

## **A SNO-CAT Sets in Motion Economic Boost for Turtle Mountain**

*By Walt Bonora*

In the dead of a North Dakota winter on the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation, when temperatures can plunge to levels that push humans to the edge of endurance, several activities take center stage to help people overcome their boredom or lethargy. Cross country skiing is one of them, and snowmobiling is another.

For members of the tribe who live on the reservation, snowmobiling brings, besides recreational enjoyment, an additional source of income, and keeping their trails groomed is essential to sustaining their economy.

“Because some places and businesses are difficult to reach by car in winter months, using snow mobiles helps our economy,” said Patrick Hemmy, the agency superintendent. “Ensuring the trails are groomed is critical for people who want to reach Indian businesses, like our casino and stores.”

For a time, the state took control of grooming trails on the reservation, but that ended a few years ago due to jurisdictional issues. So the reservation turned to Washington D.C. for help. In stepped the Interior Department’s Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development to purchase a sno-cat – a vehicle used to pull snow groomers- and provide funds for its maintenance and upkeep.

What may seem like not a big deal to the outsider, for tribal members, purchasing the sno-cat set in motion a small economic boom. Trails are groomed, snow mobilers are coming back, and businesses, often unreachable in winter by car, are now thriving.

Avid snow mobiler and tribal member Ken Davis noted, “With our trails properly groomed, people visit the casino, eat dinner, gas up their snowmobiles, thus bringing revenue to our reservation. We’re also getting Canadians coming down to visit us.”

Lyle Morin, the agency’s deputy superintendent emphasized the importance of their casino to the local economy. “Our casino provides employment and a source of income to the tribe. Those trails need to be accessible so people can come to the casino.”

Wildlife viewing is another attraction on reservation grounds. People come to admire elk, moose, wolves, and numerous types of raptors.

The IEED continually strives to boost economic development in Indian country, and working closely with tribes, such as the trail grooming efforts at Turtle Mountain, is another step in an ongoing effort to reduce unemployment and improve economies in Indian Country.