

Good afternoon, my name is Mollie Flanigan and I am the director of land conservation at the Green Mountain Club.

Thank you, Chair Harrison and members of the committee, for inviting me to speak to you today.

I provided an overview of the Green Mountain Club and the Long Trail Protection campaign in my written report.

Today, I appreciate the opportunity to share with the committee

- The historical context behind this work,
- recent Long Trail protection successes,
- how GMC is approaching trail protection going forward,

It was forty years ago that our two entities, the Vermont General Assembly and the Green Mountain Club undertook the Long Trail Protection Campaign, the bold vision of conserving the “unique, historic, and irreplaceable resource, whose protection is of great benefit to the people of the state of Vermont” as the 1985 joint resolution stated about the Long Trail. The resolution went on to say the “General Assembly supports of the efforts of the Green Mountain Club to protect the Long Trail System”.

When we started this effort, only 66% of the Long Trail was legally protected and over 90 miles of the Long Trail was on private properties. Together we have worked with private landowners; the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation; and other partner conservation organizations to

- Legally protect over 88 miles of the Long Trail System,
- Conserve more than 25,000 acres of land, and
- Add over 16,700 acres to the Vermont State Forest system

The General Assembly has been key in making all of this possible by contributing over \$3.5 Million in appropriations funding through the state’s capital bill over the years.

A lot has changed in the last forty years, but that value the Long Trail System offers the State still holds true and so does the importance of protecting the landscape that makes it a world-class hiking destination. Thank you for your continued support of this initiative.

**Current Status:**

So where does this work stand today?

4.5 miles of Long Trail are currently located on private land with no legal protection. That is across 14 different properties that range from northernmost Vermont down to the southernmost part of the state. The Long Trail is now 98% legally protected, up from 66% protected when we started this effort 40 years ago! Our work together has been tremendously successful, but the thing about a long-distance hiking trail is that every foot matters to make the system work. Until all 272 miles of the Long Trail is legally secured, there will remain a risk to its character, continuity, and public access.

In addition to the Long Trail proper, GMC manages 173 miles of Side Trails, which are hiking trails that, in general, run from the valleys to the ridgeline and offer a diversity of day and loop hiking opportunities to the state. Of those 173 miles of Side Trails, 12.3 miles cross private land and those are spread across 26 different parcels, also scattered statewide. Most hikers on the Green Mountains on any given

weekend are day hikers, out to enjoy the splendor of the mountains for a few hours, not overnight. It is the Side Trails that make those day hikes possible and thus GMC is committed to legally protecting their routes as well that of the Long Trail proper.

Finally, the club is looking to protect the full trail corridor, defined as 500 feet on either side of the trail, so that the buffer around the hiking trail remains natural and undeveloped. 85 miles of the Long Trail do not have a full 500 foot of buffer on either side and so we are looking at cultivating land protection projects for those 334 parcels as we find landowners interested and willing to conserve their land.

#### **Successes:**

In the last year, GMC has successfully wrapped up the 12-acre “Deer Camp Tract” protection project in Johnson. A map of its location is shown on the back side of the committee report.

I’m happy to share that within the last year this property has been incorporated into the Long Trail State Forest, with GMC and VHCB retaining a conservation easement for the Long Trail.

The project was financed with a unique opportunity, Long Trail Protection restricted funds that became available in 2023 when two parcels of state land in the Coolidge State Forest were transferred to the Green Mountain National Forest, a total of \$85,000.

The project was also supported by a grant from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. GMC purchased the property in 2024 to remove it from the real estate market and held the property until the state was ready to take ownership.

This 12-acre parcel is small, but as you can see on the map, it

- protects 300 feet of Long Trail treadway,
- fills a gap in the Long Trail State Forest which it abuts to the south and east,
- provides additional road access to the state forest,
- and adds to the forested buffer around the Long Trail.

A project that is currently in development is the conservation of the former Mad River Corporation land in Fayston. A private buyer put in an offer on this property in 2025, but Mad River Glen Ski Cooperative exercised their right-of-first refusal to purchase the land at the end of last month. This 1,100-acre property is an important recreation destination and hosts approximately 300 feet of Long Trail. The Green Mountain Club has been coordinating closely with Mad River Glen to ensure the trail is protected in the next phase of their acquisition, when the property is put under a conservation easement

#### **Trail Protection:**

Looking ahead, GMC is devoting a renewed focus to Long Trail System protection, thanks to the strategic conservation plan GMC adopted in 2023, a link to which is included in the handout.

Protecting the Long Trail is a top priority for the Green Mountain Club, however we must work at the pace of the willing private landowners and each property that hosts the trail has unique circumstances that require time to curate and develop in the right land conservation opportunity. GMC is continuing to aim for full conservation of the properties by purchasing the land outright and, where appropriate, incorporating the land into the State Forest system. Where needed, however, we also pursue conservation easements on privately owned lands, or trail right-of-way easements that legally secure the Long Trail System’s right to cross a private property while allowing the landowner to retain ownership and management. In short, GMC uses every tool possible to design trail protection projects that are right for the hiking trail and the landowner to achieve the goal of legal protection for the trail

system. We are working statewide, within each community the trail passes through, to cultivate the next trail protection project. My written report provides a summary of targeted properties within each county of the state. At this time, none of these are ready to be spoken about specifically and we have no funding ask of the legislature this year, however we are working hard to build out that pipeline of conservation projects and I look forward to sharing our progress with you as acquisition opportunities become actionable.

Thank you for your time today and for your support of this important effort.