



To: All interested parties
From: Drew Simmons, VOREC steering committee
Re: Disruption and demand / winter outdoor recreation in Vermont

At the August meeting of the Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative (VOREC), a panel discussion was held regarding the coming winter (2020/21) and potential for COVID-related impacts on outdoor recreation businesses, communities and managers throughout the state.

An audio recording of the panel discussion audio is located here ([LINK](#)). Panel speakers include Alex Kaufman (podcast host, "Wintry Mix"); Adam Howard (publisher, "Backcountry" and "Cross Country Skier" magazine); Zac Freeman (executive director, R.A.S.T.A.); Craig Whipple (director, Vermont State Parks); Marc Sherman (owner, Outdoor Gear Exchange); Matt Williams (director, Catamount Trail Association); and Drew Simmons (president, Pale Morning Media).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

A summary of key takeaways from the panel discussion and the meeting include:

1. HIGH USAGE TRENDS INDICATES A BUSY WINTER AHEAD

- At the end of last winter (2019/2020), as Vermont ski areas closed to the public, usage trends remained exceptionally high at all available winter recreation areas, attracting all skill levels of users from lifetime experts to novices.
- Those high usage trends of outdoor recreation areas continued this spring and summer (2020), with the addition of significant numbers of out-of-state users at already crowded trailheads, waterways and open lands.
- Fall (2020) retail trends indicate heavy interest and demand in human powered outdoor recreation equipment for wintersports including strong sales of cross country skis, alpine touring skis and snowboards, snowshoes and "fat" tired winter mountain bikes.
- For the coming winter (2020/21), there is widespread anticipation for elevated winter use of outdoor recreation infrastructure in Vermont, both at traditional ski/snowboard resorts as well as backcountry and other human-powered recreation areas.

2. DISRUPTION IS EXPECTED AT ALL LEVELS OF 'TRADITIONAL' WINTER RECREATION

- There is general agreement that traditional ski/snowboard resorts will not operate at 100% of normal capacity due to COVID-related challenges, and some may operate at significantly less capacity.



- Public and private schools are anticipated to have longer than usual winter breaks, and traditional indoor sports (hockey, basketball) are likely to be delayed or disrupted.
- Expectation is that high summer user trends will translate directly to winter user trends. Obvious challenges may arise because of “normal” Vermont weather variability -- snow, ice, freezing rain -- that may impact parking, access, travel, safe standard usage, and injury rescue if needed.

3. OPPORTUNITIES, CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES EXIST

- Winter-related trail organizations are rapidly moving to create broad consumer messaging to ensure that winter recreation on their trails are safe, and that the resources remain at the highest quality for residents and visitors alike.
- Increased usage of VAST trails by accessing backcountry ski and snowboarders.
- Increased use of frozen lakes and ponds if high school hockey season is cancelled.

4. KEY QUOTES

- *“With all this pandemic crap that we’ve all been dealing with for the past 6 months, it’s made us all very reactionary, dealing with things on a very short term basis. This winter is one of the first times where people are able to take a breath and look a little bit farther down the line into a place where we almost feel like we know what to expect. There’s still so much we don’t know. At the same point, I think we know a lot, and our gut feeling is telling us that this is a huge opportunity as well as a potential huge challenge.”*
- *“It’s natural to assume if there’s some disruption of our resort traffic, that creates a pinch point that doesn’t allow 100% of the people that want to go there, that they’re going to find other places to go. And with the COVID environment, that’s accelerated.”*
- *“We’re going to see a pretty steady explosion of new users and first time users.”*
- *“From trail counter data, we know that 40% of backcountry ski visits are between 10 and 2 on Saturdays, and we know where all the parking lots are.”*
- *“There are trailhead issues: a lot are on small, residential dirt roads. Usage will go up, and carpooling is not something that we can encourage right now.”*
- *“Over half of our trail system users are out of state, especially on weekends when there are drastically more out of state skiers and riders”*
- *“There’s no question that the interest in outdoor recreation is going to be sustained, the question is how to we manage it”*
- *“Uphill travel, backcountry and Nordic skiing is how people are going to deal with disruption at resorts”*



- *"The Vail Resorts plan (link below) put forth is really great for travellers, but it's not great for locals."*
- *"We have to assume there's going to be a significant increase in (backcountry winter) use and the challenges associated with that -- COVID specific stuff, backcountry safety and impacts to infrastructure -- parking in particular."*
- *"Hockey rinks are facing challenges and it may end up pushing people to lakes and ponds."*
- *"We are in a position to get the word out and create a consistent message."*
- *"Our phones have been ringing off the hook, at least twice as much as normal. I can really anticipate the lack of knowledge that is out there around winter trail use."*
- *We need to also keep the energy high for a positive next spring and summer series of events. A lot of events got scratched this year, which all bring in a lot of people in from out of state."*

UPCOMING CONVERSATIONS

Additional conversations on the topic of winter outdoor recreation impacts are planned. Those conversations and dates include:

- A winter resort and retailer panel discussion and networking event (Friday, Oct. 2, noon, hosted by Vermont Outdoor Business Alliance and Vermont Ski Areas Association);
- A winter small business panel discussion and networking event (Friday, Oct. 29, noon, hosted by Vermont Outdoor Business Alliance);
- A winter land manager and stewardship discussion, facilitated by Vermont Forests Parks and Recreation Department and VOREC (Date TBD).

LINKS MENTIONED IN THE MEETING

- Vail Resorts, Operating Plan ([LINK](#))
- Wintry Mix Podcast, "Odds of Skiing" ([LINK](#))
- Backcountry Magazine Podcast, "The Makers Lament" ([LINK](#))