

FINAL MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FRONT COUNTRY TRAILS
Front Country Trails Multi-Jurisdictional Task Force
February 2008

I. ADMINISTRATION/ORGANIZATION

Recommendation 1: Develop an interagency (City/County/Forest Service) Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for trail management, maintenance, and funding.

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) would provide the vehicle for a City/County/Forest Service partnership. An MOU would establish the intent and expectations of the partnership, respective agency roles and responsibilities, and planning/decision making framework, among other objectives. An MOU would also establish broad priorities and funding commitments.

Historically, the Forest Service has been responsible for the management and maintenance of the front country trail system. With some exceptions, the trail system is largely within the Los Padres National Forest and under the jurisdiction and management of the Forest Service. In 1961, the City of Santa Barbara granted the Forest Service an easement for right of way for trails over City-owned tracks of land within the National Forest, for the construction, re-construction, maintenance, and full, free, and quiet use for enjoyment.

Reduced federal funding, increasing trail use conflict, and a continuing urban interface provide some key reasons to build greater collaboration between the three agencies. Greater collaboration and an approved agreement between the three agencies would also likely result in better service to the community. The work of the FCT Multi-jurisdictional Task Force as well as the earlier Front Country Trails Working Group provides the foundation for collaboration and cooperation. The MOU would be approved by the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors, the Santa Barbara City Council, and the Los Padres National Forest Supervisor.

Recommendation 2: Develop a multi-agency Front Country Trails Strategy.

The development of a multi-agency Front Country Trails Strategy will provide the framework for communicating a long-term vision, goals and objectives, and trails planning, management, and project priorities. Although the Forest Service updated the Los Padres National Forest (LPNF) Land Management Plan in 2005, it covers the entire 1.78 million acres of the LPNF. In recent years, very little work has been done to address both immediate and long-term trails planning and management issues.

A strategy focused on the front country trails would be able to more specifically address policy, planning, and management objectives, as well as serve as a work plan for interagency collaboration. A Front Country Trails Strategy document would serve as

the vehicle for the implementation of the Task Force recommendations. Public meetings and discussions would be an integral component of developing a Front Country Trails Strategy. All three agencies would approve the strategy.

Recommendation 3: Develop a funding plan to address trails planning and maintenance, capital projects, enforcement, and education and outreach.

The lack of consistent funding at the local, state, and federal level for trails management and maintenance represents a critical constraint for the management of the front country trail system. Despite the lack of ongoing funding, there are some grant opportunities within the Forest Service, as well as through the State of California, and occasionally funds become available for one-time capital projects.

A funding plan would establish an annual operating and capital project budget, identify project priorities, specify project implementation and maintenance costs, and demonstrate organizational capacity to potential funding agencies. A funding plan would also identify potential funding sources as well as opportunities to seek support from volunteers and trail user organizations. Historically, the front country trail system has benefited from the hard work of trail users, volunteers, and organizations such as the Los Padres Forest Association, Santa Barbara Mountain Bike Trail Volunteers, and the Montecito Trails Foundation, among others.

Recommendation 4: Establish an inter-agency FCT Coordinator staff position.

Since the front country trails are largely within the National Forest, the Forest Service has historically provided the staff support for trails management and maintenance. In recent years, staffing levels have been reduced significantly. At the same time, the need for agency staff has not changed and may likely have increased.

If the City, County, and Forest Service agree to work collaboratively, it is recommended that the three agencies support a FCT Coordinator staff position. The Coordinator would be responsible for the implementation of the FCT Strategy and funding plan, grant writing, education and outreach, and coordination with trail user groups and volunteers. Additional consideration is needed to determine which agency would hold the position, and whether the position would be under contract or permanent agency personnel. All three agencies would participate in funding the position. There may be some potential for non-governmental organizations to help fund the position as well.

Improved management and maintenance of the front country trail system, as well as the reduction of trail use conflicts will likely be most successful if there is dedicated staff. Given budget constraints and the more immediate need to address trail management and education, the staff recommendation is limited to a coordinator position. Over time, there may be opportunities to address other needs such as enforcement. As outlined below, staff recommends that the three agencies first explore fostering non-profit and volunteer support as well as implementation of education programs before focusing limited resources on enforcement personnel.

