

A hard winter of a different kind

North Country seeks federal disaster relief

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Blaming the lack of snow and ice for their financial troubles, North Country business leaders are pressing Gov. John Lynch for an emergency declaration that would allow businesses in New Hampshire's five northern counties to seek federal disaster aid.

At a meeting Friday, more than 40 business leaders told the governor they are suffering badly.

At North Country hotels, the vacancy rate is 80 percent, and holiday business was down 40 to 60 percent; business at ski areas also is 40 to 60 percent off from last year, they said. Slumping snowmobile sales means dealers are laying people off, some have even closed. Loggers can't move timber out of the woods because the ground isn't frozen, and retailers who rely on ice fishing business also are in trouble.

All this means businesses are losing money as equipment sits idle, meanwhile loan payments and other bills still need to be paid. A drop in snowmobile registrations this year will hurt next year's trail maintenance budget. Mills may face a lumber shortage if loggers can't work.

"I wish we could have 10 feet of snow on the ground, but we don't," Lynch said.

Bill Phillips of the U.S. Small Business Administration said in order for North Country businesses to qualify for low interest federal loans, state officials must seek a disaster declaration by proving at least five businesses in each of the northern counties has been adversely affected by the unseasonable weather.

"That should not be difficult to prove," said Phillips, who noted Vermont also is exploring seeking federal help.

Last month was the warmest December on record in New Hampshire, and even though regular winter weather is expected in January, officials acknowledged it's impossible to make up for business lost earlier this season.

"You can't make up for lost time," said state Forester Phil Bryce.

They also discussed other solutions to the North Country's woes. Suggestions included giving some businesses a break from paying rooms and meals taxes, lobbying for relief from franchise agreements for snowmobile dealers and making February school vacation week tax free to attract tourists.

"We do understand there is a sense of urgency here," said Commissioner George Bald, head of Resources and Economic Development. "There are a lot of people impacted by this."

Meanwhile, a Pittsburg timber company reopened its ATV trails in hopes of enticing some business to the region.

The Perry Stream Land and Timber Co.'s ATV trails normally are open only during the summer.

"These trails have not been open (in winter) before, and the landowner thought something should be done to bring a little money to the area," said Mark Zeigler, an officer with the Great North Woods ATV Club.