

April 5
2023

VTGTC Testimony on H.131

House Agriculture, Food Resiliency and Forestry Committee

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Co-Chair, Vermont Trails & Greenways Council

The Big Picture

The world-class outdoor recreation landscape in Vermont

- 8,000+ miles of public access trails
 - Growing trail-serviced hut system
 - 7000+ miles of river and over 800 lakes & ponds
 - More than 40 alpine & cross-country ski areas
 - Over 6 million acres of land for hunting
 - 150 miles of accessible rail trails
 - Dozens of outdoor recreation-oriented communities
 - Access to natural, often conserved landscapes
 - A vibrant and highly diversified outdoor recreation business sector
- ... All within a 5-hour drive of 60+ million people



The Benefits

Outdoor Recreation drives health, environmental, and economic impact

- Supports healthy & resilient communities
- Fosters ecological awareness & conservation
- Fuels sustainable economic development:
 - Hundreds of outdoor businesses
 - Attraction and retention of new residents
 - Supporting infrastructure and amenities
 - A driving force for so many of the 13+ million annual visitor trips
 - **Responsible for 4.1% of Vermont's GDP, surpassed by only Hawaii and Montana**



Source: Headwaters Economics

The Ecosystem

Public sector, nonprofit, and for-profit enterprises working together

- The Vermont Agency of Natural Resources
- Public land managers (including VT-FPR)
- Trail stewardship organizations
- Towns & Municipalities
- The outdoor recreation business community
- Organizations focused on equitable access
- The Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development
- Regional Development Corporations
- The Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative
- The Legislature!



Stewards

Those who maintain and develop outdoor recreational infrastructure

- The Vermont Agency of Natural Resources
- Public land managers (including VT-FPR)
- Trail stewardship organizations
- Towns & Municipalities

The VTGC

- The outdoor recreation business community
- Organizations focused on equitable access
- The Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development
- Regional Development Corporations
- The Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative
- The Legislature!



About the VTGC

The consolidated, expert voice and support hub for recreational trails in Vermont.

As of 2021, our organizational members:

- Represent 50,000+ individual members
- Log 100,000+ hours of volunteer time annually
- Manage and maintain 7,750+ miles of trails
- Support 50,000+ jobs statewide through the broader impact of our work
- Steward trails on private land, which hosts over 70% of public access trails in Vermont
- Partner closely with state and federal agencies to manage trails on public land



VTGC Members

Comprised of over 50 trail-related organizations and individuals

- 18 State-wide Trail Stewardship organizations
- 10 Regional Trail Stewardship organizations
- 6 Local/Community Groups
- 7 Townships & Municipalities
- 7 State/Federal Agencies (ex-officio)
- 5 Individual and Commercial members

<https://vermonttgc.org/members>



VTGC Board

- Nick Bennette, Vermont Mountain Bike Association (VMBA), Co-Chair
- Danny Hale, Vermont ATV Sportsman's Association (VASA), Co-Chair
- Mariah Keagy, Sinuosity Flowing Trails, Co-Vice Chair
- RJ Thompson, Vermont Huts Association, Co-Vice Chair
- Cindy Locke, Vermont Association of Snow Travelers (VAST), Treasurer
- Greg Western, Cross Vermont Trail, Secretary
- Abby Long, Kingdom Trails Association
- Matt Williams, Catamount Trail Association
- Caitrin Maloney, Velomont Trail Collective
- Carolyn Lawrence, Stowe Trails Partnership
- Rachel Batz, Town of Dorset
- Rosy Metcalfe, Independent Community Representative



Our Stewardship

Maintaining trail infrastructure through private landowner relationships and public land manager partnerships

- Guiding principle: balance equitable access with responsible use of Vermont's amazing landscape
- Application of rigorous Best Management Practices (BMPs) on trail design, construction, use, maintenance, and stewardship
- Advise the Agency of Natural Resources
- Co-manage the Vermont Trails System (VTS) with VT-FPR
- Provide valuable input to policymakers and help guide relevant legislation
- Continually work with members and external stakeholders to operationalize and evolve our BMPs



