

P O L I C Y B R I E F

Impact of the Proposed Alto High-Speed Rail Project on Ontario's Organized Snowmobile Trail Network

An analysis of potential trail network disruption across the southern corridor and alternative route options through Eastern Ontario, with reference to parallel concerns raised by the agricultural sector

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IMPORTANT CAVEAT: Alto has not yet disclosed specific route locations within its identified corridors. This analysis is based on the broad corridor options presented in Alto's public consultation materials. Actual impacts will depend on the final alignment selected. The purpose of this document is to identify the types and scale of potential impacts so that affected stakeholders can provide informed input before the consultation closes on March 29, 2026.

1. Executive Summary

The proposed Alto high-speed rail corridor between Toronto and Ottawa/Montréal will pass through the territory of the Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs (OFSC) Districts 1, 2, and 6, regardless of which route alignment is ultimately selected. This policy brief examines the potential impacts on Ontario's organized snowmobile trail network, with particular attention to the southern corridor option through the Kingston–Napanee–Brockville region.

Key findings:

- No corridor option under consideration avoids the OFSC trail network. The southern, Highway 7, and northern hydro-line corridors each pass through extensively developed snowmobile trail territory.
- High-speed rail's requirement for a fully fenced, grade-separated corridor makes it uniquely destructive to interconnected trail networks that depend on continuous connectivity for touring loops and inter-club links.
- The consent-based private landowner agreements that sustain over 60% of OFSC trails are vulnerable to cascading disruption from expropriation proceedings and construction activity, with impacts extending far beyond the direct rail footprint.
- The affected trail network generates an estimated \$220–\$270 million in direct expenditures and \$450–\$540 million in total annual economic activity, supporting rural communities that would receive no HSR station.
- The Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA), l'Union des producteurs agricoles (UPA), and the Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA) have all passed resolutions calling for an immediate halt to the project — a precedent that recreational trail organizations may wish to consider in formulating their own consultation response.

Alto's public consultation closes March 29, 2026. Submissions can be made at: en.consultation.altotrain.ca

2. Background

2.1 The Alto Project

Alto is a federal Crown corporation established to plan and deliver a high-speed rail line connecting Toronto, Ottawa, Montréal, and Québec City. The project was announced in January 2025 by the Prime Minister, with a targeted completion date of 2043 and projected costs that have been reported at up to \$120 billion. Alto is currently in its development and preconstruction phase, conducting consultation and technical studies to determine the final alignment.

For the segment between the Greater Toronto Area and Ottawa, Alto has identified broad corridor options but has not disclosed specific route locations within those corridors. The

corridors under discussion include a southern route through the Kingston–Napanee area, a central route generally following the Highway 7 corridor, and a more northern route following existing hydro/powerline corridors through the Ontario Highlands.

2.2 Ontario’s Organized Snowmobile Trail Network

The OFSC manages over 30,000 kilometres of Prescribed Snowmobile Trails across Ontario through 181 volunteer-led, not-for-profit member clubs. This is Ontario’s largest recreational trail system. The network is organized into 16 geographic districts, each governed by a regional board of volunteer directors.

The two districts directly in the path of all Alto corridor options are:

District 1 — Upper Canada Snowmobile Region (UCSR): 16 clubs maintaining approximately 2,626 km of assigned trails (2025–26 season), covering Leeds and Grenville, Lanark, Frontenac, Lennox and Addington counties and extending into the Ottawa area. The district sells over 10,365 trail permits annually and is supported by more than 609 active volunteers.

District 2 — Central Eastern Area Snowmobile Region (CEASR): 7 clubs maintaining over 1,500 km of groomed trails from the Kawarthas through Bancroft to Mazinaw Country, including the Havelock District Snowmobile Club (one of the oldest in the province, celebrating 55+ years), the Mazinaw Powerline Snowmobile Club (est. 1983, ~400 km of trails), and five others.

District 6 — Snow Country Snowmobile Region: 14 clubs maintaining 2,667 km of trails across the Canadian Shield heartland from Haliburton to the Ottawa Valley. This district includes the Snow Road Snowmobile Club (formerly K&P Snow Trails Association), a pivotal connector club managing 470+ km of trail through North Frontenac and Lanark Highlands. The club’s trail network links the K&P Trail corridor and hydro-line corridors, bridging Districts 1, 2, and 6 through communities including Sharbot Lake, Snow Road, Ompah, Plevna, McDonalds Corners, and Perth. With 560 permit members and more than 300 private landowner agreements, it is one of the largest trail-managing clubs in the region.

