

Gas tax grab raises ire

Off-roaders upset that forgone refund redirected

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Tom Crimmins, shown in 2004, is an ATV rider and snowmobiler active in trail issues. Crimmins opposes the legislative funding deal that took gas tax money away from state parks projects.

Where the money goes

In the past 20 years, the five North Idaho Panhandle counties have received \$9.5 million in grants for snowmobile trail groomers, boat launches, docks and trail programs. Funds also go to search and rescue and park roads; every county in the state has benefited.

BOISE – More than 30 years ago, Idaho’s boaters, snowmobilers, dirt-bikers and ATV riders made a deal: They’d give up their gas tax refunds for gas burned off-road if the state would direct that tax money to trails, boat launches and the like.

It worked. While farmers and log-truck drivers still get refunds for taxes paid on gas that actually gets burned off-road, off-road recreationists don’t. Instead, they benefit from \$4.8 million a year – 3 percent of gas taxes collected – dedicated to the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation for waterways improvements, off-road trails, park roads and bridges, and search and rescue.

Now, however, a deal between lawmakers and Gov. Butch Otter to divert that gas tax money to road maintenance has recreationists steamed.

“If they want to take that back, then give us the refunds back,” said Tom Crimmins, a Hayden Lake trails consultant and retired forester. “We want the money to go back where it ought to go, and it ought to go to Parks

and Rec.”

If Idaho needs more money for highways, he said, “They’re better off getting the funding from fuel tax that’s burned on the highways.”

Crimmins spoke out at a recent state Parks Board meeting in Boise, and motorized recreation groups around the state are organizing to oppose the funding deal. When a special legislative task force starts meeting later this summer to address possible alternative funding sources for parks and for the Idaho State Police, which also would lose millions in gas tax funding a year from now under the deal, “We plan to be there en masse,” Crimmins said.

The recreationists are particularly upset because during this year’s legislative session, they successfully worked to raise their own ATV registration fees from \$10 to \$12 a year. The increase, which takes effect Jan. 1, will be divided between law enforcement and the state Department of Lands, to offset damage caused by off-road recreation on state lands.

“I think they have a legitimate concern,” said state Sen. Jim Hammond, R-Post Falls, one of eight members of the special legislative task force.

Hammond, who voted for the session-ending transportation funding deal, said, “I knew

they were scratching for every gas tax dollar they could find. ... We have to find a way to fairly replace those funds. They gave up those funds for that specific purpose.”

Steve Klatt of Sandpoint, the new chairman of the state Board of Parks and Recreation, said, “I always thought that was a fair law. ... It is a user fee.”

In 1972, when the legislation first passed, it diverted 2 percent of the state’s gas tax collections to Parks and Recreation for the waterways and trails programs. Later, that was increased to 3 percent.

One problem is that Idaho’s gas tax hasn’t increased since 1996, and with most vehicles getting better gas mileage and higher gas prices prompting people to drive less, gas tax proceeds overall have been flat for years. That’s a key reason Otter’s been pushing to raise the gas tax and car registration fees – because Idaho’s main funding sources for roads haven’t kept up with the need to maintain the state’s road system.

“This compromise agreement that they reached gives them time to come up with something better,” said Otter spokesman Jon Hanian. “He’s got no pride of ownership on the plan. He’s just interested in the bottom line, and let’s ... figure out a way of doing this.”

Otter has pushed for hundreds of millions of dollars more in road work each year to reverse a growing shortfall, but with lawmakers reluctant to raise taxes in a recession, he settled for just a few small steps this year, including the gas tax shift.

Idaho’s Constitution requires all taxes paid on gas “used to propel motor vehicles upon the highways of this state” to be spent on the “construction, repair, maintenance and traffic supervision of the public highways of this state.”

Crimmins said off-roaders got an unpleasant surprise when the trail and waterways money, without warning, showed up in the session-ending road funding deal.

“My personal perspective is if they need to raise that money from somewhere else,” he said, “then raise the gas tax, which is where it should come from.”

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Roads deal could 'gut' Idaho recreation

The Idaho parks department is set to lose almost \$5 million a year in gas taxes, but lawmakers will look for a solution

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The Idaho parks department is set to lose almost \$5 million a year in gas taxes, but lawmakers will look for a solution

About half the money spent each year on trails, boating facilities and snowmobile grooming in Idaho could be gone next year unless a task force persuades lawmakers and the governor to change how they fund recreation.

The Department of Parks and Recreation gets 3 percent of the state's gas tax money - worth about \$4.7 million in 2009 - to help pay for amenities used by motorized and nonmotorized recreationists.

That money will dry up July 1, 2010, because legislation passed in the final days of the 2009 session reallocates Parks and Recreation's share of the gas tax to highways.

"That would gut recreation in Idaho as we know it today," said Sandra Mitchell of the Idaho Recreation Council, an advocacy group for motorized recreationists, cyclists and horsemen.

A state legislative task force will have its first meeting June 30 to identify alternative funding sources for programs currently paid for by gas taxes.

"People need to realize no money has been taken from Parks and Recreation yet," task force member Raul Labrador, R-Eagle, said.

The task force could propose legislation in the 2010 session. But it has few options.

It can try to restore the 3 percent funding allocation, pay for recreation programs using other state revenue, or generate new revenue from new fees or taxes.

Labrador said the new law that shifts Idaho State Police and recreation money to highways was not intended as a long-term solution. It was part of a compromise to give Gov. Butch Otter some of the transportation funding he sought during the 2009 legislative session.

"Everyone understood this would not be the final agreement," Labrador said.

Mitchell said \$4.7 million is a fraction of the highway budget, but it is critical funding for trails and waterways, which bring millions of dollars to rural areas and add to the quality of life in Idaho.

"Are we really ready to sacrifice all that?" she said.

Parks and Recreation awarded grants in 34 counties this year for things like boat docks at Lucky Peak Reservoir, maintenance of the popular Danskin motorcycle trails east of Boise, and the purchase of a mini excavator to build trails in the Payette National Forest.

Gas taxes have been essential to the state's snowmobiling program, which grooms trails throughout the state. Unlike waterways and motorcycle and ATV trails, snowmobile trails require money every winter.

"If you don't have grooming, you don't have snowmobiling in Idaho," said Dave Claycomb, off-highway vehicle program manager for Parks and Recreation.

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