Advisory Role

The Council has a statutory role to advise ANR on trail matters

- The Vermont Trail System (VTS), which designates the official public-access trails in Vermont
- The Recreation Trail Program (RTP), which provides Federal Highway Administration funds to the States to develop and maintain recreational trails and trail-related facilities for both nonmotorized and motorized recreational trail uses
- The Vermont Outdoor Economic Collaborative (VOREC), with two Steering Committee seats
- Other trail-related policy and legislation

Vermont Statute: Title 10, Chapter 20

§ 441 Statement of Purpose

(a) In order to provide access to the use and enjoyment of the outdoor areas of Vermont, to conserve and use the natural resources of this State for healthful and recreational purposes, and to provide transportation from one place to another, it is declared to be the policy of this State to provide the means for maintaining and improving a network of trails to be known as the "Vermont trails system

§ 443 Vermont trails system

The Vermont trails system shall consist of those individual trails recognized by the Agency of Natural Resources with the advice of the Greenways Council. The Agency, with the advice of the Council, shall establish criteria for recognition of single use and shared use trails. (Added 1993, No. 211 (Adj. Sess.), § 28.)

§ 443 Advisory council designated

(a) The Vermont Trails and Greenways Council, Inc., an organization of trail using and trail providing groups, is designated as an advisory council to the Agency of Natural Resources and shall advise on all matters related to this chapter, including the allocation of State and federal funds appropriated for the purposes of this chapter.

Partner Role

The Council works closely with VT-FPR across a host of functions:

- As major landholder, managing 360,000+ acres directly and another 130,000+ through conservation easements
- In managing the VTS, including trail/member application and modifications to the program
- Coordinating on policy development and response
- Through individual member stewardship cooperative agreements for trail development and maintenance
- On initiatives like the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP)
- Developing tools and refinement of BMPs



Steward Role

VTGC organizations work directly with the landowners who host more than 70% of public access trails in Vermont

- Council Members establish and cultivate lasting relationships with landowners who host trails
- Individual trails may cross dozens of parcels
- Landowners receive no tax benefits or other direct incentives; efforts to give back through volunteerism
- Limited Landowner Liability is absolutely essential
- Council members develop maintenance, access, and co-stewardship plans and Landowner Access Agreements to make public funding accessible
- Council serves as a voice for landowners



