

West Mountain Wildlife Management Area Long-Range Management Plan Update: A Reader's Guide

This document is a companion to the full Draft West Mountain Wildlife Management Area Long-Range Management 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 in an unmatched public process and has proven to be very 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 is 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.

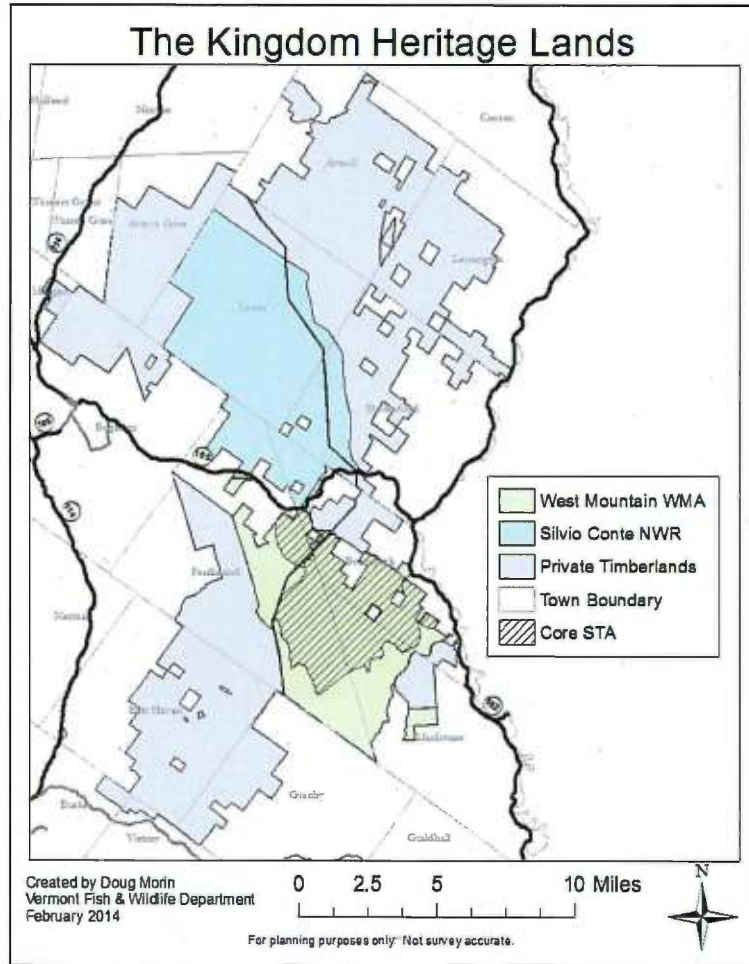
Sixteen years after acquisition, calling these parcels “the former Champion lands” does little to recognize their unique and historical values for the people of Vermont. As a result, this document will refer to these lands as the Kingdom Heritage Lands.

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.

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.

The size, ecological features and habitats, and undeveloped character of West Mountain WMA give it conservation and public use values unique in Vermont. As a result, the primary goals of the WMA are to provide perpetual ecological protection/wildlife habitat and public access (III.B., III.C.). These priorities are enforced by a Conservation and Public Access Easement (the “State Lands Easement”), granted by ANR to The Nature Conservancy and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, as well as specific directives from both acts of the Vermont Legislature and Executive Orders of Governors (III.A.).



A key part of accomplishing the goals of West Mountain WMA and the complementary management at the center of the Kingdom Heritage Lands as a whole is the continuation of the “Core” special treatment area on West Mountain WMA (III.H.).

Parcel Description

Parcel Description provides an overview of the natural, cultural, and recreational resources present on the ownerships (IV). While most of this information is the same as, or very similar to, the original plan, updated ANR assessments found some notable changes including:

- All culverts where roads cross major streams, are compromised in their flood resilience and ability to allow fish and other aquatic organism passage (IV.C.3.b.).
- Moose browse has suppressed forest regeneration in recent decades, but the moose population is now near target levels and fewer impacts are expected (IV. C.4.b.).
- New species and locations of nonnative invasive plants have been discovered in a number of locations across the WMA in the last 10 years (IV. C.4.b.).
- The major forest communities (northern hardwood and red-spruce northern hardwood) are now of sufficient size, location, and quality to be State Significant (IV.C.5.).

