

Kennebec Highlands Public Land Trails Plan



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Kennebec Highlands Public Land Trails Plan

This document accomplishes two recommendations contained in the 2011 Kennebec Highlands Management Plan: 1) to “develop a plan in partnership with BRCA (now 7 Lakes Alliance, or 7 Lakes) and CeMeNEMBA [Central Maine chapter of the New England Mountain Bike Association] for development of new nonmotorized trails in the Highlands” (p. 63) and 2) to “develop a plan to prioritize new hiking trail development, and to determine which other nonmotorized uses will be accommodated on which trails” (p. 65). It carries forward and builds upon the vision expressed in the 2011 plan, particularly regarding “Recreational Trails and Facilities” (p. 52).

I – Purpose

Kennebec Highlands is a large, undeveloped tract of public land of regional significance in terms of wildlife and natural resource conservation and as a public recreation area. Over the last 25 years, BPL ownership at Kennebec Highlands has grown to nearly 7,000 acres and has become the largest contiguous block of conserved land in Central Maine, providing important wildlife habitat and hosting an extensive network of motorized and nonmotorized trails. ATV/multi-use, snowmobile, hiking, and mountain biking trails converge in this unit.

As Kennebec Highlands evolves and grows, so does the vision for recreational trail development. This trails plan is the strategic vision and guiding document for the Bureau of Parks and Lands (BPL) for maintaining existing trails and developing new trails at Kennebec Highlands over the next 15 years. This plan identifies opportunities, priorities, and geographic areas of focus for non-motorized trail development while considering conservation values and the visitor experience inherent in the designated allocations of the Kennebec Highlands Public Land unit.

II - Role of Kennebec Highlands in Regional Trail Opportunities

The management plan describes the Kennebec Highlands region as being within 25 miles of many central Maine communities, a comfortable driving distance for day use. Within this 25-mile radius are the large population areas of Skowhegan and Augusta. Kennebec Highlands is the largest, protected, undeveloped area in central Maine, providing key habitat protection and unique recreational opportunities to over 20,000 central Maine residents as well as regional tourists who come to enjoy the Belgrade Lakes area.

The region offers several public hiking trails of 0.5 – 15 miles and several trails for mountain biking, including the multi-use Whistle Stop Trail, spanning over 15 miles and crossing several towns. The area is also known for boating and water recreation opportunities. Most trails in the area are established on small lots, offering short hikes and small networks of trails. Within an hour’s drive west of Kennebec Highlands are Mount Blue State Park, Androscoggin Riverlands State Park, and Tumbledown Public Land, offering considerable networks of hiking, snowshoeing, and formally groomed cross-country ski trails.

Kennebec Highlands Public Land offers a concentrated network of trails for a variety of both motorized and non-motorized uses in a block of undeveloped and protected land that offers a unique semi-remote backwoods recreation experience. Kennebec Highlands also offers one of the region's longer, more technical mountain biking trails. The expanse of Kennebec Highlands offers the region a large block of public land, providing access for varied user groups that require trails, like hiking and mountain biking while preserving undeveloped areas for remote recreation activities like hunting and fishing.

III – Existing Non-motorized Trails and Trails Vision

Summary of Existing Trails (see Map 1)

Hiking, Snowshoeing, Skiing

- **Round Top:** 4.4 mi. round-trip loop, starting on Watson Pond Road in the town of Rome. This loop goes to the summit of Round Top Mountain and provides overlooks with views over the region. This trail is also open to snowshoers and skiers in the winter.
- **Sanders Hill:** 2.9 mi. round-trip loop accessing the summit of Sanders Hill with views over Watson Pond to the northeast and passing by cascades on Beaver Brook. Hikers, snowshoers, and skiers use this trail.
- **Kidder Pond:** 0.4 mi. out-and-back trail, beginning at a small blueberry field on Vienna Mountain Road and following an old road to the south end of Kidder Pond. This trail offers access for anglers, hikers, snowshoers, and skiers (though winter access is located further down the Vienna Mtn. Road).



Stone steps on Round Top Trail



Beaver Brook cascades along Sanders Hill Loop Trail

Mountain Biking/Multiple-Use

- **A Trail:** A moderate to strenuous 8.8 – 9.8-mile mountain biking trail, from Round Top trailhead to McGaffey Mountain; also open to hikers, snowshoers, and skiers during the winter.