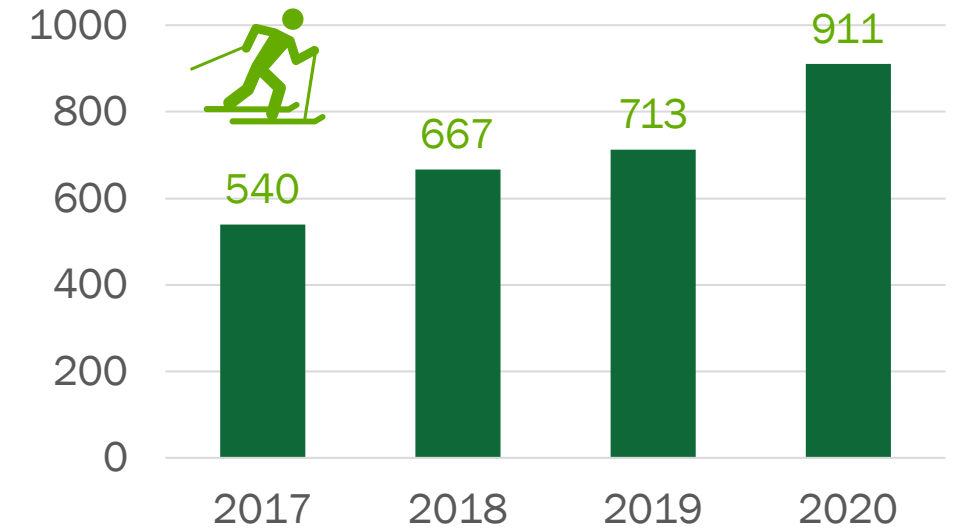
The Challenge

Vermonters and visitors rely on recreational trails, now more than ever

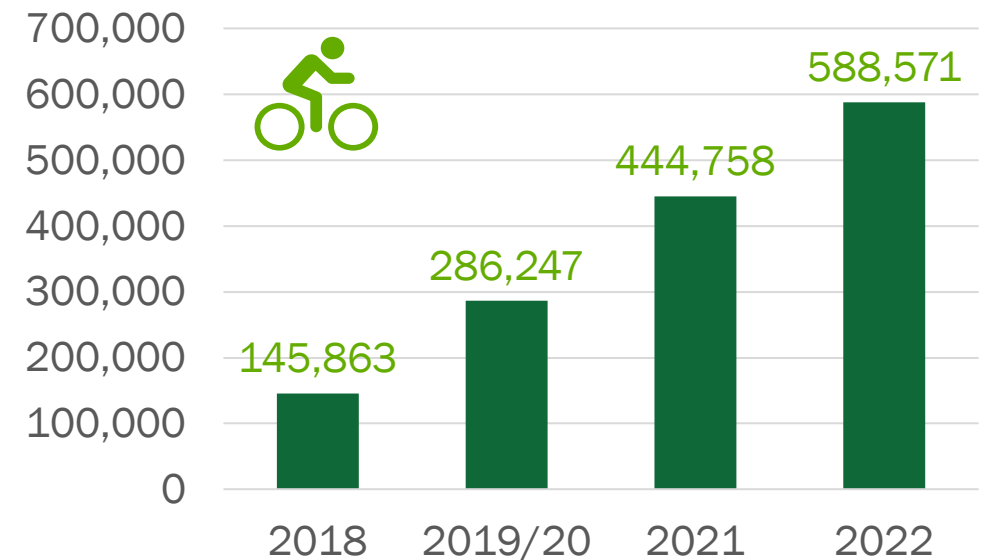
- Dramatic increase in demand for outdoor recreation over the last decade; accelerated through the pandemic
- Over half (54%) of Americans recreated outdoors in 2021, participation that has increased every year since 2014
- Trail usage across usage types, motorized/non-motorized and seasons has increased 100-200% over the last 5 years
- Over 70% of Vermont's recreational trails are hosted by private landowners, stewarded by non-profit organizations with limited/no public support

Without more investment in and support for outdoor recreational stewardship, the quality & quantity of Vermont's outdoor recreation opportunities are at risk

Trail Users, 'No-Name' Backcountry Area



TrailForks Trail Check-ins, State-wide



The Need

What is required for a sustainable path forward for trail stewardship in Vermont

- Amount of support is less critical than sustainability
- Three key issues to address
 - Centralized capacity for the VTS to provide technical support, strengthen the VTS, and fulfill advisory role
 - Organizational support for those maintaining public access to professionalize amid increasing use
 - Project-specific support for maintenance, upgrades, and repairs
- Consequence of delayed action: Burrows Trail restoration



