

**Maine Department of Conservation Bureau of Parks and Lands
Western Mountains Region Management Plan**

Advisory Committee Meeting on the First Draft

September 7, 2010 from 10am to 2:30pm

University of Maine Farmington

Minutes

The meeting began at 10:00 am with an introduction from Alan Stearns, Deputy Director of the Bureau. Amy Hudnor gave an overview of the management plan process, and the draft plan recommendations. A discussion with the committee followed each presentation of draft recommendations for each lands unit and park.

Bald Mountain Unit

The Bald Mountain Trail work has gone well and resulted in improvements. There was a question about the bog near the Bald Mountain summit, which is receiving some impact from hikers and ATVs. Its special status should be noted in the plan, and signs placed to notify hikers not to walk through. ATV access likely originates from the Skiway Road, which is used by the telecommunications tower employees and Rangeley Skeet and Trap Club. The telecommunications employees are authorized to use ATVs on a path that leaves the Skiway Road and continues to the cell tower, however, other ATV users may be using this trail, then continuing past the cell tower on old roads to the Bald Mountain summit. It may be useful to ask the telecommunications tower employees to put identifying information on their ATVs so they are not perceived as unauthorized users. More signage may help keep general ATV use down. It is also possible that some ATV riders travel to the Rangeley Skeet and Trap site and continue on old management roads to the summit. Signage may help here as well.

The picnic tables at the summit are in disrepair. Upkeep of these tables may help keep hikers staying close to the summit. BPL staff answered that they are already arranging for repairing the tables.

A question was asked about what was meant by “sensitive timber management” on Bald Mountain. Pete Smith explained that it essentially meant uneven aged management. Bureau staff marked the timber and the harvest on Bald Mountain was fairly light. Timber harvest on Bald Mountain was mostly complete for the time being.

Rangeley Lakes Heritage Trust (RLHT) mentioned a property they acquired north of the Bald Mountain Unit. There has been a proposal in the past to use the boat ramp parking area at the north end of the Bald Mountain Unit for the start of a biking path that would travel north onto RLHT property and other properties. This management plan could leave open the option to use this parking area for this purpose.

The Rangeley Lakes snowmobile club recently started a club snowmobile trail in the Bald Mountain Unit that leaves the ITS84 trail, travels west through the Unit and

continues to Mooselookmeguntic Lake. It began last year and received a lot of use. It should be noted in the plan.

Four Ponds Unit

Amy Hudnor presented the management recommendation that the plan keep the option available to locate a boat ramp on Beaver Mountain Lake, if a suitable site and public access could be obtained. A question was asked about the Edelheid Road—does the Bureau have an easement on it to access the Unit? Pete Smith answered that it is a public road up to the point it reaches the Unit. There is a spur road that branches off closer to the Lake into the Unit, however, private camp owners located off this road have worked to block public access, and it is unsure without further research whether the owners have the legal authority to do this. Other challenges with boat ramp placement include wetlands on the shore of the Lake within the Unit. There is a boat ramp that the public uses close to Route 4, which has safety issues and the ownership is unclear. IF&W would like the plan to elevate the importance of boat access on Beaver Mountain Lake. Though the Lake is not stocked, there is a population of landlocked salmon, and the public uses the Lake especially when windy conditions make fishing on the Rangeley Lakes infeasible.

Amy brought up the recommendation of discontinuing the foot trail known as the ‘Bemis Trail’ that travels through the Rangeley Plantation portion of the Four Ponds Unit—from Route 17 to Mooselookmeguntic Lake. Not to be confused with the Bemis Stream Trail further south, this informal trail also runs through private land before reaching the Lake, and it is unknown who maintains it. Advisory committee members informed the Bureau of an individual who originally built the trail at least 25 years ago. It may be used by those who live near the trail, but there is some opposition to having the trail by private landowners whose land it travels onto.

On the issue of the club snowmobile trail crossing of the Appalachian Trail (in violation of NPS policy), a committee member noted that there are some members of the snowmobiling community who are promoting keeping the trail open. A meeting with the National Park Service is being organized in the Rangeley/Rumford area on the general topic of motorized trail crossings of the AT. For the context of this management plan, the current recommendation of keeping the option open of re-locating the club trail north of the AT is reasonable.

