

Kingdom Heritage Lands Private Timberlands Public Access Plan Update: A Reader's Guide

This document is a companion to the full Draft Kingdom Heritage Lands Private Timberlands Public Access Plan 2014. The purpose of this guide is to briefly describe the topics detailed in the plan, to review changes from the original management plan (approved in 2002), and to direct readers to relevant sections in the draft updated plan (see section references in parentheses).

Because the original plan was created through an extensive public involvement process and has proven to be highly successful, this updated plan retains the vast majority of the structure and content of the original.

Following a brief description of the project background, each of the main sections of the plan are described in more detail below, highlighting key content and changes to the original plan.

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.

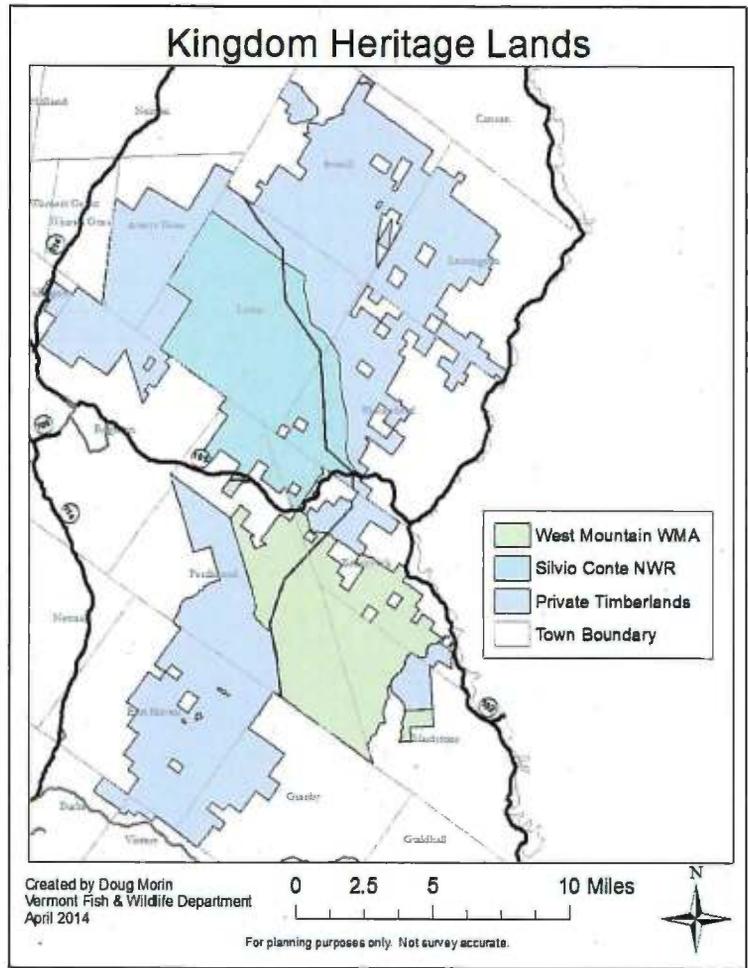
Sixteen years after acquisition, calling these parcels “the former Champion lands” does little to recognize their unique and historical values for the people of Vermont. As a result, this document will refer to these lands as the Kingdom Heritage Lands.

Context

The Context section in this plan is longer than similar sections in any other Vermont Agency of Natural Resources (ANR) management plan (III). It is included with only minor changes from the original, because detailed knowledge about the background, management constraints and directives, and goals of the Kingdom Heritage Lands as a whole is essential for understanding the strategies employed at West Mountain WMA and on the Private Timberlands.

Of particular importance, the original conservation design and public process resulted in a vision of complementary management across the lands, to provide ecological conservation, working forestry, and public access in perpetuity (III.F.).

The Private Timberlands play a key role in the vision for the Kingdom Heritage Lands, as the largest parcel (at almost two-thirds of the total area). While the West Mountain WMA and Conte National Wildlife Refuge provide a mix of active and passive management to benefit wildlife, the Private Timberlands provide continuous working forestry. All three parcels provide public access as a primary goal. An easement ensuring the perpetual use of the Private Timberlands for working forestry and natural resource protection is held by the Vermont Land Trust, and an easement ensuring perpetual public access across the Private Timberlands is held and managed by the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and the Agency of Natural Resources.



Parcel Description

Parcel Description provides an overview of the public use and recreational resources present on the ownership (IV). Overall, the levels and types of use are similar to those described in the original plan (IV.D.).

Dispersed public uses are the primary public use goal, and occur throughout the property.