- Canada lynx and American marten, both state Endangered species, occur again in Vermont and within the area of the WMA after many decades of absence (IV.C.6.b.)
- Recreational infrastructure now includes two designated camping areas, a moose viewing platform, and corridors for snowmobiles, horseback riding, and biking (IV.D. and E.).

This section also describes ANR's Management of West Mountain WMA Since 1998, including active habitat and wildlife management, infrastructure maintenance, recreation management, and acquisitions (IV.F.).

Finally, this section includes the original delineation of the Core Area and Active Management Area, which designates where active and passive management will occur on the WMA, as guided by the State Lands Easement and original public process (IV.G.).

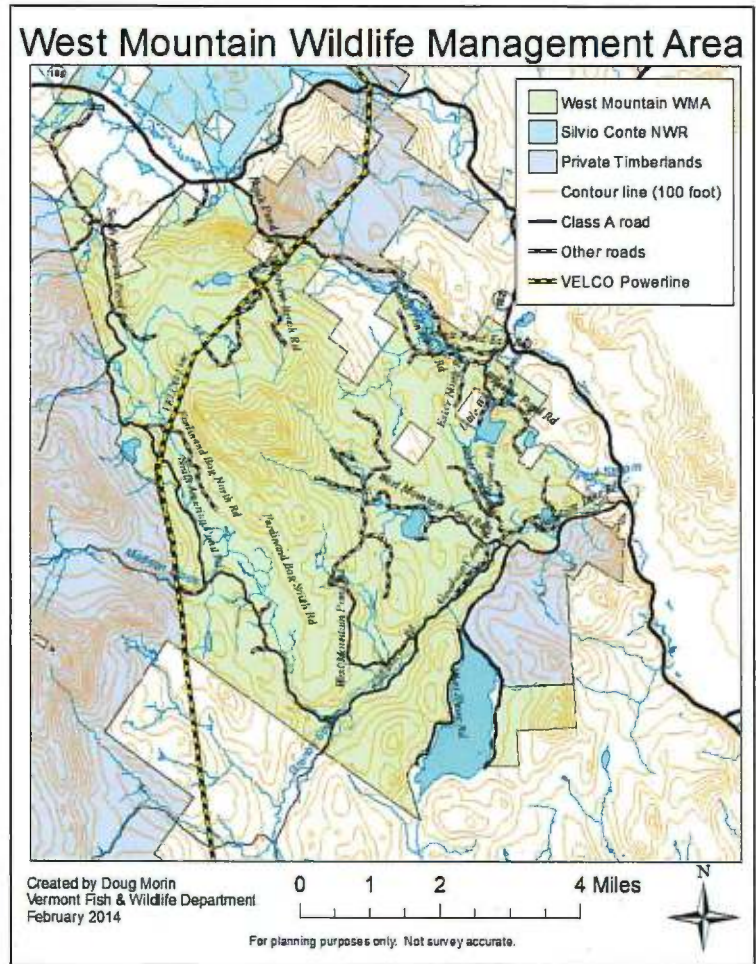
Public Involvement

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.



- Interest in both increased even-aged management to benefit game species and forest management practices designed around ecosystem function and non-game wildlife.
- Desires for leased camps to be made available to the public, kept privately, or removed.
- Concern over the ability to access the WMA and the Kingdom Heritage Lands through private roads.
- Concern over the potential development of wind power generation in the area.