More emphasis on hunting and trapping opportunities should be placed in the plan. Amy requested that more information is needed on these opportunities. IF&W could provide more information.

There is still a problem with unauthorized AT crossing (on land now owned by RLHT) probably from Four Ponds Unit leaseholders. Though the leaseholders have written permission to access the Unit from the south (without crossing the AT) some are likely using the old northern route. Signage may help stop this, but it would also be helpful for the Bureau to meet with leaseholders as a group to clarify how they are allowed to access their leases. There may be a campowners association that could be contacted.

Rangeley Lake State Park

There was some discussion on the potential for a trail system connecting to RLHT South Bog trails. This could greatly enhance the Park experience by adding opportunities for visitors. It is a popular park and campers usually leave the grounds to seek recreational opportunities in the region. The trail connection would provide more opportunities within and adjacent to the Park.

Richardson Unit

Amy asked the committee for more information on a potential hand carry boat ramp near Metallak Brook (this had been requested in a previous scoping meeting). There is currently an approximately ¼ mile trail with a small parking area off the South Arm Road along Metallak Stream. Currently this trail is sometimes used by those camping at the sites on the Unit to launch canoes. The parking area could be expanded, signage could be placed and the trail could be improved to make it more usable for hand carry launching.

Amy presented the management recommendation on improving public information on the camping opportunities. She asked: can more be done in addition to new maps and website information? A committee member noted that there is a generation of people now who don't have much experience or knowledge on camping and other nature-based skills. Since the Internet is the main source of information for most people now, increasing and improving the Bureau's web-based information would be very helpful. The Bureau will be creating a new "map and guide" for this region at some point.

Pete Smith gave an overview of the Upper Dam Road 3-gate situation. This gate system was arranged in the 1980s in consultation with the Upper Dam representatives (then Union Water Power) who were concerned with late summer crowds disrupting the campowners on their property. Currently, the 'middle gate' located approximately 1.3 miles from the Upper Dam, is locked from July 1 through September 30, which keeps down the summer/early fall crowds at the dam, but allows spring/early summer anglers closer access. However, Pete receives calls after July 1 from older anglers, who have trouble walking back up the road after fishing for the day. Could the middle gate be left open longer in the season, or is there another solution? RLHT also receives complaints about the gate closure (they own shore land near Upper Dam open to the public). They suggest leaving the gate open year-round. There is a third gate located just ¼ mile from Upper Dam that can be left closed year-round. RLHT and the dam keeper have given rides back up the hill to people who have parked at the middle gate and asked for a ride back. A NextEra representative on the committee said the campowners and NextEra support keeping the middle gate closed from July 1 to September 30. Amy suggested that due to the time left and complexity of the issue, that a smaller sub-group meet at a later date to discuss this issue.

Grafton Notch State Park and Mahoosuc Unit

A question was asked about the acreage of the new backcountry non-mechanized allocation. Amy did not have this information on hand, but will make sure it is in the final draft.

Discussion began on the management recommendations of: developing a plan for upgrading hiking trails in Grafton and Mahoosuc, and designating a recreation coordinator. AMC does a yearly trail assessment which includes work needs for the upcoming year. They support the Bureau recommendation of a recreation coordinator. In the past, the Grafton Loop Trail Coalition served as a forum for communication between the Bureau and other partners on the Loop Trail but also wider trail issues. That communication and teamwork is currently lacking since the Coalition is no longer as active. Alan Stearns noted that there is currently no funding for a recreation coordinator position. If no funding can be obtained, the major responsibilities of trail maintenance will continue to fall to the partners (AMC and MATC). Mahoosuc Land Trust expressed that a coordinator would be helpful for organizing winter use. ATC expressed that the trail system in the southern portion of the Mahoosuc Unit has a particularly high need for upgrades and more frequent maintenance due to the number of bog bridges needed, the amount of steep ledge, the fragile alpine communities, and the level of use. The four trails leading to Mahoosuc Unit from Success Pond Road, which are mostly on private land are part of the trail system valued by the public. Hiker use of the trail system in Grafton and Mahoosuc has increased since 1988, when the last Mahoosuc Management Plan was adopted. Use peaked in the 1990s, and has declined in some years since then, but generally should remain close to the higher level of use established in the 1990s. The Goose Eye and Carlo Col trails are included as part of a federal conservation acquisition in New Hampshire, to be added to the White Mountain National Forest and managed as AT corridor lands.

