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Snowmobiles this winter proved their value in emergencies

Marooned islanders take a loss

By HANK REININK

Some 500 Ontario residents, living only five miles from 401 highway have been isolated practically all winter. On Amherst Island, near Kingston, farmers have run out of feed and their veal calves and market pigs have grown too heavy to obtain top prices.

The island ferry, owned by the Ontario Department of Highways, but operated by the township, is not built for winter use. As a result, the islanders go through an isolation period twice each year.

In the Fall they stock up on supplies before the ice gets too thick for the ferry. Then they have to wait for the ice to get thick enough to carry their cars. That usually takes several weeks.

In the Spring they go through a similar period, from the time the ice won't carry their vehicles any more until the time the ferry can resume operation.

The two isolation periods are bad enough. But this year driving conditions on the ice never became good enough for cars to get to and from the island. "It is a hell of a situation," said Jim Neilson, a county federation vice-president and an island farmer.

"The ice is safe enough, but there is a foot of slush on top of it, and then there is a layer of snow on top of the slush again."

Cars and trucks can't make it across and even heavily loaded

snowmobiles get bogged down. High school students, who attend the school in Napanee on the mainland, either stay with friends in Napanee or they are taken across on snowmobiles every day. The mail reaches the islanders by snowmobile as well.

But the heavier things, like feed or livestock just can't be moved at all. Most farmers have run out of feed for their animals and some of the telephone lines have been out of order for weeks.

The icebreaker Simcoe opened up a channel for the ferry March 21. But because the large chunks of ice left by the Simcoe are 27 inches thick, the ferry still can not operate.

The icebreaker left all the ice west of the channel intact, so

snowmobiles can still make it across. Even at the end of March the islanders are still practically isolated, depending entirely on snowmobiles for transportation.

The islanders feel they are being discriminated against, says Neilson. He points to Wolfe Island, nearby, where the Ontario Department of Highways keeps a ferry going all winter.

Because of the conditions the islanders have lived under for several generations, there is a strong community spirit. Each inhabitant knows everybody on the island, and they know they can depend on one another. An expression of that spirit came during the GFO vote, when 97 percent of the islanders voted for the farm organization scheme.