

The economy of off-roading

MICHELLE BRUNETTI POST, Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, December 30, 2015 10:32 am

MAURICE RIVER TOWNSHIP — The tiny hamlet of Port Elizabeth is known for its farmers, fishermen and quiet.

Except for one weekend every fall, when the Tri-County Sportsmens Motorcycle Club holds its annual Hammer Run through trails in the woods in Cape May, Cumberland and Atlantic counties.

This year, the 20-year-old event brought in 800 riders, all on street-legal registered and insured motorcycles. Many brought families or friends, adding to the economic impact as they stayed in hotels, motels or campgrounds.

Most were from the tri-state region, but this year they also came from New England, Ohio, Colorado and Canada, organizers said.

"This is the best ride in the country," said Nils Tribus, of Stewartsville in Hunterdon County, as he started out on the second day of the two-day event. "It's varied terrain, but there is not a rock."

He was there with a group of 22 friends, each of whom got a hotel room, he said. He estimated each spends at least \$500 while in the area.

The Hammer Run isn't a competition, but a fun ride of just under 100 miles a day, said club President Eldin Polhamus. It has started from Cumberland County Undersheriff Norm Franckle's 74-acre property off Weather by Road for more than a dozen years.

Now the route, which has included state Fish and Wildlife land as well as Belleplain State Forest and private property, is facing challenges.

The state Department of Environmental Protection has told organizers that after this year, they can no longer use Fish and Wildlife property.

"We did advise the group that enduro types of events are not consistent with wildlife management area policy," said DEP spokesman Larry Hajna. "A former employee in the southern region did allow it (in the past), but we determined this potentially jeopardizes federal funding."



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Harold Cauagnaro, left, of Pittstown, Nils Tribus, of Stewartsville, and Fred Truncale, of Summit, belong to a group of more than 20 who have done the Hammer Run for more than 10 years. The run was Oct. 31-Nov. 1 this year, starting in Maurice River Township.

He said the state would risk about \$12 million a year in federal funds, because federal policy says activities on Fish and Wildlife land should not interfere with the mission to provide opportunities for hunting, fishing and wildlife-watching.

The Hammer Run, which was held this year Oct. 31 and Nov. 1, overlaps with the youth pheasant hunt and the last day of fall turkey season, Hajna said.

Organizers are concerned that the quality of the run, and the ability to attract riders, will be harmed if they cannot include roads through Cumberland County's 25,000-acre Peaslee Wildlife Management Area or Cape May County's 14,600-acre Tuckahoe WMA.

"Tuckahoe has beautiful views. Right now it's diverse. You have tight trail, single track on private land, then you have ... the touring scenic part (on Fish and Wildlife roads)," said Mike Bradway, of Vineland. He's an event organizer who works for a trucking company, runs off-road riding courses and volunteers in environmental research for the state.

"It's would take a huge, huge hit," he said. "We might have to contract it to a one-day event."

Bradway surmised that a new staff person has begun interpreting rules differently, and said he can't believe his club's run could suddenly jeopardize federal funding.

Polhamus said the state's new prohibition on Fish and Wildlife land also will make the club's Enduro in April and Hare Scramble in March less interesting.

"They are also under attack," said Polhamus. "This (the Hammer Run) just happens to be the largest."

But Polhamus said he is hopeful that the DEP will not go through with the change.

Some opponents of off-road events have claimed that participants come back and illegally ride routes after the event is over, but Bradway said his data doesn't show that to be true.

"For us in Port Elizabeth, we're part of the community. Our policing eliminates that," he said.

He said riders who have had violations for improper riding on state lands are not allowed back in the Hammer Run. In 15 years the club has only had that problem with about three people, he said.

The Hammer Run has won national awards from the American Motorcycling Association, Polhamus said.

The controversy is happening at the same time that the DEP backed off from restricting off-road vehicle riders from about half of the roads and firebreaks in Wharton State Forest, on 115,000 acres that span parts of Atlantic, Burlington and Camden counties.

Off-road riding is part of the culture in rural areas, said Maurice River Township Deputy Mayor Patti Gross.

"We don't have soccer fields here," Gross said. "This is what we do as a family activity. It's not just a hobby. It's our life."

Events like the Hammer Run are also an economic shot in the arm for the township, she said.

"Our businesses look forward to this. They know to have extra staff on hand," Gross said. "It would hurt us a lot not to have these events."

And safety is paramount, she said. The run is insured and has emergency medical personnel on hand, and riders must wear safety gear including helmets, goggles, and padded protection for the chest and most parts of the body.

"It's about \$1,000 in gear," she said. That's gear that is replaced as kids grow, or as it wears out, supporting local businesses that sell it.

Polhamus said the club donates thousands of dollars per year to local churches and community groups. This year the total will be close to \$7,000, he said.

"There's been a real land squeeze and land crunch. As the years go by, more of this property is bought with tax money," said Bradway. Instead of restricting taxpayers from using it, he said, responsible use should be encouraged.

"We're not done fighting of course," Bradway said.

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