- **B Trail:** A 1.8-mile loop of primitively built mountain biking trails across the street from the Round Top Trailhead parking lot, on the former Dolley property, with a spur leading down to Long Pond. A short section of the trail is on the 7 Lakes-owned portion of the property. The spur could link to a water trail under consideration by 7 Lakes and others. This trail is also open to hikers and other non-motorized uses like snowshoeing and skiing.

Note that the ~13 miles of ATV and snowmobile trails that cross the unit, mainly on old town roads, are also open to mountain bikers and hikers during the summer and snowshoers and skiers during the winter. In recent years, the Bureau has also approved several miles of winter “fat bike” trails on the northernmost part of the Highlands, with access and part of the trail network on adjacent private lands. More details are provided below in Section VI, under Winter Trails.

Overall Trails Vision

As stated in the management plan, the overall vision for Kennebec Highlands is to provide unique, semi-remote backwoods recreational experiences, demonstrate exemplary multiple-use and sustainable forestry, and advance understanding of the value of special protected resources. Necessarily, any future development of recreation areas needs to consider this vision. Kennebec Highlands hosts multiple uses that can often conflict; for instance, forestry activities can conflict with trail development, Maine Public Lands hunting rules prohibit discharge of firearms within 300 feet of marked hiking trails, and motorized uses like ATVs and snowmobiles can conflict with non-motorized uses.

To balance multiple recreation uses, sustainable forestry, and conservation, the Bureau has identified areas within the unit that are considered appropriate for carefully reviewed development and has identified development priorities. The Bureau has also identified zones to be left relatively undeveloped to increase the viability of wildlife habitat, sustain remote recreation that depends on trailless areas, and retain areas where forest harvesting is less complicated by complex interactions with trails. This zoning approach allows the Bureau to better manage competing interests, protect the semi-remote backwoods recreational experience, and protect habitat and special protection areas.

Trailless/No New Development Zones Objective (see Map 2 and Map 3)

Although there are networks of old roads, both abandoned and currently used, as well as several motorized and non-motorized trail systems, there are still areas within the unit that are largely free of developed/marked recreation trails. The Bureau intends to protect some of these areas as trailless/no new development zones. These proposed zones will be protected from trail development, and management here will focus on wildlife habitat; remote, dispersed trailless recreation; and forest management.

Proposed Trailless/No New Development Zones

- Northwestern Zone (Zone 1): This area encompasses most of the area northwest of the Sanders Hill Loop Trail and west of Roxy Rand and Vienna Mtn Road. It includes the wildlife-dominant allocation areas around Boody, Kidder, and McIntire Ponds, and associated stream corridors and wetlands. This area includes Significant Wildlife Habitats defined under the Natural Resources Protection Act (NRPA), encompassing inland waterfowl and wading bird habitat (IWWBH) associated with the ponds and certain wetlands. It includes portions of the existing ATV and snowmobile trails (mainly on management roads). An area north and west of Watson Pond is excluded to allow for a potential new trail connecting the Sanders Hill Loop trail to regional conserved lands and trails east of the unit. The total area is about ~2,900 acres (42% of the unit).
- Round and Beaver Ponds Zone (Zone 2): This area encompasses the Wildlife-dominant allocated areas surrounding Round and Beaver Ponds and associated streams and the mapped deer wintering area and IWWBH near the ponds (Significant Wildlife Habitats as defined under the NRPA), extending east to Watson Pond Road. This area also protects an Unpatterned Fen Ecosystem that has been designated by Maine Natural Areas Program (MNAP) as an exemplary natural community. It includes a section of the Sanders Hill Loop Trail. [Note: This section of trail may be relocated outside the zone to minimize disturbance within the deer wintering area.] The total area is about ~730 acres (11% of the unit).

Areas of Focus for New Non-motorized Trail Development

- Vienna Mountain and Blueberry Fields: Vienna Mountain and the blueberry fields occupying much of the higher ground, accessed from Vienna Mountain Road, is a focus area for new development of non-motorized trails and associated parking. This area offers unique, easily accessed, recreational opportunities for walking and berry picking in the fields with notable long-distance views from many areas. The gentle terrain is amenable to visitors looking for less physically demanding outings, including families with children and older people. The network of existing vehicle tracks on the fields, formerly used for commercial management, may provide a good option for designated pedestrian routes that would not require new construction.