The topics receiving the most comment were the Core Area and road closures:

West Mountain WMA Core Area: Some people opposed implementing a Core Area because they believed it was planned without public input, and others felt it would diminish game populations. Other comments stated that implementing a Core Area was important for reasons including: protecting rare species and natural communities, providing a place where natural processes would prevail, providing an area for scientific study, providing an area that offers remote recreational experiences, and consistency with the State Lands Easement.

West Mountain WMA Road Access: Road access at West Mountain WMA received by far the most comments. Some comments expressed that planned road closures in the Core Area should not be implemented, because they would detract from hunting, habitat management, recreation, access for the disabled, and other uses. Other comments stated that roads should be closed as planned, for ecological restoration, scientific study, more remote hunting and fishing experiences, and to preserve and enhance one of the last large pieces of land in Vermont that has few invasive species and little development. Still other comments showed interest in a middle ground, where a smaller number of road closures would be acceptable, roads could be closed further in the future than planned, or roads could be allowed to revegetate passively.

Management Direction, Actions, and Strategies

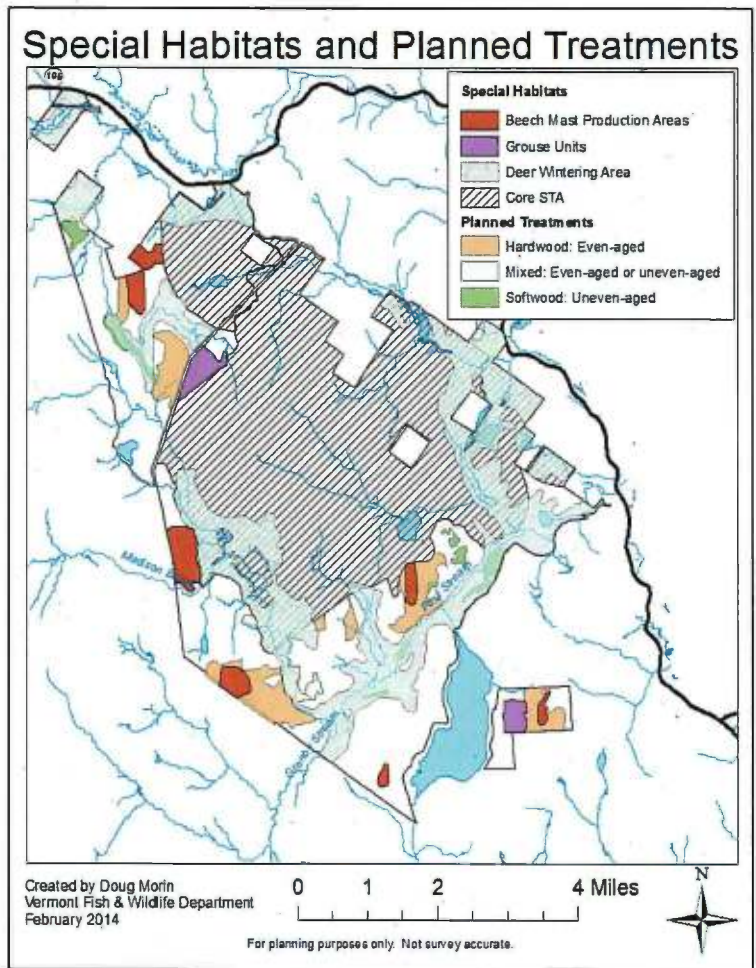
Management Direction, Actions, and Strategies section details the goals and objectives for the ownership, and how they will be accomplished with specific strategies (VI).

Goals and Objectives define the management direction for the parcel, and are derived from the 1999 Budget Adjustment Act, the State Lands Easement, the 2002 Executive Order, and the original management plan (VI.A.). Because the original plan has proven so successful over its first decade, only small clarifications and adjustments have been made for this update.

