

Local safety center targets snowmobile studs in study

Researchers will test different types of studs in variety of situations

By David Unze
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Definitive information on the usefulness and drawbacks of snowmobile studs could come from tests being done in Central Minnesota.

Instructors and riders at the Minnesota Highway Safety Center are conducting the most comprehensive array of tests done on studs, said Bill Ruhr, an instructor at the center.

He hopes to have conclusions done by the end of February in a study he said is the first he knows of that isn't funded by the snowmobile industry.

"This is such a political bombshell. When we went out looking for funding, nobody wanted to fund us," Ruhr said.

The tests come as the Legislature debates whether to repeal a

Recreation/safety

stud ban and the \$51 fee that goes with it.

Snowmobilers call studs a safety device. Opponents say studs merely improve performance at high speeds and cause more damage to trails than benefits for riders.

"I think the public needs to be aware of this," Ruhr said. "If people were made more aware, they themselves can make an intelligent decision out there."

Riders at the St. Cloud center, which is operated by St. Cloud State University, will test metal, carbide and plastic studs on ice, asphalt and hard- and soft-pack snow.

They will test everything from braking distance to cornering to the damage each type of stud does to different surfaces.

Almost 40,000 gallons of water was poured to create an ice sheet used to test stopping distances.

"My idea was why not find every angle you can with these things," Ruhr said.

The snowmobiles are hooked

up to computers that record data 100 times a second. The data is then charted on computers and examined.

What happens to the study after it's completed is uncertain, Ruhr said. He's considering selling the results to recoup costs, which he said are "tipping to the high side of \$50,000."

Two other studies — one in Canada, one in New York — both were funded by stud companies. Not surprisingly, the studies showed that studs work on certain surfaces.

Ruhr goes out of his way to stay neutral on what he thinks about studs until the study is complete.

He did say that he's already seen some information that "blew him out of the water."

"Some work, some don't," he said. "We've found some that are worse than not having anything on at all."

The Department of Natural Resources asked the center last year to do the study. The results are crucial for an industry growing exponentially.

"Snowmobiles are in their infancy," Ruhr said.



TIMES PHOTO BY KIMM ANDERSON

Minnesota Highway Safety Center's David Schultz tried to regain control of a snowmobile pulling a body sled after it jack-

knifed Tuesday at the center on U.S. Highway 10. Schultz was conducting a deceleration test using carbide-tipped track studs.

Senator seeks compromise bill on studs

By John Hoogesteger
TIMES STAFF WRITER

ST. PAUL — State Sen. Steve Morse, DFL-Dakota, appears in the eyes of many to be the sole stumbling block to repeal of the state's snowmobile stud ban.

The repeal bill overwhelming-ly passed the House and needs only to pass the committee Morse chairs to make it to the floor of the Senate for a similar vote. And it appears it would have considerable support there.

But Morse, chairman of the Senate Environment and Agriculture



Committee, sees it differently.

He argues that snowmobilers — in the form of the chief snowmobile lobbying group in the state, the Minnesota United Snowmobilers Association — are delaying action on the stud ban issue.

"They're the ones who are holding it up," Morse said. He sent a letter to the president of

the association that claims MnUSA is only interested in repeal and outlines his hopes for negotiating a compromise bill instead. He shared that letter with his fellow senators.

Proponents of the repeal bill argue that time is crucial because each day the law remains in effect, the state's winter tourism industry suffers. Much anecdotal evidence has been offered showing that snowmobilers are staying away from the state this year.

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