Some fields may be returned to active commercial management under a lease; those fields and potentially some associated existing tracks would not be available for trail development. Also, other portions of the fields not under lease will be managed primarily for wildlife habitat, as reflected in the Wildlife dominant resource allocation applied in the management plan. The Bureau will strive to avoid those fields when planning for new trails; any trail development or designation on existing tracks in those areas that may be proposed will need to be compatible with wildlife objectives.

- Connecting Sanders Hill Loop Trail to Vienna Mountain: The area between the Vienna Mountain blueberry fields and the Sanders Hill Loop trail is a focus area; specifically, with the purpose of developing a trail connecting the Vienna Mountain area to the east side of the unit and the Sander Hill Loop trailhead on Watson Pond Road. (A conceptual route is depicted on **Map 4**, using, in part, the existing road/ORV trail. The Bureau is open to other options for making this connection and will collaborate with stakeholders to determine a final route.) This connection would provide access to Vienna Mountain from the Watson Pond Road trailhead. It would also allow for longer day hikes than are currently available and could allow visitors to traverse the entire unit via Cross Road and Berry Hill Road on the west side of the unit.
- Connecting Sanders Hill Loop Trail to Regional Trails: There is an opportunity to develop a new trail that connects the Kennebec Highlands unit to conserved lands east of the unit. Such a connection would align with 7 Lakes' long-term regional conservation corridor project which aims to connect the Highlands to 7 Lakes holdings and other conserved lands, with support of the Land for Maine's Future program. This project includes an acquisition along Rt. 27 that provides an opportunity for a new trailhead. A potential connecting trail would extend between this new trailhead, or Watson Pond Road in the same vicinity, passing west of Watson Pond (potentially crossing the 7 Lakes parcel on the pond's west shore) to link up with the Sanders Hill Loop trail. The Bureau would work with stakeholders to determine the trail route, taking into account other management needs, including timber management access via existing roads.

IV – Resource Protection and Integration with Other Uses

Wildlife Habitat and Sensitive Resources

As mentioned above, Kennebec Highlands is home to numerous significant natural resources and ecological features defined by the Natural Resources Protection Act (NRPA). Among these significant natural resources are the small, undeveloped ponds that provide high-quality fisheries and inland wading bird and waterfowl habitat, an exemplary Unpatterned Fen community, two mapped deer wintering areas (one partially outside the unit), and a rare plant colony of alpine club moss. The Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (IF&W) also designated the Highlands as a focus area of ecological significance under the Beginning with Habitat program it administers. Existing trail systems, certain winter recreational uses, and roads near waterways have the potential to degrade these resources. The Bureau will consider the impacts on natural resources when planning for any additional recreational trails or other amenities.

Timber Management and Recreational Trail Integration

Timber management is the dominant allocation in the south end of Kennebec Highlands, east of McGaffey Mountain. The timber dominant area is 557 acres; dispersed recreation and wildlife management are secondary uses. Though this is the only timber-dominant area in the management plan, timber management is allowed and may occur as a secondary use in the

other parts of the unit, particularly areas allocated as backcountry motorized and remote recreation (together comprising a majority of the unit). Because forestry activity and recreation can overlap, it is important for the Bureau to consider the needs of each when planning recreation development. Forest management requires access to management roads, and development of trails often creates challenges for harvesting, given the desire to minimize trail crossings by harvesting equipment and resulting trail damage. Careful trail planning and routing are important to reduce these challenges and avoid severely constraining access for timber management.

Agricultural Land Use and Recreational Trail Integration

Vienna Mountain and the associated blueberry fields will offer a combination of commercial blueberry cultivation in certain areas (if a lease is executed), with management focused on wildlife habitat, recreational trails, and recreational berry picking in the remaining areas, as guided by the resource allocations described in the management plan. The blueberry fields represent a historic agricultural land use that has viable commercial value and management of those fields will prevent them from going fallow. As described in the preceding section, Vienna Mountain is a focus area for new recreational trail development; any such development will be carefully designed to provide unique and meaningful recreational opportunities and configured to best coexist with any resumed agricultural production. Resumed agricultural use may provide a cost-effective way to manage the viewshed enjoyed by potential trail users, particularly if a commercial leasee conducts vegetation management on non-commercial fields.

