

Vision for the Future Takes Focus

The New Hampshire Division of Parks and Recreation has completed a year-long effort involving citizens and organizations around the State in charting the direction of the “Initial Five-Year Plan for Managing Public Access and Recreation on the Connecticut Lakes Headwaters Working Forest.” According to Commissioner George Bald, “The plan itself has yet to be completed, but all the ingredients are there. The process was unprecedented: we held two rounds of public meetings and met with our advisory committee several times. We feel that we understand well what people want and anticipate releasing a draft plan for public review in February that can receive strong and broad support.”

The Division holds an easement on the property owned by the Connecticut Lakes Timber Company accommodating natural-resourced based public use of this unique property in the northern tip of the state. Two poster sessions, held in the fall, showcased alternatives for accommodating some new (secondary) uses (all terrain vehicle and equestrian riding) and making adjustments in existing (primary) uses (snowmobiling, non-motorized uses, and road and gate management).



In a response to a written survey distributed at the poster session and on the agency’s website, thirty eight individuals and eight organizations have registered their comments on the alternatives (See Public Information Briefing Packet on webpage / PDF file). The Division met with the Connecticut Lakes Headwaters Advisory Committee in December to report the survey results, characterize in which direction the department was leaning at the time, and to hear the Committee’s response and preferences.

Committee members expressed their appreciation to the Division of Parks and Recreation at the end of the meeting for a productive session. Beverly Lord summed it up this way “I am thankful that we are getting somewhere.” The alternatives and preferences discussed are highlighted below.



Road and Gate Management

The Division is currently making ad hoc decisions about gate status, which generally except for main haul roads are kept closed, unless a legitimate need is identified. Two alternatives were proposed for the next five-year period: continuing the status quo or instituting a policy to keep

gates open unless environmental, experiential, financial, or other specified reasons (decision-making criteria) preclude the department from doing so. Most respondents and the Advisory Committee highly favored keeping the gates open except with cause. The Division likewise told the Committee that it favors that approach, and plans to work with NH Fish & Game (NHF&G) and Connecticut Lakes Timber Company to develop and apply the criteria.

ATV Management

Currently, only a short segment of trail is designated for such use to allow Great North Woods Riders ATV Club trails on adjacent, privately owned forest to connect in a loop. In certain and limited circumstances, currently game may also be retrieved using an ATV.



The Division generated five alternatives regarding whether to allow the use of ATVs on the property over the next five years. The alternatives ranged from the status quo (1), to utilitarian use only (2), to allowing ATV on specified designated roads (3), a combination of utilitarian use and specified designated roads (4), to allowing ATVs on any designated roads (5).

Most individual respondents favored the status quo or utilitarian use; most organizations strongly favored utilitarian use. Reasons centered on maintaining experiential values on the property, ability to meet law enforcement needs, ability of State to fund and manage, low environmental impact, and availability of existing areas in the region and state. DRED reported to the Committee that it favors the status quo because of inadequate enforcement capacity at NHF&G and so as not to divert scarce state resources from other facilities in the North Country.

One organization, the Great North Woods Riders ATV Club expressed a preference for the use of ATVs on specified designated roads. Three Advisory Committee members agreed with the club stating economic reasons; one committee member supported only utilitarian use; another wanted all alternatives to be “left” in the plan to allowing flexibility in these changing times.

While keeping to the status quo, the Division told the Committee that it plans to work with NHF&G to monitor existing use and demand in the region and could amend the plan if needed within the 5-year period. The department will work with the landowner and NHF&G formalizing existing policies regarding game retrieval.

Snowmobile Management

An extensive system of snowmobile trails currently supports snowmobiling on the property. Management alternatives include the status quo (1), developing trail side facilities and expanded parking areas in the northern part of the property to disperse use (2), designating a new section of trail between Coon Brook Bog and the Perry Stream Road to disperse use (3), and a combination of Alternatives 2 and 3 (4).



About two thirds of the individual respondents and two of the organizations specifically favored some level of facilities improvement. Most favored Alternative 4. NHF&G expressed strong concern that the proposed improvements would increase use to the detriment of the Natural Area. Written comments, however, revealed that people are more concerned about the management shortcomings of the present system rather than the need for improvements. They cited the need for better enforcement, improvement of user attitudes, and better understanding of system capacity and user thresholds.

