

# Study shows snowmobilers more daring after a few drinks

**S**nowmobilers who drink and drive will discover sobering insights in a new driving and braking distance study conducted by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Arctic Cat Inc., and others concerned about public safety.

The study showed alcohol's negative effect on operating ability and also shed light on the braking distances of snowmobiles both with and without traction devices, commonly called studs.

"No one was surprised that driving ability decreased as intoxication increased," said Capt. Jeff Thielen of the DNR's Enforcement Division. "What was surprising, however, was the extent to which alcohol affected the driving ability of the two professional test drivers who were part of the four-person study. Test drivers literally fell off machines, rolled through stop signs, and exercised poor judgment at critical times. If alcohol can have this kind of effect on professionals who drive 30,000 miles a year, he implications for the

average recreational rider are significant."

The study was conducted at the Minnesota Highway Safety Center at St. Cloud. The study, using sophisticated computerized equipment, focused largely on three things: perception time, which is the time it takes a driver to notice a visual signal; reaction time, which is the time it takes to react to that signal; and stopping distance, which is the time it takes a snowmobile to come to a complete halt after the driver has noticed the signal. Perception times ranged from .48 to 1.62 seconds. Reaction times range from .42 to .67 second.

"We learned several important things from the intoxication study," said Bill Ruhr of the Minnesota Highway Safety Center. "One, we learned that alcohol slowed drivers' reaction times by up to 20 percent and slowed perception times by more than 100 percent. Second, we learned study participants turned in their fastest lap times on the 1.4-mile course when they were moderately intoxicat-

ed. And three, we saw operator ability deteriorate as alcohol consumption increased. When the drivers were sober, they all had a smooth, even touch on the throttle and brake. That wasn't the case after they had been drinking. After a few drinks it was hard on the gas, hard on the brake. Real herky-jerky. The thumb control just wasn't there."

Ruhr, an associate professor at St. Cloud State University, said split second differences in reaction and perception times may seem trivial to the ordinary operator, but have real world consequences. To prove his point, he used the example of a hazard that is one second away. A snowmobile traveling at 30 mph will travel 45 feet per second, he said, meaning the driver has 45 feet in which to turn left, right or brake. An average perception and reaction time is three-fourths of a second, which translates into 33 feet of snowmobile travel. Then, since virtually everyone blinks when they are surprised, experts add another one-fifth a second to the calculation, which is