Recommendation 5: Foster development of an umbrella non-profit community organization to assist with trail maintenance, education, fundraising, and community support. Confirm/Maintain multi-agency/non-profit partner agreements.

Historically, the Santa Barbara front country trails system has benefited significantly from the involvement of non-profit organizations in maintenance and education efforts. These organizations include the Los Padres Forest Association (LPFA), Santa Barbara Trails Council, Santa Barbara Mountain Bike Trail Volunteers (SBMTV), the Los Padres Chapter of the Sierra Club, and the Montecito Trails Foundation, among others. LPFA fundraises to support the efforts of the Forest Service, and the Montecito Trails Foundation raises funds from its membership to contract trail work on the County urban trails as well as portions of the FCT in the Montecito area. Through sponsorships and volunteer labor, SBMTV sponsors regular trail work days.

There are a number of reasons for the three agencies to foster the development of an umbrella community organization. The first is that even with collaboration, the three agencies cannot solely manage the trails. Second, an umbrella organization would neither replace nor preclude the work of individual organizations, but would foster collaboration and coordination among them and serve as the primary point of contact for the three agencies. Third, non-governmental organizations can be very effective in fostering community support for maintaining the trails and adhering to trail use guidelines. Non-profit organizations can seek funding not available to public agencies and may also be better positioned to move projects forward once they are approved. There are many examples of other communities with extensive trail systems that work collaboratively with trail organizations and community groups to raise funds, implement projects, and promote educational programs.

The formation of an umbrella organization to work with the Forest Service was one of the recommendations of the Trails Working Group. There has been public comment at a number of Task Force meetings that supports the formation of such an organization, as well as ongoing collaboration with all the existing trail user groups.

II. COMMUNITY OUTREACH/EDUCATION AND SUPPORT

Recommendation 1: Re-implement education efforts, including trail signage, trail hosts, and other sources of information

Over the years, a number of education efforts have been implemented for the front country trails. Staff presented these efforts at the May 2007 Task Force meeting, and specifically focused on signage, informational materials, bike bells, and trail hosts. It is recommended that the Task Force endorse the re-implementation of these education efforts, as well as others that are identified. In the short-term, staff would move forward with developing educational materials, including signage. The City, County, and Forest Service would also work closely with trail user organizations to develop and implement

education efforts, since they will largely be successful if they receive volunteer assistance.

Recommendation 2: Develop interim voluntary trail use guidelines.

The Task Force has considered a range of trail use guidelines that have been informally promoted as well as formally adopted by other communities. Both voluntary compliance and fines are used to enforce trail use rules. Over the long-term there may be a need for the three agencies to develop and adopt consistent trail use regulations for the front country trails. In the short-term, it is recommended that the City, County, and Forest Service develop interim voluntary trail use guidelines that are promoted through education and outreach efforts.

Guidelines could address the use of bike bells, courtesy and yield, use of mutt mitts, staying on the trail, controlling dogs, horses, and bikes, avoiding trails during and after rain events, and so on. A consistent message is one benefit of interim and future guidelines. Guidelines that are consistently communicated would also educate trail users that may not be familiar with appropriate trail use practices. Similar to the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, enforcement of the guidelines could initially be done with volunteers. If over time, it is determined that voluntary compliance is not successful, the three agencies could consider punitive enforcement methods.

Recommendation 3: Build broader community support for the FCT by working with trail user groups to sponsor quarterly events/work days and an annual event to recognize volunteers and collaborative partnerships, among others.

Trail user groups and volunteers will continue to play an important role in the long-term management of the front country trail system. The three agencies could further support their work by assisting with volunteer work days and holding an annual event to recognize volunteer efforts and build broader community support for maintaining the trail system. There are other activities, such as educational and community service programs for youth that could be also be pursued. Given the limited staff resources, the implementation of individual events rather than ongoing programs is more feasible. Other activities could be pursued if, over time, additional resources are acquired.