The Snow Road Clubhouse (established 1976, located at 1106 Gemmill Road) serves as far more than a trail stop. It is a vital community hub for seniors and families through biweekly fundraising breakfasts that regularly draw over 200 people, raising money for charities including the Alzheimer’s Society and Canadian Cancer Society. North Frontenac councillors have highlighted its role as an emergency shelter — a function it served during the 1998 ice storm — and it hosts family celebrations, reunions, and community events year-round. The clubhouse is open 24/7 during the sledding season with refreshments available on the honour system. In 2026, the club launched the Snow Road Snowmobile Club Grill and Eatery, serving hot meals Wednesday to Sunday from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. for snowmobilers using the OFSC trail system and for local residents who wish to drop in for a meal.

2.3 Economic Significance

The OFSC’s 2022–2023 Economic Impact Study, prepared by Harry Cummings & Associates using the Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport’s Tourism Regional Economic Impact Model (TREIM), documented the following provincial figures:

| Measure | 2022–2023 Season |
|--|------------------------|
| Direct snowmobiler expenditures | \$1.48 billion |
| Total economic activity | \$3 billion |
| Full-time equivalent jobs supported | 9,307 |
| Tax revenue (federal, provincial, municipal) | \$538 million |
| Potential annual impact (strong snow year) | \$3–\$6 billion |
| Annual value of club volunteer contributions | \$16.4 million+ |

The combined Districts 1, 2, and 6 represent approximately 15–18% of the provincial trail network by kilometre and approximately 10% by permit sales. Applied proportionally, these districts generate an estimated \$220–\$270 million in direct expenditures and \$450–\$540 million in total economic activity annually, supporting approximately 1,400–1,700 full-time equivalent jobs and generating \$80–\$100 million in tax revenue across three levels of government.

This economic activity falls disproportionately on small rural communities where snowmobile tourism is often the primary or sole source of winter revenue. These include Westport, Sharbot Lake, Perth, Cloyne, Bancroft, Seeleys Bay, Portland, Sydenham, and Harrowsmith — none of which would receive an HSR station under any proposed alignment.

3. Why High-Speed Rail Is Uniquely Destructive to Trail Networks

High-speed rail is fundamentally different from other linear infrastructure in its impact on recreational trail systems. Three characteristics make it uniquely damaging:

3.1 Complete Corridor Fencing and Grade Separation

Unlike conventional railways or highways, which can accommodate at-grade crossings with signals or stop signs, HSR corridors must be fully fenced and grade-separated for safety at operating speeds of 250–300+ km/h. Every point where a snowmobile trail intersects the rail alignment must either be permanently severed or accommodated by an overpass or underpass. Given the density of the OFSC trail network in Eastern Ontario, the number of required crossing structures would be substantial and the cost of providing them prohibitive.

3.2 Network Connectivity Dependence

The economic and recreational value of the OFSC trail system depends on connectivity, not on isolated trail segments. Snowmobile trails are designed as interconnected loops enabling multi-day touring. The UCSR promotes signature touring routes that span hundreds of kilometres and depend on continuous connectivity across the very territory Alto proposes to bisect:

- French Connection Loop — 302 km
- Upper Canada Circuit — 275 km
- Ottawa Valley River Loop — 500 km
- Ontario East Rails & Trails Loop — 267 km

Severing even a small number of trail crossings can render an entire touring loop unrideable, collapsing the tourism economy it supports across dozens of communities and businesses.

3.3 Vulnerability of the Consent-Based Landowner Model

Over 60% of OFSC trails cross private land under voluntary agreements with approximately 18,000 landowners province-wide. This consent-based system is the foundation of organized snowmobiling in Ontario — and it is uniquely vulnerable to disruption.

HSR construction creates multiple pressures on landowner relationships:

- Expropriation proceedings create stress and resentment toward infrastructure projects generally, potentially causing landowners to withdraw trail permissions as an assertion of remaining property rights.
- Property fragmentation from the rail corridor can make remaining parcels less suitable or convenient for trail access.
- Multi-year construction disruption (staging areas, haul roads, blasting, equipment corridors) extends well beyond the final rail right-of-way, affecting landowners whose properties are not directly expropriated.
- The erosion of trust in government land-use decisions can spread through rural communities, causing landowners far from the rail corridor to reconsider their willingness to participate in voluntary trail agreements.

Unlike farmland, which retains productive capacity after a rail line passes through adjacent property, a snowmobile trail loop that loses a single critical landowner permission may collapse entirely. The cascading nature of this risk means that impacts on the trail network could far exceed the physical footprint of the rail corridor.

