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Environmental Police Alert Off-Highway Vehicle Operators of New Rules

New age restrictions, safety education and registration requirements go into effect

With the onset of spring, the Massachusetts Environmental Police (MEP) are reminding snow machine, all-terrain vehicle and dirt bike operators of new safety rules, including new operator age limits.

As part of an effort to protect public safety, a new law passed by the Legislature then signed by Governor Patrick in August 2010, increases safety requirements for minor operators and stiffens penalties for illegal off-highway vehicle operation.

"This year we encourage all snow and recreation vehicle operators to operate safely, use common sense and obey all of the new and existing laws, especially regarding vehicle operation by minors," said Environmental Police Director Col. Aaron Gross.

Under Massachusetts law, no person under 10 years old may operate any off-highway vehicle under any circumstances. No person between 10 and 14 years old may operate an all-terrain vehicle or recreation utility vehicle except while preparing for or participating in a sanctioned race, rally or organized event. No person age 14 to 16 years old may operate an all-terrain or recreation utility vehicle with an engine capacity greater than 90 cubic centimeters, and no one between 14 or 16 years old may operate an all-terrain or recreation utility vehicle without direct supervision by an adult. Supervising adults must be at least 18 years old and must be sufficiently close to the operator at all times to maintain both visual contact and verbal communications with the operator. No one under the age of 16 and a half may operate a recreation vehicle across a public way unless directly supervised by an adult.

As of February 1, 2011, operators under the age of 18 are required to take an approved safety course. Parents of operators under the age of 16 will be required to attend one mandatory safety course session.

2011 safety course schedule: <http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dle/ohvcourselist.htm>

In addition, the new law requires all operators of recreation vehicles operated on public and private property to register their vehicles with MEP. Previously, operators who rode exclusively on private property were not required to register their vehicles.

The new law also includes increased penalties for illegal operation of off highway vehicles.

During the 2009 to 2010 winter season, there were 22 snowmobile accidents, with one fatality. During the winter of 2008 to 2009, there were 27 accidents and four fatalities. In 2010, there were 62 total recreation vehicle accidents and six fatalities. In 2009, there were 50 recreation vehicle accidents and two fatalities. In 2008, there were 50 accidents and three fatalities.

MEP also reminds operators of these safety tips.

- Never operate a snow or recreation vehicle under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Operating a snow or recreation vehicle under the influence can result in fines, driver's license restrictions, suspensions and vehicle impoundment.
- Operate at reasonable speeds.

- Wear a safety helmet.
- Operators are prohibited of operating within 150 feet of an occupied residence without permission of the owner.
- It is prohibited to operate a recreation vehicle on an ocean beach or sand dune in a manner to destroy, damage or break down the beach or dune.
- It is prohibited to operate in a manner to harass or chase wildlife or domestic animals.
- Report all recreation vehicle accidents to the MEP at 800-632-8075.

The Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs' Office of Law Enforcement – known also as the Massachusetts Environmental Police – is the primary agency responsible for enforcing the Commonwealth's fish and game and boating and off-highway vehicle laws.

MEP officers are empowered to enforce all general laws, focus on laws and regulations related to the protection of natural resources and public parks and land; boat and recreation vehicle use; and hazardous waste disposal. MEP officers serve as stewards of the state's natural resources, patrolling forests, parks, inland waterways and coastal waters throughout the Commonwealth.