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Legislature Puts Brakes on Snowmachine Law

Passes Kohring's HB 397 to Eliminate Rider's Need for Drivers License

(JUNEAU) -- Alaskans will not need a drivers license to operate snowmachines or other motorized vehicles off-road, under legislation sponsored by Rep. Vic Kohring (R-Wasilla/Peters Creek) and passed by the Legislature last week.

"It is ludicrous to assume that passing a test on traffic signals to get a driver's license improves your ability to drive a Ski-Doo on the frozen Kuskokwim River," said Kohring. "House Bill 397 simply restores common sense to Alaska's law regarding off-road vehicles."

Kohring introduced HB 397 after a 2001 statewide study of winter transportation issues revealed widespread ignorance about several safety and legal aspects to off-road snowmachine operation. Media reports focused public attention on a largely unenforced 1978 state law requiring anyone operating a snowmachine on public land or waters, whether in or out of town, to have a driver's license.

The news that law enforcement agencies planned to resume enforcing that law caused an uproar in rural Alaska, where adults and children alike use snowmachines as a primary means of day-to-day transportation. Many urban Alaskans who use snowmachines for recreation also questioned whether licensing improved safety, or simply represented government intrusion on a popular family activity.

"Having a driver's license has nothing to do with safe operation of an off-road vehicle," Kohring said. "If safety is the concern, then the focus needs to be on safety, not on requiring a driver's license."

Kohring's bill, which passed with support from legislators from both urban and rural districts, will allow operators of all off-road motor vehicles, including snowmachines, boats, airplanes or ATVs, to operate off-road on public property without a license.

"Those who depend on snowmobiles, boats, and ATVs for basic transportation to work, hunt, and fish in many parts of Alaska need to have their rights protected," Kohring said. "HB 397 protects their rights, and still provides important safety protections for the use of such vehicles in town."

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