



Sen. Mike Gravel:

Off Road Vehicles

Editor's Note: The Tundra Times is grateful to Senator Gravel for furnishing us with the following column. The Tundra Times will use contributions from members of the Alaska congressional delegation on a periodic basis until a permanent staff correspondent is selected for Washington, D.C.

Off Road Vehicles are part of Alaska's style of life. With only 2,744 miles of paved road in a state of 586,000 square miles, it could hardly be otherwise.

ORVs serve a legitimate, and often a vital, role in our state.

So when word came earlier this year that the Administration might stiffen its rules on ORVs, I heard from constituents throughout the state.

Rumor had it that ORVs might be banned outright from federal lands, a proposal that was ridiculous when applied to the Alaskan situation.

Carl and Patsy Fisher of Cordova were among those who telegraphed me: "We are against closing public lands to off road vehicles."

Toney Conrad of Tok, writing for the Alaska Fur Trappers Association, said, "Public lands should not be closed to our use under any blanket executive order."

Other representative telegrams came from Ron Engstrom in Nome, John Quinn in Bethel, and Wayne Callan in Valdez.

ORV businesses also wrote: Big Lake Sports Hut and Arctic Cat Sales, both of Wasilla, and the Kotzebue Fish Coop were among them.

Howard Baker and Mike Shupe of Polar Equipment Company in Anchorage wrote an especially cogent letter: "Alaska is primarily composed of federal land and most of our rural communities have no roads. (A blanket order) would make law breakers of all rural citizens because they use snowmobiles in the winter and boats and motorcycles in the summer to travel and communicate across federal lands."

The decision on ORVs was part of President Carter's twice-delayed message on the environment. It was natural that, in this message, the President and his Council on Environmental Quality should address the problem of ORV damage.

But the kind of damage they have in mind is that inflicted by thousands of city-dwellers on relatively small areas of nearby open land. A case which especially comes to mind is Southern California, where six- and eight-lane freeways make the fragile Southwest desert easily accessible to bikers and dune-buggy enthusiasts.

Of course this is a far cry from Alaska's situation, and a solution aimed at Los Angeles is not transferrable to Fairbanks and Kotzebue.

In discussion with those preparing the President's message, my staff learned that "irreparable damage to the environment" might become a test for ORV use on federal lands. Yet even this concept could be inappropriate for Alaska.

I telegraphed the White House last month and pointed out that "there may be no question that at certain times of the year, the use of the snow machine on tundra in

the absence of a complete and consistent snow cover may in fact cause what C.E.Q. may choose to term irreparable damage to the environment."

But the possibility of scattered snow machine scars on tundra is clearly not the kind of serious and intensive damage the Administration wants to prohibit.

Add to this the fact that snow machines are used in subsistence hunting, and the inappropriateness of strict ORV rules in Alaska becomes especially clear.

President Carter needs to set a policy tone of increased sensitivity to possible environmental damage by ORVs. And Alaska, too, needs to be sensitive to the trade-offs involved in the use of ORVs.

But, as my telegrams from Alaska said, a blanket federal order is the wrong thing for Alaska. ORV problems which actually stem from high population density are not the kinds of problems that confront Alaska.