

## **Snowmobile Safety<sup>1</sup>**

---

Howard J. Doss<sup>2</sup>

Despite increased safety standards and regulations designed to make snowmobiling safer, accidents continue to claim the lives of snowmobilers in Michigan at an alarming rate. According to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, last year 22 snowmobilers were killed in 603 accidents, up from 13 fatalities in the 1992-93 season.

What's even more alarming is the number of snowmobilers killed in Michigan as compared to the rest of the nation. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission reports that during the 1991-92 winter season there were 65 snowmobile fatalities in the nation; 17 of these fatal accidents occurred in Michigan.

In addition to fatalities, there were 1,064 personal injuries during this three-year period.

There are too many variables to identify a single reason for the increased number of accidents last year as compared to previous years. What is known is that in almost all accidents the operator likely used poor judgement such as driving too fast for the situation, alcohol or drug usage, riding on thin ice, etc.

The following safe snowmobiling rules will help reduce the risks you take while still enjoying this fast-paced recreational activity.

1. Never drive your snowmobile alone or on unfamiliar ground. Have someone ride along with you so you can help each other in case of a breakdown or accident.
2. Drive only on established and marked trails or in specified use areas.
3. Avoid unknown waterways. Frozen lakes and rivers can be fatal. It is almost impossible to judge adequate ice coverage or depth without testing.
4. Avoid driving in bad weather. Check warnings for snowy "whiteouts," ice, and wind chill conditions before starting.
5. Watch the path ahead to avoid rocks, trees, fences (particularly barbed wire), ditches and other obstacles.
6. Slow at the top of a hill. A cliff, snowbank, or other unforeseen hazard could be on the other side.
7. Don't hurdle snowbanks. You have control only when your skis are on the ground.
8. Learn the snowmobile traffic laws and regulations for the area. Many states prohibit using snowmobiles on public roads. Some states have minimum age requirements for drivers.
9. Be sensible about stopping at roads or railroad tracks. Signal your turns to other drivers. Avoid tailgating. Control speed according to conditions.
10. Use extra caution if driving at night, unseen obstacles could be fatal. Do not drive faster than you headlights will allow you to see. Do not open new trails after dark.
11. Never drink alcohol while driving your snowmobile. Drinking and driving can prove fatal.

---

1. This document is part of the Safety News Series, Agricultural Engineering Department, Michigan State University Extension, East Lansing, Michigan, 48824-1323. Publication date: January 1995.

2. Howard J. Doss, Safety Leader, Agricultural Engineering Department, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824-1323. This information is for educational purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names does not imply endorsement by the MSU Extension or bias against those not mentioned.

12. Be sure the snowmobile is properly maintained. Some accident cases report that the throttle sticks, leading to loss of control. Snowmobiles manufactured before 1983 may not have a "throttle interruption device" (emergency tether) designed to shut off the snowmobile in the event the throttle sticks.

**Reference:** Consumer Product Safety Alert - 009403.