Compatibility of Multiple Recreation Uses

The size and undeveloped nature of Kennebec Highlands and its proximity to the major population centers of Augusta, Waterville, Skowhegan, and Farmington make it a popular recreation destination for a variety of users. Recreational uses are primarily hiking, mountain biking (including winter fat tire biking), skiing, horseback riding, snowmobiling, ATV riding, hunting, fishing, and berry picking. While hikers and bikers can use the ATV and snowmobile trail networks, which are mainly on management roads, nonmotorized and motorized uses are marked separately on trail maps. Skiers may use a combination of hiking trails and groomed snowmobile trails. Other recreationists, such as hunters and anglers, may focus their activity in the more remote areas of the Highlands. To provide opportunities for all users while reducing conflict, it is necessary for different recreation uses to share resources, and it is important to maintain the more remote regions of the unit as primarily undeveloped to allow for the dispersed recreation that relies on and benefits from that remote setting.

V – Potential New Trails and Expansion of Existing Trails

Hiking Trails and Improved Access Trails

The Bureau sees opportunities to improve existing trails and to build new trails, emphasizing connectivity and improved access for those with limited mobility. The Bureau will prioritize maintenance and improvements on the existing trail network, investing in the Sanders Hill Loop and Round Top trails to reduce erosion, improve the visitor experience, and ensure long-term

sustainability. With the addition of Vienna Mountain and the blueberry fields in the center of the unit, the Bureau's current priorities for non-motorized trail development are:

- Maintenance and sign improvements on existing trail networks
- Construction of public parking on Vienna Mountain Road
- Development of trails on Vienna Mountain for berry picking and access to views from the top, primarily using existing roads and pathways
- Building a hiking trail that connects Sanders Hill Loop Trail to Vienna Mountain
- Building an improved access trail on Vienna Mountain, offering a unique and spectacular trail for people with limited mobility

All new trails and associated parking will be designed in conjunction with decisions about the management of the blueberry fields. The Bureau will review each proposal to expand the non-motorized trail network to ensure minimal impact on wildlife and other natural resources and minimal conflict with other uses and allocations.

