

[Click Here to Print This Article](#)

June 23, 2009

Adena Cook: Hasty move hurts recreation, economy

READER'S VIEW

BY ADENA COOK - Idaho Statesman

READER'S VIEW

In their haste to get out of town, our state legislators agreed to eliminate a beneficial gas tax- funded program and dump the money into highways to satisfy the governor. They killed the recreation gas tax program, acknowledged to be the best in the country. It was abolished with little debate, for the sake of expediency. Here's what the legislators failed to consider:

Idaho has an established policy not to apply highway taxes on gas not used on highways. For example, farmers and loggers routinely apply for a refund on the taxes they've paid at the pump for gas they've used on the farm or in the woods. Individually, they each get their money back.

In 1983, Idaho motorized recreationists asked the Legislature for the right to give up their individual tax refunds and pool it in a recreation fund. It was set up to be managed and administered by Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation.

This small (3 percent) portion of the gas tax is refunded back to recreation. It benefits Idahoans in many ways, for example: boating facilities, education and enforcement, state parks, bridges and recreation parking lots and facilities, trails, OHV education, search and rescue, and snowmobile trail groomers.

Each one of these benefits has a success story to tell. For snowmobiling, the gas tax pays for the groomers that groom 8,000 miles of trail, more miles than any other Western state. Snowmobilers leverage this equipment fund by paying additional registration fees. This pays for groomer operation, fuel and other facilities. They augment these dollars with thousands of volunteer hours. Without the gas tax seed money, it would all collapse.

Off-Road Motor Vehicle grants pay for hundreds of miles of trail improvements, trailheads and facilities, bridges, and camping improvements - both formal and informal. For each dollar of gas tax fund granted, many other dollars are added through matching funds and volunteer labor. Projects abide by strict guidelines and are reviewed by multi-user grant committees and the IDPR board. These projects would never happen without the initial impetus of the gas tax fund.

The boaters who enjoy the benefits of the waterways programs can tell a similar story.

As the projects are implemented, they bring together land managers, professionals from Parks and Recreation, county governments and recreationists. Collectively, they become the recreation infrastructure that supports tourism in rural economies.

Our state legislators took the pennies for highways, and threw away dollars of benefit for recreation. Perhaps as a concession, they set up a task force of legislators to study how the fund can be replaced. They'll be holding meetings this summer to "come up with alternatives." I've got an alternative for them - give us back our gas tax!

Adena Cook is senior policy adviser for the BlueRibbon Coalition in Idaho Falls.