Active management will continue much as originally planned (VI.B.). Wildlife habitat management will continue in the Active Management Area, at the same level (VI.B.2.). As originally planned, strategies will include development of young forest patches, ruffed grouse units, beech mast production areas, deer wintering areas, riparian buffers, and woody material retention. In addition, a new bridge over Paul Stream (the “Bullthroat Bridge”) is planned for construction, which will enable forest management in a portion of the Active Management Area that is currently inaccessible for logging equipment (VI.E.3.c). In addition, one new active management strategy is allowed in this draft plan update: forest management to increase the structural complexity of stands, enhancing the development of mature forest characteristics and habitat features.

Habitat management within the Core Area will also continue much as originally planned (VI.B.3). With limited active management, the Core Area will, over time, provide habitats and ecosystems not currently available in the surrounding region. Allowing this area to experience natural ecological processes and develop mature forests with minimal human infrastructure or active management is central to the vision for the Kingdom Heritage Lands.

Active management of the Core Area will remain limited to protecting rare, threatened, and endangered species and ecological restoration (VI.B.3). As part of this goal, this draft plan update continues deer wintering area enhancements in the eastern portions of the Core Area and allows consideration of limited noncommercial or research-based forest management designed to enhance the development of the habitat features and processes of old forests that the Core Area is intended to provide.



Aquatic resources management is addressed in a new section, to protect and enhance the valuable waters, aquatic species, and wetland communities of the WMA (VI.B.2.e). The strategies in this section include riparian buffers, aquatic habitat restoration through the addition of large wood into streams, and Atlantic salmon restoration. This section also highlights the need to replace or remove culverts which are having negative effects on water quality, aquatic organism passage, and/or public infrastructure. Investments in appropriately designed culverts and bridges will both mitigate these environmental impacts and improve public access across roads and infrastructure.

Nonnative invasive plants are highlighted, due to their increasing occurrence and the critical need to control and manage them before they spread throughout the WMA (VI.B.2.c.7). While one of the significant ecological values of West Mountain WMA is its relative lack of invasives, species such as common reed, Asiatic bittersweet, buckthorn, honeysuckle, and others are being found in increasing numbers, primarily along roads.

Climate change is addressed in a new section that describes the anticipated effects in this region and land management strategies to increase the resilience of the WMA, such as developing a forest with a diversity of species- and age-classes and replacing undersized culverts (VI.D.).

Road management strategies propose the most significant potential changes to the original plan (VI.E.). With 73 miles of roads (1.92 miles of road per square mile of land), West Mountain WMA contains a great deal of vehicular infrastructure—even more than some towns. The road system is more than adequate to serve its multiple purposes: wildlife management, public motor vehicle access, recreational corridors, camp access, and use by neighboring land owners.

The original rationale and strategies for road closures to lessen the human impact on natural processes within the Core Area (VI.E.3.) remain scientifically valid, especially given the complementary management approach of the Kingdom Heritage Lands, where two-thirds of the land will forever remain working forest. In addition, a recent ANR assessment concluded that roads that were planned for closure in the original plan but that have not been closed are causing ongoing ecological, social, and maintenance impacts that require either active closure and revegetation or significant maintenance.

To provide a balanced approach to road closures that responds to the spectrum of concerns and perspectives voiced in the scoping process, and to fulfill the ecological goals of the Core Area without unduly impacting public access, a new set of road access strategies is presented in this draft. The foundations of this road access plan are: 1) major travel corridors will remain uninterrupted, including all primary roads, access to all active camp leases, and all designated snowmobile corridors; 2) all parts of the WMA will remain accessible within two miles of a road (and in most cases, much less); and, 3) all roads in the Core Area will be closed over time – including most dead-end roads in the Core Area that do not provide access for camps or designated snowmobile trails within the 10-year timeframe of this plan update (VI.E.3.).