Montana's Solution

The Montana Trail Stewardship Grant Program

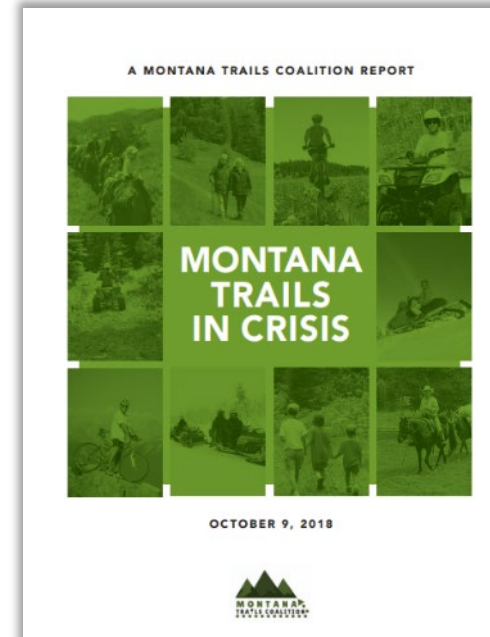
- 2018 – Montana Trails Coalition releases “Trails in Crisis” report, emphasizing unfunded RTP projects
- 2019 – Legislature passes SB 24, which includes Montana Trail Stewardship Grant Program; initial \$1.2M funded via optional light motor vehicle registration fee
- 2022 – a portion (4%) of the recreational marijuana state tax is directed to the Trail Stewardship Grant Program
 - \$406,000 in FY2022
 - \$1,080,000 in FY2023
 - \$2,040,000 by FY2025 (est.)
- Since inception, has awarded ~\$2.6 million to 73 projects focused on development, renovation, and maintenance.



Montana Trails Coalition

Trails for All
Montanas and Visitors

Through collaboration, education, and communication, we work collectively to promote, improve, and support trails and outdoor recreational opportunities for public benefit in Montana.



“As pressure on Montana’s public land infrastructure increases, it is essential that we invest in our trails to preserve our way of life

H.131 Summary

An act relating to the creation of the Green Mountain Recreation Fund

- Creates a dedicated role for the Council to fulfill its statutory role and stewardship activities
- Creates a dedicated role for FPR to more actively oversee and manage the Vermont Trails System
- Creates a dedicated role for FPR to administer a Green Mountain Recreation Fund that would provide grants for:
 - Nonprofit trail organizational capacity
 - Nonprofits and municipalities to advance the objectives of the Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative

1 H.131
2 SHORT FORM
3 Introduced by Representatives Sims of Craftsbury, Boyden of Cambridge,
4 Buss of Woodstock, Campbell of St. Johnsbury, Demrow of
5 Corinth, Elder of Starksboro, Harrison of Chittenden, Jerome of
6 Brandon, Leavitt of Grand Isle, Lipsky of Stowe, Masland of
7 Thetford, Morris of Springfield, Priestley of Bradford,
8 Surprenant of Barnard, and Torre of Moretown
9 Referred to Committee on
10 Date:
11 Subject: Conservation and development; recreational trails
12 Statement of purpose of bill as introduced: This bill proposes to establish the
13 Green Mountain Recreation Fund as a sustainable source of funding for
14 organizational capacity and recreation related development and stewardship.
15 The Fund would be funded from five percent of the existing tax on the
16 gallonage sale of malt and vinous beverages. The Fund would be used to fund:
17 (1) one full-time staff position at the Vermont Trails and Greenways
18 Council (VTGC) whose duties would be to:
19 (A) administer membership to the VTGC;
20 (B) manage VTGC meetings, activities, operations, and budget;

19 (B) host trainings and other events to support applicants and grantees;
20 (C) develop and maintain a regular grant cycle; and
21 (D) manage a grant selection process;

H.131 Benefits

The GMRF would secure essential, lasting support for trail stewardship

- Augments capacity for codifying and augmenting BMPs, effective technical assistance, and more active leadership
- Protects and preserves the bedrock of Vermont's outdoor economy while facilitating smart growth
- Preserves environment by minimizing impacts and supporting the adoption of a conservation ethic
- Strengthens FPR to work closely with VTGC in an even more effective public-nonprofit partnership



A snowmobile is parked on a snowy slope during a sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm glow over the scene. The snowmobile is white with black and red accents, and the word "POLARIS" is visible on the seat. The background shows a range of mountains under a clear sky.

THANK YOU!

The VTGC Board of Directors; board@vermonttgc.org