4. Southern Corridor: Detailed Impact Analysis

NOTE: Alto has not disclosed specific routes within the southern corridor. The following analysis identifies trails, clubs, and infrastructure within the broad corridor that could be affected, depending on the final alignment.

The southern corridor generally follows the Kingston–Napanee–Brockville axis through the heart of OFSC District 1 (UCSR) territory. This section examines the specific trail infrastructure, clubs, and community connections that fall within or adjacent to this corridor.

4.1 Major Trail Infrastructure at Risk

Cataraqui Trail

A 104 km multi-use rail trail on an abandoned rail bed running from Smiths Falls to Strathcona, crossing Leeds and Grenville, Frontenac, and Lennox and Addington counties. The trail passes through the UNESCO-designated Frontenac Arch Biosphere Reserve, a globally significant ecological corridor connecting the Canadian Shield and the Adirondack Mountains. Snowmobile clubs provide essential financial and maintenance support for this trail, which serves as a critical north–south connector in the UCSR network.

Frontenac K&P Trail

A 90 km multi-use trail running from Kingston northward, used year-round by cyclists, walkers, ATVs, and snowmobiles. Together with the Tay-Havelock Trail, it forms part of the Trans Canada Trail route through Frontenac County. The K&P intersects the Cataraqui Trail at Harrowsmith, creating a critical junction point that the southern corridor would threaten.

4.2 Clubs Directly Affected

| Club | Area | Key Vulnerability |
|---|-----------------------|--|
| Lennox & Addington Ridge Runners | Kingston–Napanee | Directly in the path of the southern corridor; established 1969; deep community roots |
| Rideau Ridge Riders | Smiths Falls–Kingston | Trail connectors between Kingston area and Smiths Falls/Brockville/Ottawa would be severed |
| Elizabethtown SC | Brockville area | Eastern segment of UCSR network; connections to Quebec trail system at risk |
| Athens & District SC | Athens–Brockville | North–south trail links through the Frontenac Arch area |

4.3 Touring Loop Disruption

The southern corridor's most damaging impact would be the severance of touring loop connectivity. The UCSR's promoted touring routes depend on continuous trail links across the Kingston–Brockville–Smiths Falls triangle. A fenced HSR corridor bisecting this territory would make it physically impossible to complete the French Connection, Upper Canada Circuit, or Ottawa Valley River Loop without lengthy and potentially impractical detours. The loss of these multi-day touring routes would disproportionately affect winter tourism businesses (motels, restaurants, fuel stations, outfitters) that depend on through-traffic from touring riders.

4.4 Community Impacts

The communities along the southern corridor that depend on snowmobile trail tourism include some of the smallest and most economically vulnerable municipalities in Eastern Ontario. For villages like Seeleys Bay, Portland, Sydenham, and Harrowsmith, snowmobile season provides one of the few significant winter revenue streams. These communities would bear the full burden of HSR construction and operational disruption while receiving no direct benefit from the project — no stations are proposed for any of them.

Community members in the affected area have already begun organizing in opposition to the project. A Facebook group created by a South Frontenac landowner attracted over 3,000 members within weeks, with snowmobile trail access explicitly cited among the concerns motivating opposition.

5. Alternative Corridors: Impacts Not Avoided

While this brief focuses on the southern corridor, it is essential to note that neither of the alternative route options avoids significant impacts on the organized snowmobile trail network.

5.1 Highway 7 Corridor

A Highway 7 alignment would parallel and in many sections overlap with the Tay-Havelock Trail (90 km, Havelock to Glen Tay), the Ottawa Valley Recreational Trail (296 km, Smiths Falls toward Mattawa), and the K&P Trail at the critical Sharbot Lake junction. These are publicly funded multi-use rail-trail corridors in which municipalities, counties, and the province have invested heavily. Lanark County recently partnered with the Snow Road Snowmobile Club on a \$250,000 bridge upgrade along the Tay-Havelock Trail.

Affected clubs would include the Havelock District Snowmobile Club (55+ years of operation), the BEAST (Beautiful Eastern Association of Snowmobile Trails, covering Carleton Place, Smiths Falls, and Almonte), and the West Carleton Snowmobile Trails Association (250+ km of trails). The Ontario East Rails & Trails Loop (267 km) — specifically designed to leverage the OVRT and K&P rail-trail corridors — would be directly disrupted.