Importantly, while some roads will be closed in the near-term, this road access plan includes a number of new strategies specifically intended to increase public pedestrian and vehicular access in both West Mountain WMA and nearby private lands, including:

- Opening the only currently gated road on the WMA.
- Constructing a new bridge (the “Bullthroat Bridge”) over Paul Stream to improve access to portions of the Active Management Area and Core Area.
- Maintaining footpaths on closed roads in the Core Area, where feasible.
- Pursuing discussions with Plum Creek to open to public access up to an additional 15 miles of currently gated roads on the Private Timberlands, with maintenance costs shared by ANR.
- Continuing discussions with the Town of Granby and a neighboring landowner to ensure public access to the WMA from the south.

In addition, the plan proposes a new timeline for closing roads in the Core Area, designating:

- 35.25 miles throughout the WMA for Open status, including all major travel corridors;
- 7.1 miles for Contingent closure, to be open until the end of use for camp access and designated snowmobile trails (35% of eventual closures);

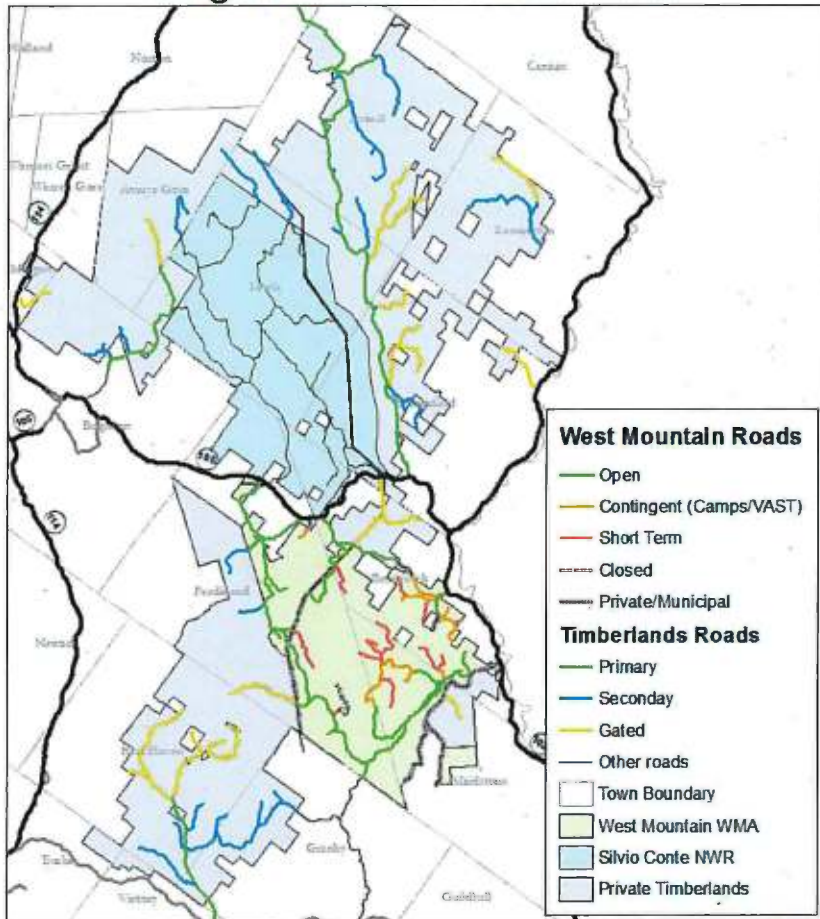
- 4.5 miles of Long Term closures, to be prescribed in a future planning process (2024 or later) (23 % of eventual closures);
- 8.5 miles of Short Term closures within the next ten years, on a schedule specified in the draft plan update (42% of eventual closures).

These strategies target Short Term closures on the roads causing the greatest negative impacts for ecosystems, public access, and infrastructure, while temporarily extending vehicular access in more appropriate locations of the Core Area.

These new strategies are intended to work in combination with the parallel strategies to increase public access on the WMA and the surrounding region. Overall, they aim to achieve the goals of the Core Area over time without unduly impacting access within the region.

Decades from now, once all road closures are complete, 88% of the WMA will remain accessible from within one mile of a road open to vehicular access, and all of the WMA will be accessible within less than two miles of a road open to vehicular access (V.I.E.4.).