Because of the lack of public satisfaction with existing enforcement and experiential qualities, the Division told the Committee that it is considering another alternative: working with clubs, law enforcement, and other partners to reconfigure the system to make it more manageable, enforceable, and family-oriented. The agency also favors creating off-road parking to get the cars off Route 3, but not creating any more capacity than already exists in that part of the forest; evaluating trail standards to control speed better; placing speed restrictions especially on problem areas; and promoting compliance through better education.

While the landowner representative on the Committee supported the Division's direction, three other members favored Alternative 4.

Non-Motorized (Hiking / Snowshoeing / Cross-Country Skiing)

Currently, people can hike, walk, cross-country ski or snowshoe anywhere on the property, depending upon forestry operations. A handful of existing trails facilitate day hiking. In addition to the status quo (1), two other alternatives regarding these uses were proposed: development of new day hiking trails (2), and development of new day hiking trails plus acceptance of the proposal to route the Cohos Trail through the



property (3).



About half of the survey respondents favored Alternative 3 and another 13% favored new day hikes without acceptance of Cohos Trail proposal. All but one organization supported Alternative 3. Some respondents (individuals and an organization) were concerned that little consideration was given to opportunities for bicycle use, canoe / kayak access, and camping.

In response to summer interest and because of its low cost and a willing partner organization (Cohos Trail Association), the Division told the Committee that it prefers to implement Alternative 3 and continue to develop specific actions accordingly. Six advisory committee members expressed support for this direction and asked that the Cohos Trail and other new trails pass through the working forest without a buffer.

Equestrian Management

Currently no equestrian use is allowed on the property. The Division of Parks and Recreation proposed four alternatives at the poster session including the status quo (1), special permit use only (2), dispersed use on existing designated roads and trails (3), and use on specified designated roads and trails (4). Approximately 60 % of individual respondents favored allowing equestrian use on all or specified trails. Most favored specifying trails. Organizations were less interested in equestrian activities as a new use; two favored special permit use only and one the status quo; two others offered comments without indicating a preference. Concerns related to protection of the riparian zones on the property and the adjacent Natural Areas, and the potential introduction of invasive plant material through horse manure.

The Division told the Advisory Committee that it is tentatively leaning toward Alternative 4. The agency proposes working with partners to select one area for a loop system and evaluate integration with Coleman State Park, but only if a lead equestrian organization comes forward and DRED has the financial resources to develop and manage appropriately. The Committee expressed reservations about invasive species and lack of scientific agreement on whether this is a threat in this area; DRED and consultants will try to find more definitive research. One member supported Alternative 4.

Special Use Permits (and Road Rallies)

The Division proposed no alternatives in the poster session relating to road rallies, a use which one organization had promoted during earlier public meetings, leaving such use to a decision through the department's special use permitting system. A special use is

defined as a commercial activity or one in which 10 or more people participate as a group for education or other natural resource-based purposes.

Several individuals and organizations expressed written opinions against the possibility of road rallies being allowed under the special use permit system. In response, DRED told the Advisory Committee that road rallies do not meet the three screens the department will use for this property, and can so state in the management plan. These screens include the need to be a natural resource-based activity as specified in the Easement; to be a primary or secondary use as defined in the plan; and to meet the criteria for changes in use which are to be included in the plan. The Committee expressed no support for road rallies.

Non-Motorized (Biking / Canoeing / Kayaking / Camping):



No specific alternatives were proposed for these uses as little demand or interest for improvements was expressed at prior public meetings. Currently, biking is a primary use allowed on designated roads. Camping is not allowed; and access is available to all the ponds. One organization (Appalachian Mountain Club) expressed disappointment that paddling is allowed under the easement, but no enhancements are

proposed. Camping is also not discussed among the alternatives.

In response, the Division told the Committee that it is leaning toward working with AMC (and other partners) over the course of the 5-year plan to explore possibilities. Biking will continue to be allowed on designated roads. Through hikers will be encouraged to camp at existing public facilities (e.g. Lake Francis and Deer Mountain) or stay at private campgrounds, lodges and motels.

The meeting wrapped up with the landowner and the Division of Parks and Recreation agreeing to discuss future management issues when they meet to discuss how to proceed with landowner deliberation of the plan, as the landowner must agree and approve the plan before it becomes effective.

After the draft plan is released in early February, the public will be given a minimum 30-day review / final comment period. At the end of the review period, the Division of Parks and Recreation will make their final decisions. The target date for release of the completed plan is early April.