5.2 Northern Hydro-Line Corridor

A more northern alignment following hydro/powerline corridors would cut through OFSC District 2's core territory. Hydro corridors are extensively used as snowmobile trail connectors throughout Eastern Ontario; they provide the long, straight, cleared routes through dense bush that are essential for linking trail segments across the Canadian Shield. The Mazinaw Powerline Snowmobile Club — named after the powerline corridor and founded in 1983 — maintains approximately 400 km of trails and anchors the Bon Echo Loop (~232 km), one of the premier promoted touring loops in southern Ontario. A hydro-corridor HSR alignment would directly threaten the trail infrastructure this club's identity is built around.

This corridor also threatens the Snow Road Snowmobile Club (OFSC District 6 — Snow Country Snowmobile Region), which manages 470+ km of trail connecting North Frontenac and Lanark Highlands via both K&P and hydro corridors. Snow Road SC is the critical north-south connector linking Districts 1, 2, and 6 through the Sharbot Lake-Snow Road-Ompah-Plevna corridor. Its clubhouse (est. 1976) is not just a trail facility but a year-round community hub — biweekly fundraising breakfasts draw over 200 people, serving as one of the only regular social gathering points for seniors and families across this sparsely populated area. In 2026 the club expanded further, launching the Snow Road Snowmobile Club Grill and Eatery serving hot meals to trail users and local residents. The club also maintains trail agreements with over 300 private landowners — exactly the fragile consent-based relationships that HSR construction would jeopardise.

5.3 Comparative Summary

| Impact Category | Southern Corridor | Highway 7 | Hydro Lines |
|---|--|---|---|
| OFSC districts affected | District 1 (UCSR) | Districts 1 and 2 | Districts 1 and 2 |
| Clubs directly affected | 4+ (L&A Ridge Runners, Rideau Ridge Riders, Elizabethtown, Athens) | 3+ (Havelock, BEAST, West Carleton) | 3+ (Mazinaw Powerline, Old Hastings Snow Riders, Snow Road SC) |
| Major rail-trails crossed | Cataraqui Trail, K&P Trail | Tay-Havelock, OVRT, K&P at Sharbot Lake | Hydro corridor trails, K&P Trail (North Frontenac), forest access roads |
| Public infrastructure at risk | County-owned rail trails, conservation authority lands | Millions in municipal bridge and trail investment | Less public infrastructure; more Crown land and private agreements |
| Signature touring loops threatened | French Connection, Upper Canada Circuit | Ontario East Rails & Trails Loop | Bon Echo Loop |

6. Agricultural Sector Precedent: The OFA/UPA/CFA Resolutions

On February 25–28, 2026, three of Canada’s most prominent agricultural organizations took formal positions calling for the Alto project to be halted:

- The Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA) passed a resolution at its Annual General Meeting on February 25 urging the federal government to immediately halt the project to allow for comprehensive economic, social, and environmental impact assessments and meaningful consultations with affected communities.
- The Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) and l’Union des producteurs agricoles (UPA) issued a joint call on February 27–28 for an immediate suspension of the project.

The agricultural resolutions called on governments and Alto to stay out of prime agricultural areas, avoid fragmenting farms, protect drainage infrastructure, address construction and ongoing operational costs (including fencing and maintenance of safe crossings), and ensure independent, publicly available impact assessments.

6.1 Parallel Concerns

The agricultural sector’s concerns closely parallel those facing the recreational trail community:

| Agricultural Concern (OFA/CFA) | Snowmobile Trail Parallel |
|---|--|
| Stay out of prime agricultural areas | Avoid alignments that sever interconnected trail networks |
| Avoid fragmenting farms; keep fields and operations intact | Preserve network connectivity; do not fragment touring loops |
| Protect farm drainage systems | Protect consent-based landowner relationship system |
| Safe farm crossings for equipment and livestock (min. 10 m) | Grade-separated trail crossings for grooming equipment and snowmobiles |
| Independent, publicly available agricultural impact assessments | Independent recreational trail and winter tourism impact assessments |
| Fair, proportional compensation for permanent impacts | Fair compensation for permanent loss of trail infrastructure and decades of volunteer-built social capital |

6.2 Shared Stakeholders

The agricultural and recreational trail constituencies are not merely analogous — they are substantially overlapping. Many of the approximately 18,000 private landowners who provide access for OFSC trails are the same farmers whose operations the OFA seeks to

protect. One farmer directly affected by the proposed southern corridor, Cory Kozmik, told Farmtario in February 2026 that the HSR threatens both her farm operation and the existing OFSC trails running through the area. Agricultural and recreational trail impacts are inseparable.