The discussion continued regarding funding for trail maintenance, which is a challenge as there does not seem to be enough funding for all the trails that need it. Preliminary estimates gathered from MATC and AMC and other sources indicate that at least \$500,000 is needed to address current trail needs in Grafton and Mahoosuc. Many volunteer hours go into trail maintenance—about 2,000 hours a year. User fees, or at least donations, could be sought. Colleges who guide trips on the public lands could be asked for donations, and also non-Maine residents. However, collection of fees does add administrative costs, and the logistics of how to collect fees is challenging in an area where use is dispersed. A recreation coordinator could help with a donation or user fee system. However, money for a coordinator position does not currently exist—and could cost as much as \$80,000 a year with salary and benefits. One participant encouraged this position to be funded by sources other than tax revenue. Alan Stearns said that there are sources of funding that could arrive in the form of wind power mitigation or charitable donations, and if the management plan contains recommendations for trail funds and/or a coordinator, funding can be sought later from these sources.

In lieu of, or in addition to a recreation coordinator, a trail advisory committee should be formed with the major players to determine the future recreational development in the area. This should be done soon with current Bureau staff, and there should be a sub-plan within the Management Plan.

Some specific suggestions were given on recreational needs and maintenance. The north arm of the Wright Trail needs to be eliminated as it is not in an appropriate location and the steps are rotted out. There is a campsite on the Wright Trail that gets some use, and could use an outhouse. In the wintertime, there is a need for more parking—BPL should communicate with DOT about appropriate areas to plow. This could be done soon, to fill an immediate need of winter recreationists, and would not cost the Bureau anything. There are outing clubs, high schools, colleges, and individuals who use the Park and Unit for winter recreation (snowmobiling, ice climbing, winter camping, Nordic skiing). People are currently parking along plowed private logging roads. Particularly, a parking area near the trails to Sunday River Whitecap would be useful. Nordic skiing is occurring currently on old and current management roads. High school ski teams use the area around Bull Branch for practice. Snowshoeing and dog walking also occur here. A permanent Nordic ski trail system is needed, and the outing clubs are looking into options around the Twin Bridges area that could use both private and public lands.

ATV and Jeep use in the Riley Township area was then discussed. These uses may be compromising the ecological reserve values as vehicles leave the Sunday River Road and into areas they are not authorized to travel. A committee member suggested reaching out to the Jeep and ATV clubs to communicate the rules and restrictions, and about their possible role in protection of the area. It is a challenge to communicate to those individuals who are not part of clubs, and monitoring these areas is difficult.

A question was asked by The Wilderness Society (TWS) as to whether the Bureau considered expanding the ecological reserve in Mahoosuc, and whether any inoperable acres were currently included in acres allocated for timber management. Tom Charles explained that the legislature, when creating an ecological reserve system, put an upward limit on the number of acres in the system, including a maximum percentage of operable acres. Additionally, they cautioned the Bureau about side-stepping the maximum ecological reserve limits with other “no cut” allocations. There is likely some acreage that is inoperable in the area surrounding Baldpate, that under the current draft management plan would be allocated timber dominant (or wildlife/visual class I which allow timber harvest as a secondary use). TWS suggested that areas that are inoperable should be given a different designation than timber dominant. TWS also asked if there were areas designated by MNAP as exemplary or rare, that are within areas authorized for timber harvest. Andy Cutko replied that areas identified in the MNAP Natural Resource Inventory are mainly within in resource allocations that are “no-cut” with the exception of a small area in the southeast corner of the Unit.

Mahoosuc Land Trust asked that the upper Bull Branch drainage be designated as Backcountry, to protect the water system, the recreational experience, and connect the current proposed Backcountry non-mechanized allocation with the ecological reserve. Also, riparian areas should have a no-cut buffer a certain distance from the stream, and that should be defined, like other management plans such as the Umbagog NWR plan.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:30pm.