

Executive Summary: Private Timberlands Public Access Plan Update

Project Background

Sixteen years ago, Vermont began perhaps the most ambitious conservation project in its history.

In 1998, Champion International sold 132,000 acres of land in northeastern Vermont. Through a complex partnership, these lands were divided into three parcels. The most ecologically significant areas became public lands, while the largest areas continued as private working forest:

- The State of Vermont acquired 22,000 acres for the West Mountain Wildlife Management Area (WMA).
- The US Fish and Wildlife Service acquired 26,000 acres for the Silvio O. Conte National Wildlife Refuge.
- Essex Timber Company acquired 84,000 acres for working forestry, with easements protecting certain natural resources and guaranteeing perpetual public access. This land was subsequently purchased by the Plum Creek Timber Company.

The most important part of this project has been its focus on complementary management across the three ownerships to achieve three equally important goals: Working forests, ecological protection, and public access.

Sixteen years after acquisition, calling these parcels “the former Champion lands” does little to recognize their unique and historical values for the people of Vermont. As a result, this document will refer to these lands as the Kingdom Heritage Lands.

The Planning Process

The Vermont Agency of Natural Resources (ANR) uses management plans to administer its land, and relies heavily on public involvement in planning.

The original planning process for the Kingdom Heritage Lands was unprecedented—after more than 35 public meetings, participation from the Vermont Legislature, and hundreds of written comments, ANR and its legal partners for these lands produced two guiding plans in 2002, a Long Range Management Plan for the West Mountain Wildlife Management Area and a Public Access Plan to manage the public access easement on the Private Timberlands.

In 2013 and 2014, ANR began the process to update these plans by soliciting input from user groups, local residents, and organizations. While numerous legal constraints and directives determine much of the management direction for these properties, this plan update was created by integrating this legal framework with comments from the public, the goals for these ownerships, updated scientific assessments, and a decade of management experience with these lands.

Public Access Plan Update

The Private Timberlands (now owned by Plum Creek) are one of the largest landholdings in Vermont. The Timberlands have two primary goals: working forestry and public access. As manager of the Public Access Easement on these lands, ANR works closely with the landowner and all users of these lands.

ANR's experience managing public access on these lands over the last decade has been very positive. In large part, this has been thanks to the thoroughness of the original Public Access Plan and a successful collaborative relationship with the landowner.

Public comment on updates to the Public Access Plan focused largely on maintaining the remote character of these lands and the public access opportunities they provide. Comments also indicated an interest in maintaining or increasing public access for a variety of activities including, snowmobiling, mountain biking, hiking, hunting, and fishing.

This updated Public Access Plan follows the original plan closely, by

- Emphasizing dispersed pedestrian access across the ownership (for uses like hunting, fishing, bushwhacking, photography, and berry-picking).
- Maintaining more intensive uses in designated corridors with Corridor Managers, presently including:
 - Up to 150 miles of snowmobiling trails across the Kingdom Heritage Lands are managed by the Vermont Association of Snow Travelers,
 - Seven miles of hiking trails are managed by the Green Mountain Club on the Private Timberlands,
 - 25 miles of equestrian corridors are managed by the Vermont Horse Council on the Private Timberlands and West Mountain WMA.

This updated plan also takes steps to increase public vehicular access in the area, by

- Designating up to an additional 15 miles of roads across the Private Timberlands (for a total of 85 miles) to be open for public vehicular access. ANR would share the cost of maintaining these roads, as it does the 70 miles already designated.

Overall, this updated plan hopes to guide a second decade as successful as the first for the Private Timberlands—providing public access and working forestry side-by-side, and ensuring public voices are heard in the process of crafting management decisions.