VI – Other Existing Trails Not Proposed for Expansion

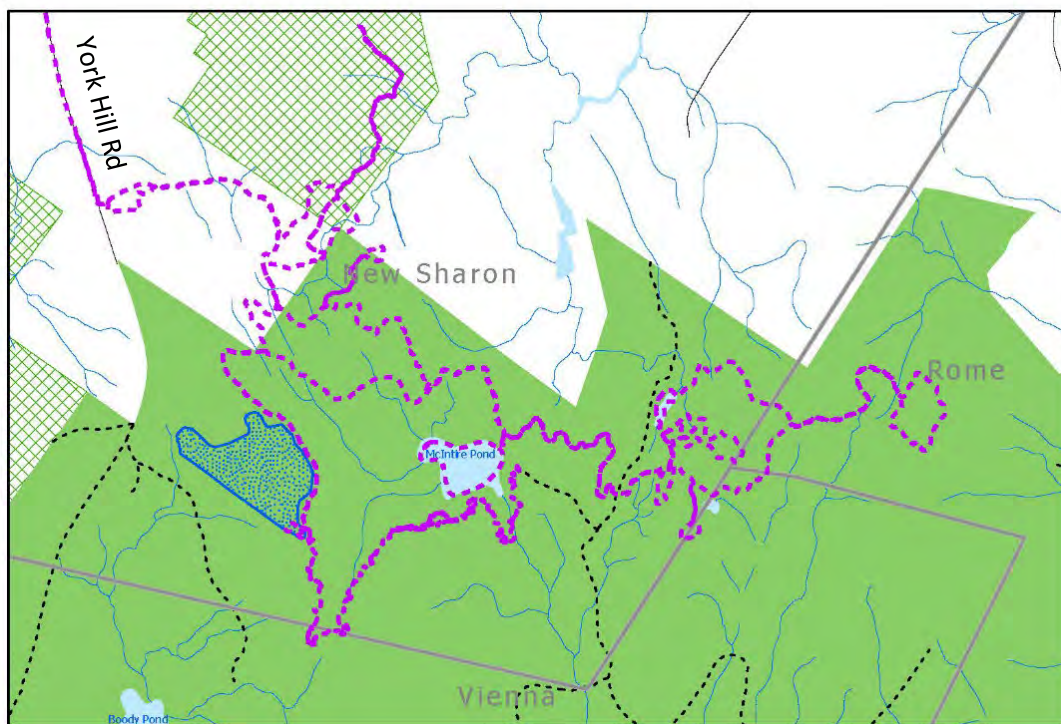
Mountain Biking Trails

There are currently two mountain biking trails developed by local mountain bike interests, the A Trail and the B Trail, both starting at the Round Top trailhead parking area. Bike riders may also use the ATV and snowmobile trails throughout the unit to create longer rides. The current trails that offer mountain biking access are a community asset. Given the presence of high-value wildlife habitat in the remaining undeveloped areas of the unit and considering the responsibility of the Bureau to manage for multiple uses such as sustainable timber management and remote recreation, the Bureau does not see the development of new, purpose-built mountain biking trail networks as part of the future role of Kennebec Highlands in the context of the regional trail opportunities. While extending current trails or developing additional networks and creating destination-level mountain biking trails is not a priority, the Bureau will consider proposals to develop relatively short new sections of trail, connecting existing trails and/or management roads that would expand the range of riding opportunities (for example, a trail connecting the A Trail to McGaffey Mtn. road). Also, allowing biking access on existing roads and on new trails developed on Vienna Mountain could be an opportunity, if deemed compatible with other recreation uses.

Winter Trails

Cross-country skiers and snowshoers can access existing hiking trails and groomed snowmobile trails throughout the unit. Although the development of formal, groomed ski trails is not a priority, including skiers in the planning process for new trail development in priority areas could provide increased access for skiers. Skiers and snowshoers can also seek greater adventure opportunities by venturing off-trail throughout the unit.

Fat tire mountain biking has become a popular winter activity, requiring groomed trails. Currently, local volunteers maintain an approved ~10 mile trail network for fat tire bikes at the north end of the unit (see figure below). The trails on BPL property are primarily based on existing skid trails and are developed with minimal ground disturbance or vegetation removal. The trails do not enter any currently mapped deer wintering areas. Adjacent and nearby property owners have granted permission for parking at a site along York Hill Road, and for the sections of trail leading to the public land. These trails are for winter use only; bike use is not permitted when there is insufficient snow to groom the trails. Pedestrians may use them in other seasons, but they are not blazed and are not depicted on BPL maps distributed to the public, nor maintained for that use. Given the overall semi-remote backcountry vision for the unit as well as the constraints of parking and access to this trail system on adjacent private property, the Bureau believes this network is sufficiently extensive.



Approved winter fat tire mountain bike (fat bike) trails on the Kennebec Highlands, and associated sections on adjacent properties.

VII – Partnerships, Long-Term Maintenance, and New Trail Proposals

Potential Partnerships: Trail Development, Construction, Maintenance, and Stewardship

Hiking/Pedestrian Trails

The maintenance of current hiking and pedestrian trails is managed in partnership by BPL and 7 Lakes, according to a Memorandum of Agreement. The Bureau will contract Maine Conservation Corps crews or private contractors to implement large maintenance and construction projects as needed. All trail maintenance and stewardship will use trail-building best practices to improve the long-term sustainability of the trails.

Mountain Bike Trails

The Bureau will partner with 7 Lakes and CeMeNEMBA to maintain the A Trail and the B Trail mountain biking trails, and any new connecting trail sections. Maintenance of mountain bike trails will follow best practices for these specific types of trails to ensure the long-term quality and sustainability of the trails. CeMeNEMBA will also conduct maintenance that may be necessary to keep fat bike trails open for winter use, limited to removal of blowdowns and trimming of low hanging limbs and similar tasks.

Improved Access Trail

BPL will prioritize the construction of a new improved access trail on Vienna Mountain. An improved access trail is designed to meet or exceed the Architectural Barriers Act access standards or the US Forest Service Trail Accessibility Guidelines for access.¹ These trails allow someone with a mobility device, limited mobility, or a balance challenge to experience nature or green space. The Bureau will partner with the local Travis Mills Foundation and other experts to identify a trail location and layout and design parameters that will fulfill this goal. Placement and construction of this trail will be contracted out to professional trail builders specializing in the specifications of such trails. The Bureau will ensure, with support from 7 Lakes, that maintenance and stewardship of this trail provide the trail conditions and quality of experience that meet the needs of the intended users.

