

**Western Mountains Region Management Plan
Focus Meeting on Grafton and Mahoosuc Trails**

October 14, 2010

Newry Town Office, Maine

Minutes

Focus on Current Trails in Grafton and Mahoosuc

Amy reviewed the results of the online survey on trails that she sent out prior to the meeting. It was pointed out that this survey and results not methodologically rigorous. Another participant stated that the formal hiking trails being reviewed do not reflect the full picture of recreational use. There is a great deal of walking on old logging roads, especially around Sunday River Whitecap and Bull Branch. Some use the 'Quonsut Hut' Road to access Sunday River Whitecap, and others use the Upper Bull Branch Road to walk, access fishing spots, etc. Front-country experiences and shorter routes to summits are desired by many residents and tourists.

The first question of the survey—regarding level of use of each trail in relation to other trails in Grafton and Mahoosuc—was reviewed. The group generally agreed on the survey results, though the Wright Trail probably gets more use than is reflected in the survey (getting more use than the Cataracts Trail). Also the Speck Pond Trail from Success Pond Road should get a higher rating. The Grafton Loop Trail (GLT) could get a higher rating if the Puzzle Mountain day hike were separated out as its own hike.

The second question on the survey—desired trail type—was reviewed. Results were generally accurate, with most trails being on the primitive end. The Puzzle Mountain hike could be increased in the level of accommodation for hikers. The more primitive trails may have structures such as bridges, or more hardened trails, in order to protect the resource and keep people from widening the trail by walking around muddy areas. This may be perceived as the trail being designed to be more accommodating/developed.

The third question on environmental sensitivity was reviewed. There were a few trails that participants felt should get a higher rating on environmental sensitivity—these included the Notch Trail (due to water and erosion), the GLT from Old Speck to Sargeant Brook (Sunday River Whitecap peak), and the AT from Table Rock northbound to the end of the Mahoosuc Unit (especially around Baldpate peaks). One participant suggested that the Natural Resource Inventory (NRI) performed by the Maine Natural Areas Program be the primary determinant of what constitutes a sensitive trail. However, though the NRI identifies exemplary natural communities and rare plant populations, it does not cover issues such as erosion that are occurring on certain trail sections. Additionally, some trails have more potential for impact because of the difficulty of keeping hikers on the trail—such as Goose Eye, where there are many peaks and overlooks which hikers are drawn to.

The fourth question of current trail conditions was reviewed. The Notch Trail needs a lower rating as conditions are wet due to the proximity of the trail to the stream, which poses safety concerns. The GLT received generally high ratings due to the fact that it is a newer trail that was properly designed. The Carlo Col Trail was omitted, but should be added, and could be potentially the trail in the worst shape as it runs very close to the brook.

Trails that could be prioritized as “high”—in other words, in the most need of attention—were identified. These include: Notch Trail (especially Mahoosuc Unit section), Speck Pond Trail (especially Mahoosuc Unit section), Carlo Col Trail (before it meets the AT on private land), Wright Trail, and the AT from Table Rock to Baldpate. It was noted that it is really the alpine sections of trails that need the greatest focus—not necessarily the trail sections as listed on the survey. This is for a few reasons. It is easier to get volunteers to work on the lower, more accessible sections of trail and thus more work has been done on lower sections. Additionally, the environmental sensitivity of alpine areas adds to the urgency.

Trails Coordination

Amy brought up the topic of forming a trail coalition for Grafton and Mahoosuc, as was mentioned in the September advisory committee meeting. The potential purposes of this coalition would be to coordinate trail upgrades, increase collaboration (decreasing competition for scarce funds) and develop a trail management plan for 5 years intervals. This group could meet either once or twice a year. A meeting in August/September would be good timing, as the grant applications are due in November. If a meeting were held this late, however, an agenda would need to be circulated well in advance, so that participants could do the ground work preparation for the meeting. It was noted that the Grafton Loop Trail Coalition was so successful in part because the participants were high enough ranking in their organizations to be able to bring resources to the table. Members of this coalition would be AMC, MATC, BPL Lands, BPL Parks, Mahoosuc Land Trust, and potentially a member of the public and a member of the motorized trail community. BPL could initiate/coordinate the meeting and would need to determine which staff member would do this.

