



KINGDOM TRAILS

**Abby Long, Executive Director Kingdom Trail Association
Senate Agriculture
Testimony 2.18.25 / 10:30pm Zoom**

My name is Abby Long, Executive Director for the Kingdom Trail Association. Thank you for welcoming me once again'. This time, in celebration of the Northeast Kingdom as NEK Day at the Statehouse is this coming Thursday. Molly Willard and I will be sharing about Vermont's Forest Future Strategic Roadmap. Which I was so grateful for the opportunity to have been a part of this planning process, serving as the outdoor recreation voice as the goal of the Vermont Forest Future Strategic Roadmap was to look at the current state of Vermont's forest products sector and greater forest economy and identify opportunities to strengthen, modernize, promote, and protect its long-term viability. To achieve this 5 main pillars were identified.

Molly Willard spoke to Pillars 1-4. See the full Forest Future Report here:
<https://fpr.vermont.gov/forest-future-strategic-roadmap>

Kingdom Trails, is a nonprofit trail organization located in Vermont's beautiful Northeast Kingdom. KT celebrated 30 years last year as we were founded in 1994 on old logging roads, thanks to the NEK's traditional industry of forestry. I am proud that our trail network now serves as an incredible example of the 'new' working landscape, with outdoor recreation as part of the forest economy and deeply intertwined with our local community.

Therefore, I am presenting on Pillar 5; Forest Economy and Vermont Communities. Providing a vision for how towns can maintain a strong forest culture, protecting and enriching the many ways our forests contribute to our economy and well-being.

Vermonters and visitors value our forests for their environmental, cultural, and economic benefits. Sawmills were some of the earliest economic engines in many of Vermont's rural towns, which continue to benefit from the forest economy that grew up around them. Sawmills like Mike's Tiki Bar in downtown East Burke, serving as Kingdom Trail's parking, trailhead, host of multiple food trucks, and place to grab a beverage after a mountain bike ride, all with an active sawmill out back behind the bar.

The Vermont Forest Future Strategic Roadmap provides a vision for how towns can continue this, like East Burke. Actions include elevating the forest economy's positive impact on communities across the state. Sustainable forest management supports wildlife, recreation, forest product business owners, and cultural traditions.

Kingdom Trails is a true example where recreation provides renewed economic vitality and operates in a complementary manner with the forest products sector.

Our trail organization not only elevates our region as an exemplary place to live, work, and play, assisting area businesses' need to recruit a workforce, plus has an economic impact of over \$10M annually in the NEK one of the most socially and economically challenged regions of the state, but our trail organization has also conserved over 400 acres of forest with the Vermont Land Trust, forests enrolled in current use, allowing us to host our first-ever timber harvest 2 winters ago.

One of the products harvested was 8,000 board ft of hemlock. Hemlock that was then cut and processed on-site and all used within a 5 mile radius for bridging throughout our trails. Grown, cut and used all right there.

KT is now proud to share that story through signage on the trail so that mountain bikers from Boston or New York (we welcome 100,000+ visitors annually). They can bike by and learn. Building stronger linkages and understanding between the forest user and the positive impact of the forest economy.

These trails are at risk, though. 70% of Vermont's trail system is made possible by the generosity of private landowners. KT has 106 private landowners who make our 100 miles in Caledonia and Essex County possible. While private landowners who are enrolled in Vermont's current use program receive an incentive tax benefit, the landowners who make Vermont's public trail system do not. Stewardship organizations, such as KT, VAST, Green Mtn Club, the Catamount Trail, are prohibited from directly compensating host landowners, as it would compromise the landowner's protection under the state's liability statute.

With increased demand on our trail assets, these non-profit trail stewardship organizations face more and more challenges in retaining public access to vital trail corridors.

This question of how we develop an appropriate mechanism to recognize private landowners will be a critical component of how we retain public access to Vermont's trail

system and their key role in maintaining a strong forest culture, ensuring that our forests continue to support the economy, enhance our Vermont communities, and well-being.

Therefore, I ask you to please support the actions in the Forest Future Strategic Roadmap as well as H.147 an act relating to establishing the Recreational Trails Compensation Study Committee.

Thank you for your consideration and for listening.