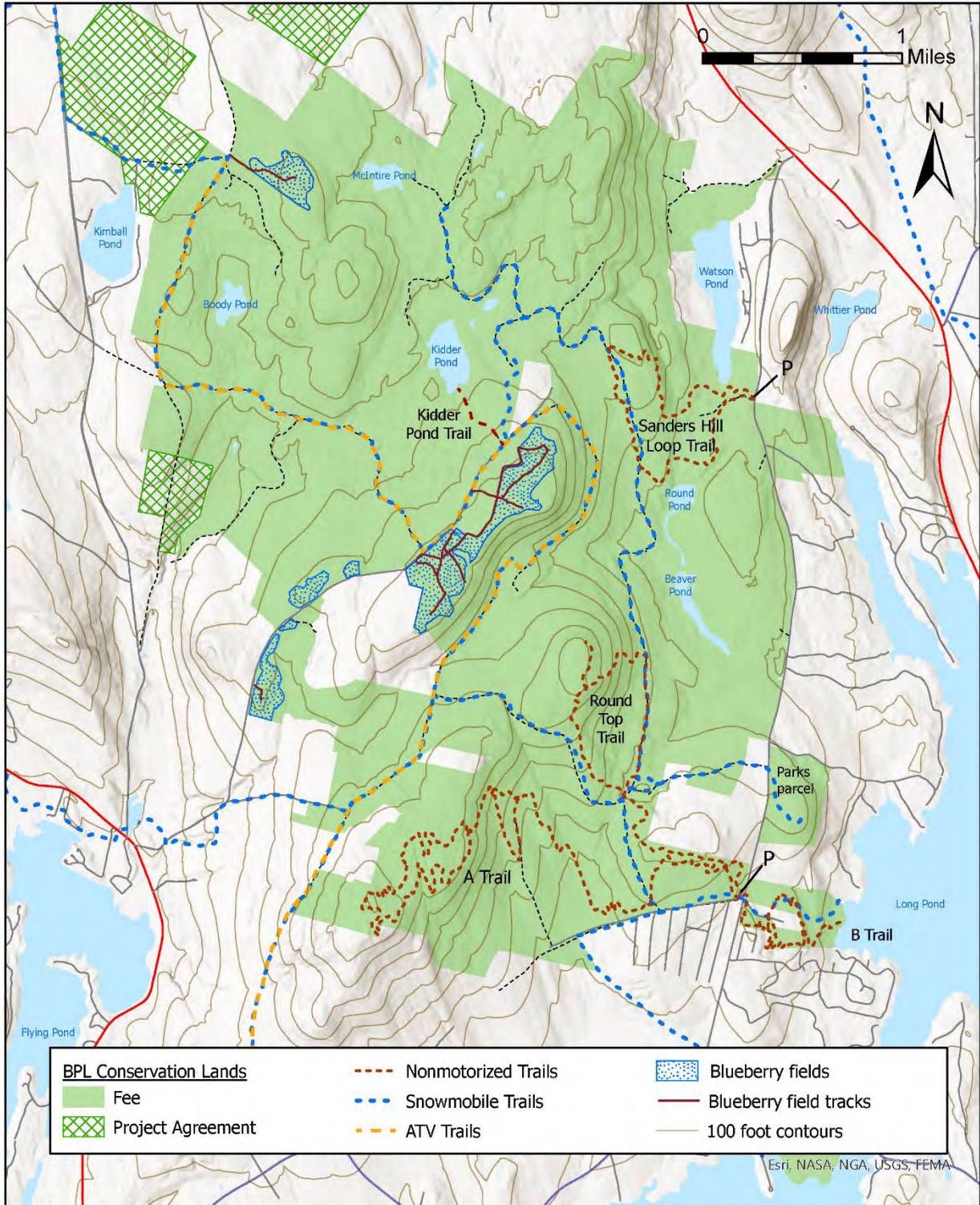
Process for New Trail Development Proposals

To ensure alignment with the resource values and vision of the Kennebec Highlands Management Plan and Trails Plan, proposals for new non-motorized trail development will be submitted to the Bureau for review and approval. Proposals should be developed and submitted by a cooperating partner or organization familiar with trail development and stewardship, and provide detailed descriptions, photos, and maps. The Bureau will perform a thorough project review with MNAP, the IF&W wildlife specialist assigned to BPL, recreation/trail planners, and the Regional Manager to determine the suitability of the project. To ensure quality, sustainable trail construction and capacity for ongoing maintenance, BPL requires all new trail development projects to be supported by a cooperating partner, who, if the project is approved, is willing to enter a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), agreeing to assist with or take on stewardship and maintenance of the new trail(s). Any organization wanting to groom new or existing trails must obtain a Special Use Permit from the Public Lands Western Regional Manager. This ensures that the manager has approved of the activity and has defined the scope of the activity.