Winter Recreation

Amy asked the group for more information on winter recreation, beginning with plowing needs in the Park. Currently, the Department of Transportation plows the Park trails parking lot fairly frequently, though this may not be happening through a formal agreement with the BPL. The DOT plows a few spots more sporadically, such as the Moose Cave parking lot, the Quonset Hut Road (100 feet in to the gate), the Cable Road (a small parking area is desirable) and a small parking area (for 2-3 cars) at the foot of the old fire tower trail for ice climbers. It is likely that the DOT plowing is reactive—certain drivers plow in places where they know people will park on the road if they don't. It would be best to be proactive—and communicate with DOT about regular places to plow, according to a winter recreation plan, and formalize the agreement.

It is desirable that the plan include a vision for winter recreation. The Park and Unit contain some of the most reliable snow in the larger region, when snow in lower areas is less reliable. Additionally, development in the region has (and will continue to) put pressure on public trail and

recreational access, making the public lands even more crucial. Development of a Nordic ski trail system would be a great asset to the region, and would be used by area high schools as well as the tourism and guiding businesses. The Upper Bull Branch area gets snow earlier and holds snow longer than most other locations. This area should be developed for Nordic skiing. Plowing should end at Twin Bridges, and then the Upper Bull Branch Road system should be left as a snow corridor. Local groups could groom trails for skiing for school groups and others. Old logging roads can be used. The trail system may be able to be linked to a larger trail network connecting Andover, the Bear River Valley and Bethel. Or the Bull Branch ski trail system could be linked to the Sunday River Road, although motorized trail grooming cannot occur in the ecological reserve. Other uses such as snowshoeing and winter camping could occur. Pete Smith noted that it would need to be plowed early in the season (November) up to a certain point for hunters to drive in. Other conflicts that may occur are between motorized and non-motorized users. The trail system could be coordinated with forestry operations.

It will probably not be possible to delineate an exact trail system in the management plan, however, setting the stage—or creating a vision that promotes winter recreation in collaboration with local groups is appropriate for the management plan. The plan could acknowledge the high local interest in a winter trail system.

This is the table that was presented as the results of the survey on trails:

+ indicates someone thought it deserved a higher rating,

- indicates someone thought it should be rated lower

TRAIL NAME	CURRENT USE	DESIRED TRAIL TYPE	ENVIRON. SENSITIVITY	CURRENT CONDITION	*Priority
Wright Trail	2.1+	1.7	3.7	2.6+	High
Goose Eye Trail	3	1.5	4	3	
Notch Trail	3.2	1.6	3.2+	2.7-	High
Speck Pond Trail	2.8+	1.4	3.2	2.3	High
Eye Brow Trail	3.8	2.7	2.8	3.5	
GLT (Old Speck to Sargent)	2.5	1.9	3.3+	4	
GLT (Sargent to 26)	2.7	1.6	2.8	3.7	
AT (NH to Full Goose)	4	1.9	4.6	2.5	High
AT (Full Goose to Old Speck)	3.8	1.9	4.6	2.3	High
AT (Old Speck to 26)	4.5	2	3.6	3	
Table Rock	4.8	3.3	3.2	4	
AT ((TR to BaldPate)	4.3	2.4	4+	3	High
AT (Baldpate to end of PRL)	3.6	2.1	4.2+	3.3	
GLT (Baldpate to Town)	2.4	1.7	3.6	3.8	

Corner)					
GLT (Town Corner to 26)	2.5+	2+	2.4	3.8	
Cataracts Trail	2.5-	2.75	2.5	4-	
MEAN	3.3	2	3.5	3.2	
Carlo Col	3.2	1.6	3.5	2.5	High

*Though this is a starting point, it is recommended that a trails coalition be formed, which will design a 5-year trail improvement plan and coordinate on submitting grant applications and assigning work crews.