6.3 A Precedent for Response

The OFA/UPA/CFA resolutions demonstrate that organized, sector-specific advocacy is both appropriate and effective in the Alto consultation process. The agricultural sector drew on its own professionally prepared economic data, its organizational structure, and its established relationships with elected officials to articulate a clear position before the consultation deadline.

The OFSC is similarly well positioned to respond. The federation's 2022–2023 Economic Impact Study provides TREIM-based data with district-level breakdowns. The organizational structure — from provincial office through district boards to individual clubs — enables both a coordinated provincial response and targeted local submissions identifying specific trail impacts. The OFSC's existing relationships with municipal governments, conservation authorities, and provincial ministries provide credibility and access.

Whether the OFSC chooses to pursue a formal resolution, a joint statement with allied organizations, individual club-level submissions, or a combination of approaches, the agricultural sector's example demonstrates that the consultation process responds to organized, evidence-based advocacy from affected stakeholders.

7. Provincial Investment at Risk

The Government of Ontario recently made a historic \$4.9 million investment in the OFSC trail network for the 2025–26 season, recognizing the trail system's importance to communities and the provincial winter economy. This included \$3.9 million in new funding and \$1 million in infrastructure funding already allocated.

Simultaneously, the UCSR has undergone a painful 21% trail network reduction, losing 689 km across its 16 clubs due to OFSC-wide financial constraints. The trail system is already under significant stress. Additional HSR-related closures, landowner relationship disruptions, and construction-period impacts would compound an already difficult situation and could trigger further cascading trail losses throughout the region.

It would be contradictory for the federal government to fund a project that permanently destroys portions of the very recreational trail infrastructure the Province of Ontario is simultaneously investing to sustain.

8. The Consultation Opportunity

Alto's public consultation portal is open until March 29, 2026. The portal includes an interactive map where location-specific comments can be pinned directly onto areas of concern, as well as a general survey and open comment submission.

Submissions from snowmobile organizations at every level — provincial, district, and individual club — would carry significant weight, particularly where they include:

- Specific trail kilometres and crossing points within or adjacent to the identified corridors
- Economic data on local snowmobile-related tourism spending and employment
- Documentation of private landowner agreements that could be affected
- Volunteer hours and community investment in trail infrastructure
- Identification of signature touring loops that depend on cross-corridor connectivity
- Descriptions of trailside businesses (motels, restaurants, fuel stations) that depend on winter snowmobile traffic

The OFSC, UCSR, CEASR, Snow Country Snowmobile Region (District 6), and individual clubs each bring unique knowledge and credibility to this process. Provincial-level submissions can speak to the systemic network impacts and economic data. District-level submissions can identify specific inter-club connectivity that would be disrupted. Club-level submissions can provide the granular, on-the-ground detail about specific trail routes, landowner relationships, and community impacts that only local organizations possess.

The OFA's approach — combining a provincial-level joint resolution with encouragement for individual farmers to submit their own location-specific comments through Alto's portal — offers one model for an effective multi-level response. Other approaches may be equally or more appropriate for the snowmobile community's organizational structure and culture.

Alto's consultation portal: en.consultation.altotrain.ca/shaping-the-canada-of-tomorrow-with-high-speed-rail — Deadline: March 29, 2026

9. Conclusion

The proposed Alto high-speed rail project represents a significant and potentially irreversible threat to Ontario's organized snowmobile trail network and the rural winter tourism economy it sustains. The unique characteristics of HSR infrastructure — complete corridor fencing, grade separation, and the extended construction footprint — make it fundamentally more destructive to interconnected recreational trail systems than other forms of linear infrastructure.

No corridor option under consideration avoids these impacts. The consent-based landowner model that underpins the entire OFSC system introduces a vulnerability with no parallel in

other infrastructure conflicts: the potential for cascading trail closures extending far beyond the direct footprint of the rail corridor.

The agricultural sector has demonstrated that organized, evidence-based advocacy before the consultation deadline can shape the terms of the public debate. The OFSC and its member organizations possess the economic data, organizational capacity, and community credibility to mount an equally compelling response — and the March 29 deadline makes timely action essential.

About This Document

This policy brief was prepared by Alto HSR Citizen Research (altohsrcitizenresearch.ca), an independent citizen research initiative analyzing the proposed Alto high-speed rail project and its potential impacts on Eastern Ontario communities. It is provided as an informational resource for recreational trail organizations considering their response to Alto's public consultation. It does not represent the official position of any organization referenced herein.