

Vermont Senate Committee on Institutions
Senator Wendy Harrison, Chair
Testimony by Mollie Flanigan
Director of Land Conservation, Green Mountain Club, Inc.

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 recent Long Trail protection successes, how we are approaching trail protection going forward, as well as how the Long Trail fared in last year's floods and what the club is doing to address the impacts of a changing climate on trail.

As a quick background for work, the Green Mountain Club launched the Long Trail Protection Campaign in 1986, and over the last thirty-nine years, the Club has worked with the General Assembly, on a shared goal of legally protecting the Long Trail system. Together we have worked with private landowners; the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation; and partner 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 of the years.

Successes:

Last year GMC reported that the 12-acre "Deer Camp Tract" parcel in Johnson was under contract to be conserved. A map of its location is shown on the back side of the committee report. I'm happy to share that the project went forward as anticipated in 2024. GMC purchased the property in May. The project is being 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 is also being supported by a grant from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. GMC is currently holding the property until the due diligence is complete to transfer the property to the state and incorporate it into the Long Trail State Forest with a GMC retained conservation easement. 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.

Another project I'm happy to report on is the protection of 1.5 miles of Long Trail in Hancock Vermont. Occasionally there are locations and opportunities for protecting the Long Trail that do not involve land protection. One such opportunity came in 2024 when Middlebury College generously donated a 1.5-mile-long trail right-of-way to GMC for the route of the Long Trail across their downhill ski area, the Snowbowl. A downhill ski area is not a location where land conservation and acquisition are suitable, so GMC was happy to work with Middlebury for a trail right-of-way form of legal protection. Trail right-of-ways are not GMC's preferred tool for trail protection since they do not conserve the land around the trail and thus ensure the "footpath in the wilderness" the LT is known for, but on parcels such as the Snowbowl where other recreational uses are occurring, GMC is happy to take a flexible and collaborative approach like this.

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. This plan has given the club renewed attention to our long-standing goals and GMC is actively working to develop the next protection projects and looks forward to updating the committee as soon as one is ready for acquisition. The last 4.5 miles of unprotected Long Trail are spread across 13 different properties. The last 12.7 miles of side trails are spread across 45 different properties. These priority parcels are spread across most of the state, as the table in the handout shows as well as this map, where top priority areas are shown in orange and additional focus areas are in blue. GMC is working statewide within each community on this important effort. Each property has unique circumstances that require time to curate and develop the right acquisition opportunity. Protecting the Long Trail remains a top priority for the Green Mountain Club, and we look forward to sharing the next protection opportunity soon.

Floods in 2024:

Finally I'll comment on how the historic floods of 2024 affected the Long Trail System. These events have sharpened our attention on what it means to manage and maintain valued public recreation assets in this new era of climate change. We are seeing warmer, shorter winters and wetter summers and these conditions provide unique challenges to recreational trails. I am happy to report that the Long Trail System saw no major infrastructure damage in 2024's floods, such as bridges washing out or shelters being destroyed. That said, significant portions of the trail, particularly side trails, experienced severe erosion, especially in Addison and Chittenden counties between Mount Abe and Mount Mansfield. Another important impact was damage done to local roads, leading up to the trailheads, which experienced significant damage and resulted in GMC and the State advising the public not to access affected trailheads until those roads were fixed.

It will take years and tens of thousands of dollars to repair the erosion damage and recover from the 2023 and 2024 storms. The fact that we have legally protected the majority of the Long Trail System in the past 39 years is the most important factor in GMC's ability to repair and rebuild damaged portions of the trail. Because the land that hosts the Long Trail is protected in perpetuity, the club and FPR can raise public and private funds and make the

capital investments necessary to do this work. Long term protection of land that hosts treasured recreation assets like the Long Trail is one of the best tools we have to maintain recreation resources and respond to the impacts of climate change.

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