



## Grooming A Trail

### Everything you wanted to know but were afraid to ask!

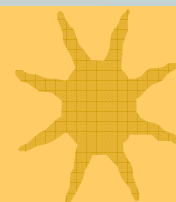
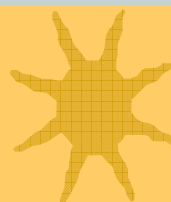
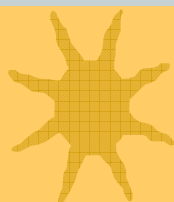
I receive a lot of e-mails concerning groomers and trail grooming. As someone, who drives the groomer day in and day out, I find it hard to believe how many snowmobilers are unaware of how a groomer works and what is involved in grooming a trail. In this article, I will attempt to explain, in terms everyone can understand, how the trails are prepared for your riding pleasure.

The following scenario would be typical for a snowmobilers day (especially on the weekend.) It is 8:30 A.M., the sun is out and you have just finished breakfast. Ready for a great day of riding, you get the sled all warmed up and hit the trails. You say to yourself, "Wow!" These trails are smooth." The miles fade into the distance behind you and you are having fun. After a wonderful ride to your destination, it is time to head back. As you return to your camp or motel room that trail that was smooth eight hours ago, now looks like the U.S Army had used it for target practice or it looks like a mountain road in Afghanistan. How did it get this way, you ask? Believe it or not, this question has been posed to me in e-mails hundreds of times. The answers are not simple because good trails depend on a number of factors: temperature, amount and kind of snow, and the traffic during the day. Snow can be fluffy like cotton, wet and sloppy, granular like sugar and any one of a hundred variations in between. As snowmobiles travel over the smooth trails, the packed snow is loosened a bit as each sled passes. Each machine tends to sink in where the snow is soft and the harder portions of the trail become the tops of the growing moguls. Spinning tracks, doing doughnuts and speeding around corners loosens the snow even faster. After hundreds of sleds have passed over a trail, it becomes mogul alley. In addition, temperatures above freezing are deadly to any trail, no matter where it is located or how much snow is on it.

Forks Area Recreation Club will groom our trails 4 to 5 nights a week, weather permitting. Even with this frequency of grooming, it is still unlikely that the trails will remain completely smooth 24/7. Three groomers cannot keep 81 miles of trails smooth when there are hundreds of sleds ripping up and down them, spinning tracks, sliding around corners and tearing up the fresh groom. We can go out at night and try to repair the damage to make the trails smooth for the next day, but the next day hundreds of sleds are back, tearing up the freshly groomed snow.

Grooming requires a lot of time and preparation. Once the pre trip checklist is complete, we leave our home base at about 5pm. We start late because grooming needs to be done when there are fewer sleds on the trails. Lower traffic volume means the trail has a better chance to set up and is much safer for everyone involved. We then roll down the trail at a speedy 5 to 8 miles per hour. We look out ahead of our front blade and all we can see are moguls! It's going to be a long night! We drop our drag as low as it can go. The drag is a long metal trailer that we pull behind the grooming tractor. We have to get the blades of the drag down to the bottom of the moguls. If we were to only skim the top of the mogul, then we would be wasting our time. If we cut off the top of the mogul, the snow held in the drag will be deposited in the low spots between the moguls.

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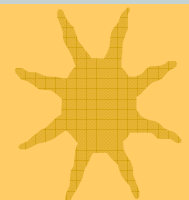
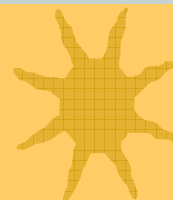
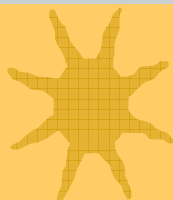
The trail will look smooth behind the drag, but it is not. The first snowmobile that travels down such a trail will start a wavy motion, because he is hitting hard snow (the top of the mogul) and soft snow (the snow between the moguls.) In no time, the moguls will be built up again by the sled traffic. By running the blades on the front of the drag as low as we can go, we take the whole mogul out. Now that the mogul has been removed by the front blade, the snow is funneled through a series of other blades before it reaches the pan. (The pan is located at the very back of the drag.) As the snow goes under the pan, it gets flattened out and packed down.