III. TRAIL MANAGEMENT AND MAINTENANCE

Recommendation 1: Conduct an assessment of existing trail conditions and use to evaluate the application and scope of a trail classification system.

Knowledge of existing trail conditions and use are important first steps in developing a trail management and maintenance program. Information gathered regarding trail use and trail conditions would provide the foundation for developing trail guidelines and standards as well as provide the framework for establishing trail use designations. An assessment of existing trail conditions is important for the development of a funding plan and a trails strategy. It is also important to know when and how the trails are used.

Since, with one exception (Jesusita Trail), there is no consistent funding for trails planning, and maintenance, there is little information on specific existing trail conditions. The Forest Service has not fielded a trail maintenance crew on the front country trails in over ten years. Trail maintenance is completed primarily by volunteers (SBMTV and the LPFA Wilderness Rangers). In addition, MTF has contracted for some trail work on FCT trails that are within the Montecito community. In recent years, there has been a small amount of funding for the repair of storm damaged trails.

To assess trail conditions and use, it is recommended that on the ground survey work be conducted, similar to that conducted as part of the Santa Monica Mountains Area Recreation Trails Coordination project (SMMART). Other models include, but are not limited to, the Mid-Peninsula Open Space District and Boulder County, Colorado. As an example, the trails inventory for the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area was conducted by students, community members, and public agency staff, and data was collected with hand-held GPS units.

It is also recommended that the three agencies conduct trail user surveys to learn more about trail user demographics, trail use, trail user interaction, barriers to access, and knowledge about the front country system, its natural resources, and trail user etiquette, among other issues. Survey data would assist in developing trail use education materials, trail use recommendations, and trail management and maintenance programs.

Recommendation 2: Develop a trail classification system and trail standards that are appropriate to Santa Barbara's front country.

The topography, soils, and climate of the Santa Barbara front country make its trail system unique. With the exception of fire roads and dirt roads, most front country trails are fairly narrow and steep. As a result, the development of a trail classification system, and trail standards beyond those established by the Forest Service may be difficult. However, since the front country trails are currently multi-use by default, it is recommended that a trail rating system be explored. Other agencies have developed such systems, such as the Mid-Peninsula Open Space District. A classification system would address trail width and grade, side slope, and line of sight. This information along with increased trail management and maintenance would help trail users select an appropriate trail and foster trails that are safely accessible to multiple users.

Recommendation 3: Explore developing consistent standards for trails planning, policy, permits, and regulations.

Early on, the Task Force identified the need to develop consistent standards among the three agencies for trails planning, policy, permits, and regulations. As the lead agency, Forest Service policies and regulations provide a foundation. Many of the management recommendations would provide a mechanism to achieve consistency, where necessary, as well as determine shortfalls. Specifically, an MOU and the development of a Front Country Trails Strategy could form the basis for developing consistent trail use policies and regulations. Key considerations raised by the Task Force include the use of the front country for commercial purposes, trail use guidelines including speed limits, opportunities for generating revenue to support trail maintenance and management, enforcement, methods for addressing trail use conflict, and resource protection, among others.

Recommendation 4: Explore a Pilot Program with Trail Use Designations

Trail user conflict is a key concern of every trail community and trail-related public agency. In Santa Barbara, a variety of trail stakeholders have called for limiting the use of certain trails to avoid conflicts between hikers, equestrians, and mountain bikers. Others have called for keeping the trails open regardless of use. Trail use designation that separates users has been implemented in other communities to reduce trail conflict and to protect sensitive resources. There are a number of methods including:

- establishing even/odd days that alternate use for cyclists, hikers, and equestrians;
- designated single use days within each week;
- designated single use trails;
- development of wider trails to better support multi-use; and
- new trails that meet broad multi-use guidelines or are designated for a specific purpose (such as mountain bike trails).

It is recommended that an evaluation of alternate trail uses and designations be conducted only after the three agencies have up-to-date information on existing trail conditions and trail users. Baseline data will be critical for an assessment of various trail use options. It is anticipated that consideration of specific trail use designations would also involve extensive public input.