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Salt Lake Tribune, The (UT)

Date: April 24, 2005

Section: Nation/World

Edition: Final

Page: A9

ATVs bring big bucks to rural economies

Tom Wharton The Salt Lake Tribune

Trailers, trucks, motor homes and tents carpeted the desert floor as 20,000 off-highway-vehicle riders gathered at Little Sahara Sand Dunes over Easter weekend. Out front were the toys -- thousands of dirt bikes, dune buggies and all-terrain vehicles. All that recreational equipment adds up. And that's not counting fuel. "I'll use 30 gallons of gas for my ATV in two days," says Sean McElreath of West Valley City. "With our trucks and trailers, we will easily use 400 gallons for 35 of us."

With gas prices shooting well above \$2 a gallon, that group spent more than \$900 on gasoline alone for its Easter weekend outing. Add the cost of new machines, trailers, food and safety gear for the nearly 200,000 registered OHVs and it adds up to a huge economic impact.

Consider Marysvale. Before the Paiute ATV Trail opened, the town was dying. It had two business licenses and property could be bought for back taxes. Now, there are 29 business licenses and two-acre building lots are selling for \$38,000.

"The Paiute trail is the best economic boost Piute County has ever seen, including the boom years in mining," says RV park owner Ron Bushman.

"I can positively say we would not be in business [if it weren't for the Paiute Trail]," says Randy Moore, who with his wife Katie opened a bed and breakfast in an old boarding house near the 275-mile trail. "Probably as many as 85 to 90 percent of our guests are here to ride the trail."

Kevin Arrington, tourism and events director for Sevier County, estimates that 80,000 riders use the Paiute Trail during the summer. They spend \$100 to \$125 a day, which generates up to \$6 million a year.

Last year's Rocky Mountain ATV Jamboree in Richfield brought riders in from 33 states and several countries.

Then there are OHV sales, rental and service centers. Vescoes, a Brigham City dealer, just moved into a big new building whose aisles are filled with ATVs costing as much as \$8,000.

Vescoes' Steve Underwood says overall sales have been climbing, and ATVs account for 70 percent of business.

Not all Utahns are thrilled by this trend. Gus Gilmore of Salt Lake City says OHV users in places like Moab have chased him and others out.

"I'm not by any stretch an OHV hater. I understand how much fun they can be," Gilmore says. "But it doesn't take many pieces of equipment to ruin your outdoor experience, especially when they're going from early in the morning till 10 at night. Basically, I don't go to Moab anymore. There are better places. And don't ask me where, because I'm not going to tell you."

Tribune reporter Joe Baird contributed to this story

Graphic: OHV boom comes at a cost (map, tables; line graph; bar graph) The Salt Lake Tribune

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