Original Road Access Plan



- West Mountain Roads**
- Open
 - Contingent (Camps/VAST)
 - Short Term
 - Closed
 - Private/Municipal
- Timberlands Roads**
- Primary
 - Secondary
 - Gated
 - Other roads
- Town Boundary
 ■ West Mountain WMA
 ■ Silvio Conte NWR
 ■ Private Timberlands

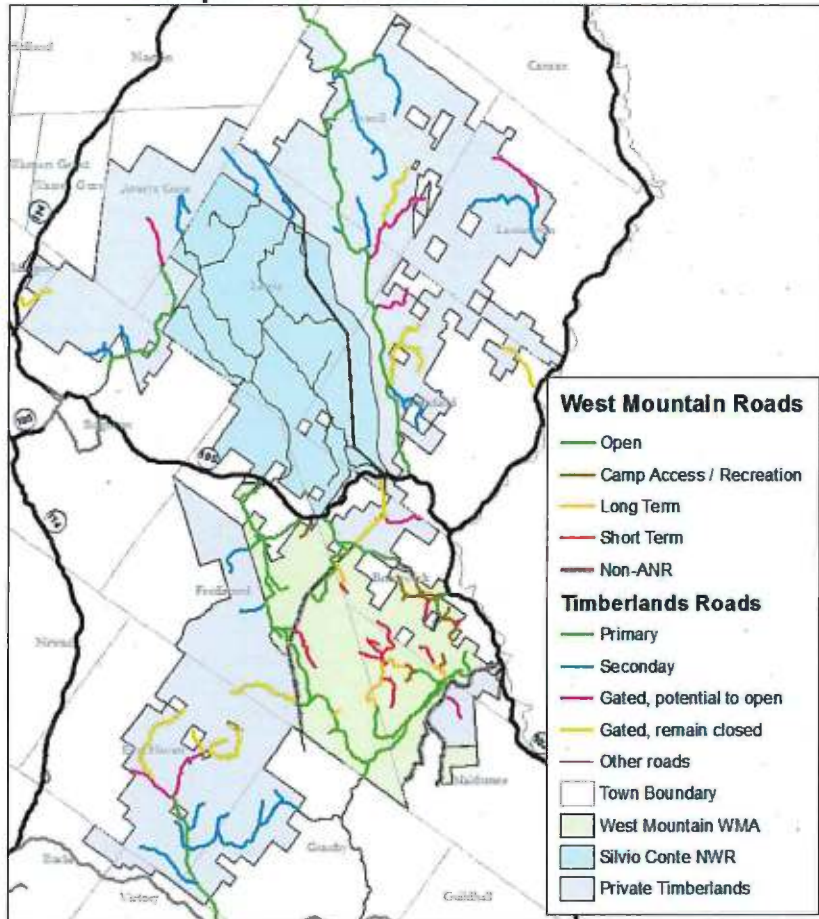
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Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department
April 2014

0 2.5 5 10 Miles



For planning purposes only. Not survey accurate.

Proposed Road Access Plan



- West Mountain Roads**
- Open
 - Camp Access / Recreation
 - Long Term
 - Short Term
 - Non-ANR
- Timberlands Roads**
- Primary
 - Secondary
 - Gated, potential to open
 - Gated, remain closed
 - Other roads
- Town Boundary
 ■ West Mountain WMA
 ■ Silvio Conte NWR
 ■ Private Timberlands

Created by Doug Morin
Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department
April 2014

0 2.5 5 10 Miles



For planning purposes only. Not survey accurate.

Dispersed public uses are encouraged throughout the WMA, including the Core Area (VI.F.2.a). 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, gathering edibles, primitive camping, and campfires.