¹ The standards and guidelines address factors such as trail width, slope, material, cross slope, etc. with the purpose of eliminating or reducing elements that may impede or prevent use by people with mobility impairment. Signs and trail descriptions will provide information about the design that allow visitors to determine if the trail meets their mobility requirements.

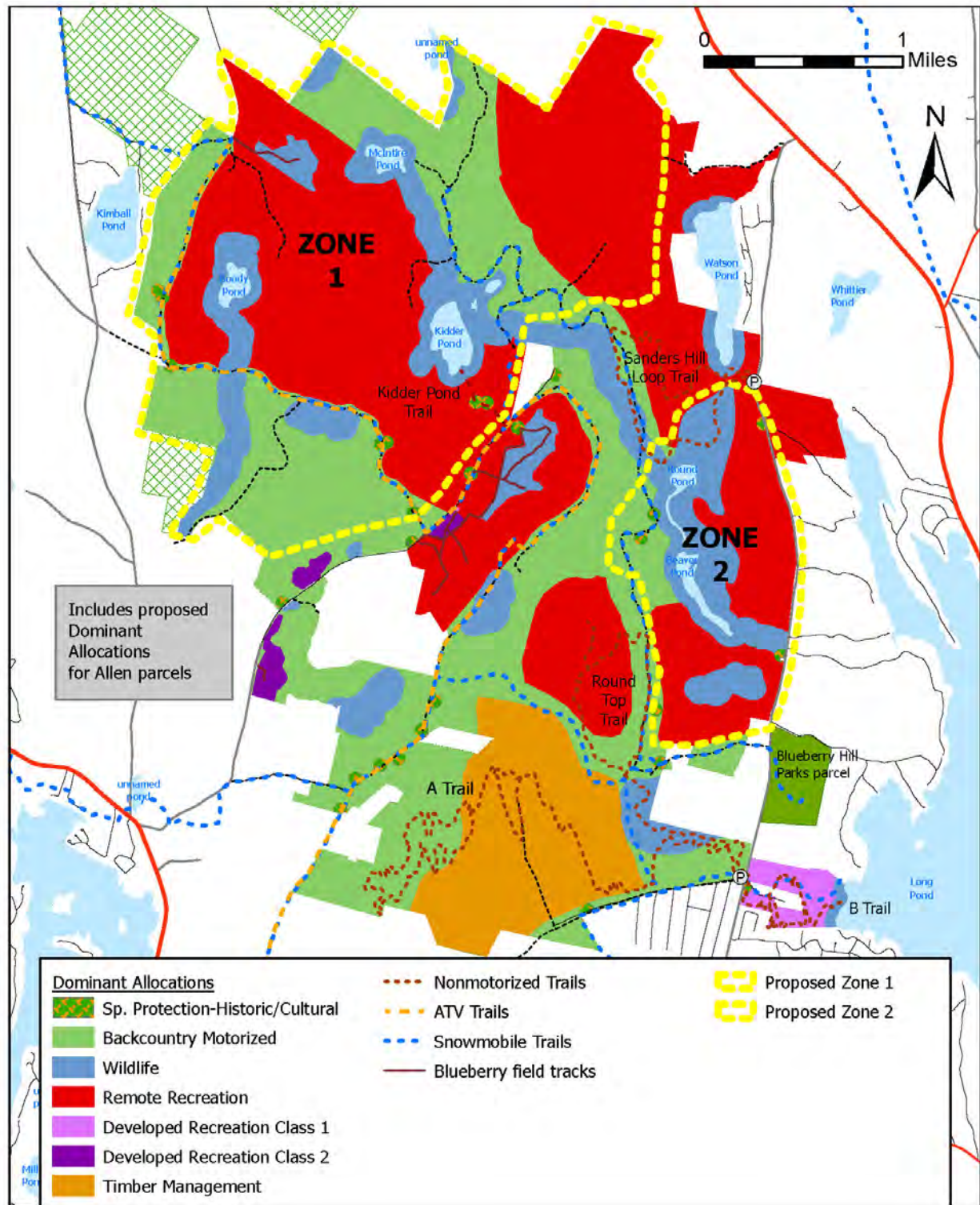