Groomer operators call the snow that comes out from under the pan "The Ribbon". Every groomer operator loves a good ribbon. Then comes the most important part of grooming. The ribbon needs time and cold temperatures to set up. If the temperature is at or above freezing, the ribbon will not set up. On a warm night, if I get out of the groomer to stretch and take a break and walk on the ribbon, my footprints will be three or four inches deep. If these conditions last, the trail will not hold up to all of the sled traffic the following day. When it is cold out and we have some new snow, the ribbon will set up and will harden almost like concrete. When the weather is cold, the groomer operator is happy because the trails can then take a bigger beating and will last longer. We use the front blade on the groomer as well. The large front blade is used when the moguls are really deep or drifting snow on the trail and when we have to bring snow back into a corner, where the speed demons have thrown it out.

I hope you are still with me and are paying attention because you are learning something about how we make your trails smooth. I have explained how a mogul starts, what we do to get rid of them and how the ribbon looks and feels. I will now explain how one should treat the ribbon when you meet a groomer. When you are on a narrow trail, you must ride on the ribbon after you meet a groomer. When this happens, don't spin your track right away. Speed won't hurt the ribbon but stopping and then ripping it will. When you meet a groomer on a wide trail you probably say, "Wow fresh trails, but don't jump on the ribbon right away because the snow hasn't had a chance to set up yet. If it is reasonably smooth on the old section, stay on the old section and let the new ribbon set up. If the trail is rough, by all means get on the smooth part since we don't want you to ride on rough trails. Just be careful how you treat the ribbon at first. There have been many times when I was grooming the trail at two o'clock in the morning. A couple sleds would follow me riding up and down spinning their tracks and sliding around corners on the freshly groomed ribbon. These two idiots on those sleds ruined the riding on that section of the trail for the following day for everyone.

One Saturday this past season, I began grooming out of West Forks at 6:00 p.m. I met what seemed like hundreds of sleds, but by 11 p.m., the sled traffic was almost gone. I groomed ITS 87 and when I returned to West Forks at 7:30 a.m. the next morning, the trail looked as if it hadn't been groomed in over a week. Why was the trail destroyed in less than twelve hours

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Weather is the major deciding factor in determining the condition of the trails and how long a freshly groomed trail lasts. Cold is good, colder is better and low sled traffic and a cold night insure a good ride the next day. There are times when I pray for wet snow. When we receive wet snow and then cold weather follows, our ribbon becomes like cement. There were times last winter when I groomed during a warm day and I felt like I was literally wasting my time. As soon as five sleds passed me, it did not even look like I had groomed. That is why we groom at night. The temperatures usually drop in the evening and the lower amount of sled traffic gives the ribbon time to set up. If you are sledding at night, remember don't tear up the ribbon because you are ruining it for everyone the next day.

I will end this groomer lesson on a final note. When you meet a groomer, there are three things you must do. First, get out of his way. The groomer and drag cannot get off the trail easily. A snowmobile can get off the trail much easier and remember a stuck sled is easier to get out than a stuck groomer! Second, use the proper hand signals to let the groomer know how many sleds are behind you. It is nice to know if someone else is coming, especially if we are approaching a corner. Third, give the drivers a big thumbs up and let them know that you appreciate them volunteering hours of their time to help groom the trails. If you come up behind a groomer, wait until he sees you in his rear view mirrors. As soon as he can find a place to get off to the side, he will pull over, stop, and let you pass. A little patience on your part could avoid a nasty accident. Remember he is much bigger than you are!

Oh! I almost forgot. Another great way to keep the snowmobile trails smooth is to join our club. Without snowmobile clubs providing volunteer labor and raising money to help buy grooming equipment, your trail permit fees would need to be at least 10 or 15 times higher than they are today. Join our club, and participate in some of the events they sponsor throughout the year. Become a part of the 10 percent of snowmobilers who help with the trails. As more people participate, the job of keeping our trails in great condition becomes easier for everyone concerned.

All of the people in the Forks Area Recreation Club are strictly volunteers. We do not receive pay for our time. We do it for the love of the sport and to provide our area with nice, smooth trails. Thank you for taking the time to read this long letter. Your membership and support of our club is the energy that keeps the volunteers going during those long, lonely hours on the trail. Have a great ride!

**SUPPORT AND RIDE F.A.R.** (Forks Area Recreation Club)

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