

The Truth About Gas Tax

Editor's note: This letter was sent to the Minneapolis StarTribune in response to criticism of the gas tax.

Minnesota has a long tradition of well-reasoned public policy debate in which folks of good faith argue the issues of the day. Unfortunately, Jeff Brown's recent opinion piece, "It's time to reclaim that gas tax money" (8/2/10), departs from this tradition.

The article left me wondering whether Brown is simply wrong or if his misstatements, allegations and erroneous conclusions were part of some other agenda. Whichever it may be, he does a disservice to Minnesotans who deserve better.

Brown's notion that the unrefunded gas tax dedicated to outdoor recreation is a diversion of highway money is a discredited thesis with no basis in law. As recognized by a recent Star Tribune editorial, snowmobiles, boats and off road vehicles are not users of the public highways. As a constitutional matter, users of these vehicles, like farm equipment, should not be subject to the tax and should be entitled to a tax refund. The State has wisely chosen not to refund this money but, with the support of the user groups, to dedicate it to the public good.

These funds directly support law enforcement, safety training, the state trail system, public waters and grants to local units of government to develop and maintain recreational trails. Thus, essential public safety and Minnesota's recreational system are fostered without increasing the projected 5.8 billion dollar State deficit.

Collateral benefits of this dedicated funding to Minnesota are profound. According to a 2005 study by the University of Minnesota, snowmobiling alone accounts for over 5,900 Minnesota jobs, contributes over \$300 million dollars towards Minnesota's gross state product (of this amount over \$130 million dollars is consumer spending) and produces \$51.8 million in annual tax revenue for our State and local governments. If the impact of boating and other motorized recreation is also considered, the economic benefits to Minnesota become staggering. Outdoor recreationalists should be thanked, not attacked, because after all, it is their "refund" helping make this possible.

Clearly then, Brown's call to reduce funding for motorized recreation is a threat to Minnesota's economic recovery. In a struggling economy, why does he want to cripple something that is so important to our citizens? The answer is not about roads and bridges but can be found in longstanding opposition to motorized recreation per se. As made clear by its mission statement, Brown's advocacy group, Minnesotans for Responsible Recreation, views motorized recreation as noisy, noxious and a danger to the environment. This group consistently attacks motorized recreation at the Minnesota Legislature. They certainly have a right to their opinion and should be commended for lobbying for their point of view. Fortunately, the Legislature is a deliberative body that considers all sides of a given issue and places a high value on credibility. Perhaps this group's ongoing lack of legislative success is the reason that Brown now criticizes the DFL Caucus, a capable legislator of integrity and all of our candidates for governor.

As recognized by the Star Tribune, there exists a legitimate issue relating to the unrefunded gas tax. The amount of the unrefunded gas tax for motorized recreation is determined from time to time by the Legislature. This determination is a good faith estimate based on available data. In the case of snowmobiling, exact fuel usage varies from year to year. The variable is, of course, the amount of snow cover in a given winter. This past winter saw an abundance of snow. In a great winter like this one, there is more snowmobiling and snowmobilers pay more gas tax. Other years with less snow, snowmobilers pay slightly less. Currently, the snowmobile gas tax is estimated to be 1%. In years of abundant snowfall, like last winter, the amount of unrefunded gas tax allocated is probably too low. Overall, we believe it is about right.

Minnesota snowmobilers are citizens who believe in the Minnesota legislative process. We participate fully and eagerly engage in legitimate public policy discussions. We look forward to the next legislature and will not shy away from legitimate conversations about our sport and its funding. We call upon the Minnesotans for Responsible Recreation to cease its misleading rhetoric and to act like responsible Minnesotans.

Douglas Franzen

St. Paul

Counsel for the Minnesota United Snowmobilers Association