MAP 1

Kennebec Highlands Public Land Existing Motorized and Nonmotorized Trails



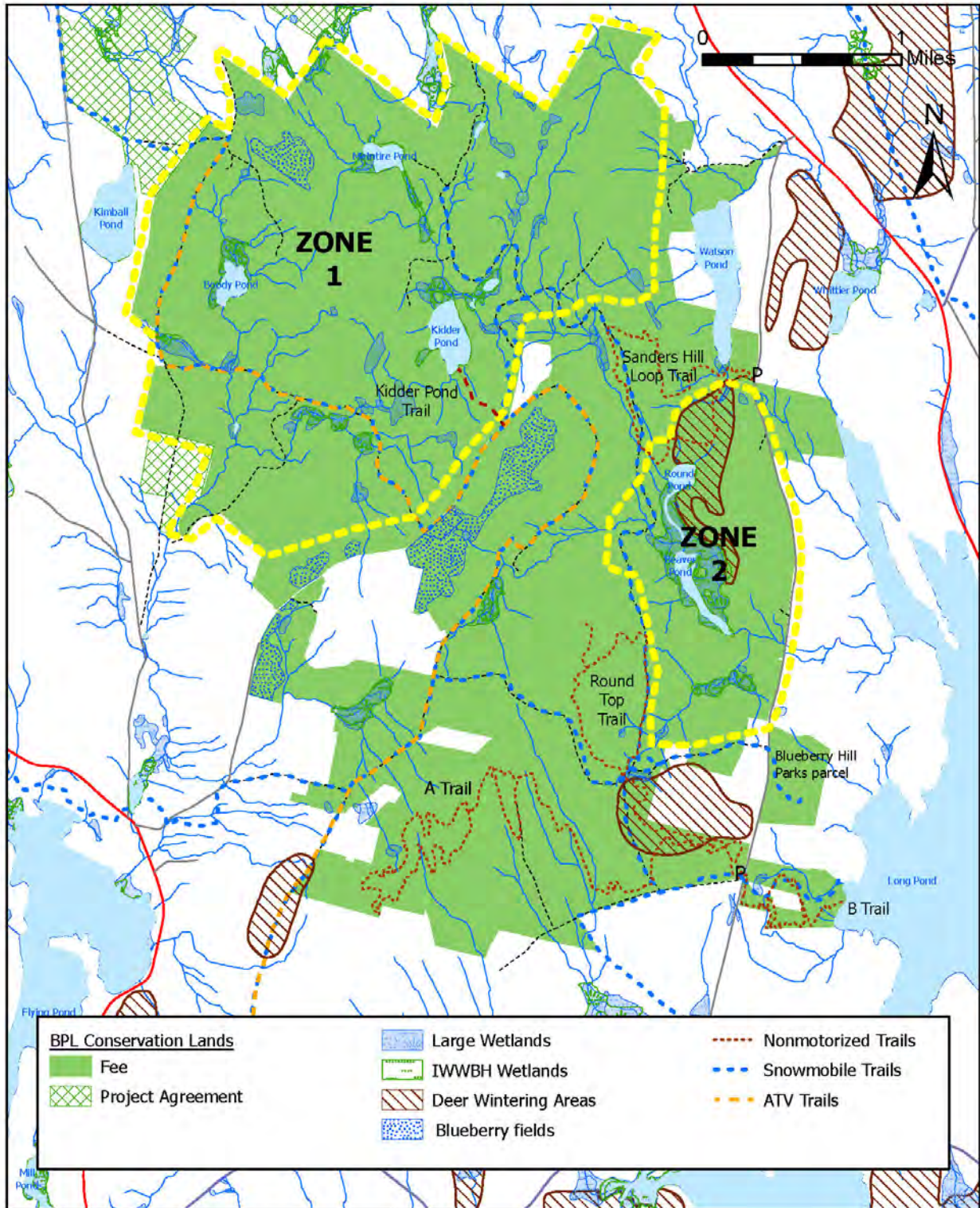
MAP 2

Kennebec Highlands Public Land "No Additional Development" Zones & Dominant Allocations



MAP 3

Kennebec Highlands Public Land "No Additional Development" Zones & Wildlife Features



MAP 4

Kennebec Highlands Public Land Sanders Hill Trail - Potential Connector to Vienna Mtn

