there was no other vehicle involved with the snowmobile or ATV.

Among drivers involved, most (55%) were 29 years old or less. Accidents mostly occurred in the afternoon. Snowmobile accidents occur most often in February and March while ATV accidents occur in June and September.

The accident factors most frequently reported were careless driving, excessive speed and impaired driving. The latter factor is more important in Nord-du-Québec than in Abitibi-Témiscamingue or in Québec as a whole.

Possible Causes of Accidents

Between 1995 and 1999, approximately 54% of accidents took place in populated areas. In Nunavik, this can be explained by the fact that residents are used to driving snowmobiles or ATVs in the streets of their village since these vehicles are the main mode of transportation. ORV traffic is also extensive in Cree villages, in MBJ and in the enclaved towns, although less in Nunavik. Jamesians generally drive through their communities to access snowmobile and ATV marked trails.

A great majority of accidents occur because drivers contravene safety rules.

In the absence of marked trails, traffic mostly runs on informal trails and *public roads*. Driving on informal trails can have an impact on safety (irregular surfaces, absence of signalization, etc.).

Severe weather conditions and a difficult terrain in Nord-du-Québec are factors that can influence safety in the use of ORVs, especially in Nunavik.

Courses of Action to Reinforce Safety

With regard to possible courses of action, the priority should be set on raising the awareness of snowmobile and ATV drivers in order to reduce the incidence of unsafe behaviour. The main issues to address are the following: impaired driving, speed driving by youth, risks specific to informal trails, dangers related to driving ATVs and snowmobiles on *public roads*.

During the MTQ consultations with the Nord-du-Québec population in 2000, there were repeated requests for the development of marked trails. It would be relevant for local and regional organizations to review the importance of building new marked trails.

If regulations eventually allow ORV traffic inside villages, the possibility of adapting the roads for a safe ORV traffic should be considered, with improved and adapted signalization for example.

Regional organizations such as the Kativik Regional Government, Cree Regional Authority, Regional Conferences of Elected Officers and the Municipalité de Baie-James, can play a major role in the actions taken to ensure a safe use of ORVs. Locally, municipal administrations, along with police forces are also important stakeholders, particularly with the adoption of municipal by-laws on ORV traffic in the streets of agglomerations. On their part, government authorities can support the communities.

At this time, discussions are taking place as to recognize certain specificities related to the northern environment. However, the government will have to ensure that the municipalities or villages adopt safety regulations related to ORV traffic in agglomerated area. In spring 2005, the Ministère will carry out a public consultation in the form of itinerant parliamentary commission in various areas of Québec in order to exchange on legislative and lawful adjustments foreseen in the Act Respecting Off-Highway Vehicles and its régulations.