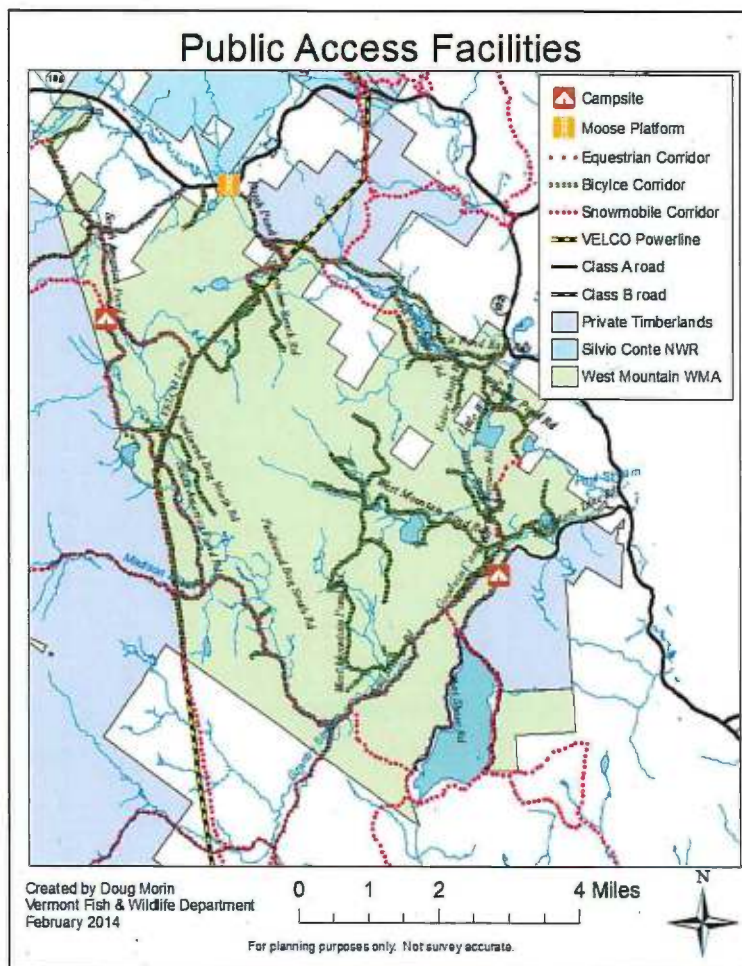
Over time, the Core Area will provide the public access for these kinds of uses in an increasingly rare landscape—a more remote, undeveloped area.

Concentrated uses are managed through designated corridors with Corridor Manager organizations (VI.F.3.). Presently, ANR and its Corridor Managers oversee three types of corridors on the WMA:

- Snowmobile corridors: 30 miles on existing roads and trails managed by Vermont Association of Snow Travelers
- Equestrian corridors: 25 miles on existing gravel roads managed by Vermont Horse Council
- Biking corridors: 70 miles on existing gravel roads managed by Vermont Agency of Natural Resources

Managing concentrated uses in this way has proven very successful over the last decade. No new recreational corridors are 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. In addition, the snowmobile corridor passing through the Core Area on the east side of the WMA will be moved outside the Core Area once a suitable alternative is available.

ANR has also increased recreational infrastructure through the construction of two designated camping sites and a moose viewing platform over the last 10 years. This plan update envisions the possibility of constructing a low-infrastructure shooting range on the WMA, to provide a safe location for firearms practice. No other new recreational infrastructure is planned.



Management of privately leased camps is an ongoing task for ANR, with 64 camps on the WMA (VI.F.7.). These camps existed before the state acquired the land, and the Legislature set out terms that will cause all leases to revert to the state. Presently, 43 leases retain the original term of lifetime of the leaseholders plus twenty years, while 12 have an expiration in 2078 (from adding leaseholders), and 9 have an expiration in 2056 (from selling or transferring leases). This section provides more detailed information on the camps than was available for the original plan, and discusses the need for ANR to create an updated long-term plan for the camps, because any structure left on the property when leases expire will also revert to the state.

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 management plan for West Mountain WMA 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.