Concentrated uses are managed through designated corridors with Corridor Manager organizations. Since 2002, ANR has approved corridors for snowmobile, hiking, and equestrian uses on the Private Timberlands, in addition to existing vehicular corridors (IV.E.).

ANR and Plum Creek also created a new type of recreational infrastructure, by constructing a drift boat access area on the Connecticut River in the town of Lemington (IV.E.)

Public Involvement

Public Involvement provides a summary of the key role that the public has played in developing this plan (V). The original West Mountain WMA Management Plan came from an unprecedented process of more than 35 public meetings, involvement of the Legislature, and hundreds of public comments. This plan update has used a similar, but less intensive, process to fine-tune the vision created by the comprehensive original public process.

In 2013, ANR began the public scoping process for this plan update by meeting with 16 different interest groups, hosting two public meetings, and holding an open comment period that gathered 40 written comments over 60 days. This effort was intended to reach out to all groups of users and interested parties, and was much more involved than any such effort on other state lands.

Comments, broadly, expressed:

- The perceived importance of the unique character of the Kingdom Heritage Lands.
- Interest in maintaining snowmobile, equestrian, and bike corridor networks, but concern over the compatibility of intensive recreation and wildlife conservation.
- Concern over the ability to access the WMA and the Kingdom Heritage Lands through private roads.
- Concern over the potential effects of the development of wind power generation in the area on wildlife and the region's character.
- A range of opinions on West Mountain's "Core" Special Treatment Area and planned road closures within the STA.

Management Direction, Actions, and Strategies

Management Direction, Actions, and Strategies section details the goals and objectives for the ownership, and how they will be accomplished with specific strategies (VI).

Goals and Objectives define the management direction for the parcel, and are derived from the 1999 Budget Adjustment Act, the public access easement, the conservation easement, and the original public access plan (VI.B.). Because the original plan has proven so successful over its first decade, only small clarifications and adjustments have been made for this update.

Dispersed public uses are encouraged throughout the Private Timberlands. As one of the property's primary goals, and unchanged from the original plan, a variety of uses are permitted, including: bushwhacking, wildlife watching, photography, hunting, fishing, trapping, swimming, canoeing, and gathering edibles (VI.D.). No changes to these uses are proposed.

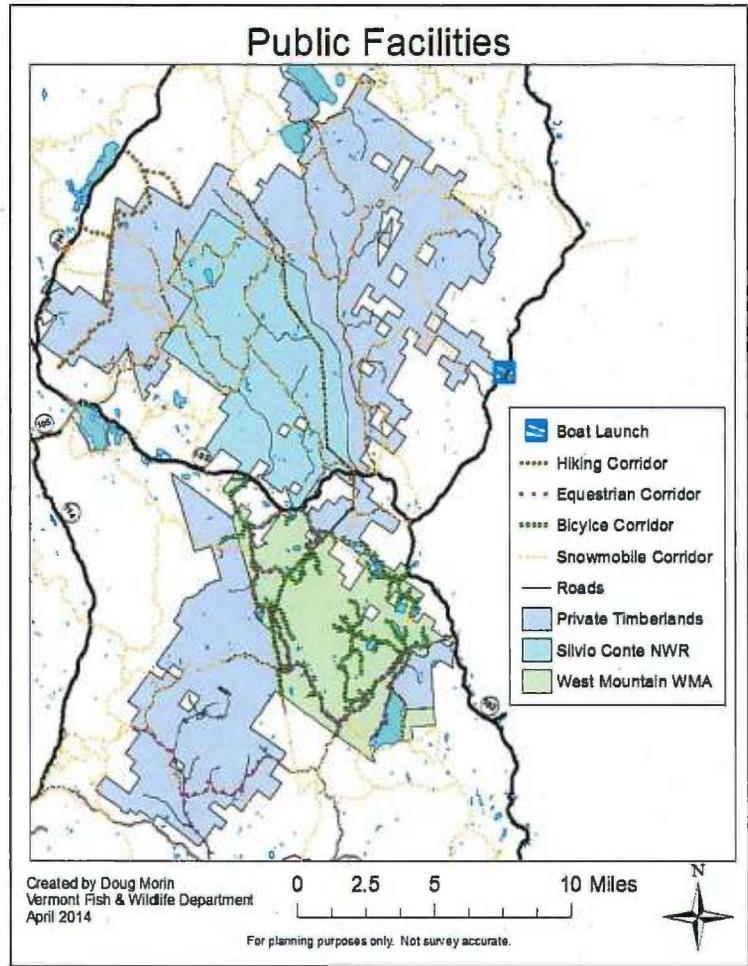
Concentrated recreational uses are managed through designated corridors with Corridor Manager organizations (VI.E.). Presently, ANR and its Corridor Managers oversee three types of corridors on the WMA:

- 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 (with 8 more miles in development),

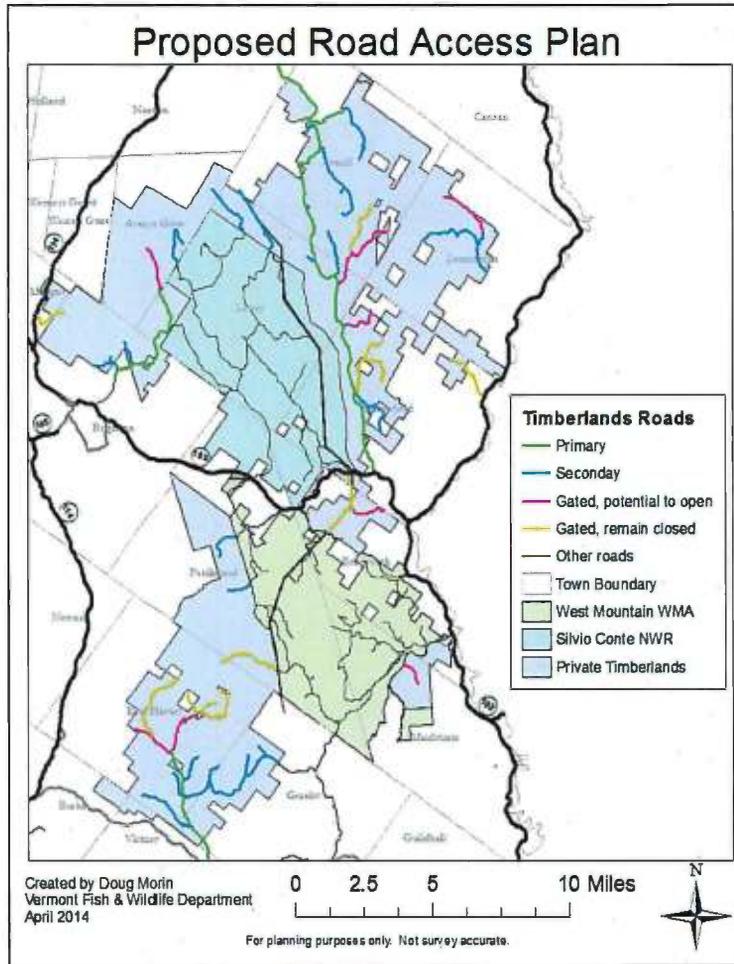
- Twenty-five miles of equestrian corridors are managed by the Vermont Horse Council on the Private Timberlands and West Mountain WMA.

Managing concentrated uses in this way has proven very successful over the last decade. No new recreational corridors or infrastructure is anticipated for this planning cycle, however, new Corridor Manager Agreements must be completed with each organization, and each may request additions or alterations to the existing corridor network.

Roads are managed by ANR in collaboration with Plum Creek. To ensure roads remain available for public use, and as detailed in the original public access plan, ANR has shared the cost of maintaining 70 miles of roads across the Private Timberlands over the last decade.



In response to the spectrum of concerns and perspectives voiced on the importance of vehicular access in the 2013 scoping process, and to fulfill the ecological goals of West Mountain WMA’s Core Area without unduly impacting public access, a new set of strategies is presented in these draft plans. On the Private Timberlands, these strategies include pursuing discussions with Plum Creek to open to public access up to an additional 15 miles of currently gated roads on the Private Timberlands, bringing the total to as much as 85 miles. Maintenance costs for these additional roads would be shared by ANR and Plum Creek, as with the currently accessible roads. In addition, ANR will continue discussions with the Town of Granby and a neighboring landowner to ensure public access to and from the Private Timberlands and West Mountain WMA from the south.



Conclusion

Since 1998, when Champion International sold its landholdings in Vermont, the Kingdom Heritage Lands project has successfully provided the people of the state with unmatched levels of public access, working forestry, and ecological protection.

With many users and interested parties, numerous legal constraints and directives, and a wide variety of natural resources, managing these lands is a complex task. The original public access plan for the Private Timberlands was created in an unparalleled public involvement process and has been highly successful, so this update maintains most of its structure and content. All proposed alterations seek to further the original goals and vision already defined for this land, while remaining responsive to public input.