

**Willoughby State Forest
Long-Range Management Plan Amendment
Re: Equestrian Access**

Long-Range Management Plan (LRMP) Process

The Vermont Agency of Natural Resources (ANR) oversees state-owned land with various objectives, from safeguarding natural resources to facilitating public access. To achieve these goals, ANR develops long-term management plans (LRMP) for its state-owned lands. These plans are crucial for directing resource allocation, including decisions on recreational activities, timber harvesting locations and methods, and wildlife habitat management.

Periodically, ANR may propose amendments to these long-range management plans to reflect evolving management practices, usage patterns, or public interests. Similar to the initial LRMP development process, amending these plans involves robust public engagement and transparency. This includes providing access to proposed changes, presenting detailed explanations of the proposed amendments, and offering opportunities for public feedback. ANR strives to incorporate suggestions that align with its land management principles, objectives, and departmental missions.

Willoughby State Forest LRMP

The Willoughby State Forest Long-Range Management Plan (LRMP), established in 2004, directs the management of about 7,862 acres of forested land in the towns of Barton, Sutton, Westmore, and Newark. This forest is divided by Lake Willoughby and bordered by the towering cliffs of Mount Hor and Mount Pisgah. It holds substantial ecological, recreational, and scenic importance, encompassing two natural areas – Willoughby Cliffs and Marl Pond – alongside extensive forested areas managed for purposes such as water quality, wildlife habitat preservation, sustainable forestry, and recreational activities.

Vermont Horse Council

The Vermont Horse Council (VHC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting and protecting the interests of all Vermont equine users. In May 2019, VHC signed a cooperative agreement with the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation (FPR) to *‘cooperate with the development, maintenance and enforcement related to horse trails on state-owned land.’* The agreement states, in part: *‘FPR recognizes that horse activities, defined as horseback riding and driving of horse drawn vehicles, are important recreational activities and supports the use and development of horse and multi-use trails on state-owned land where consistent with FPR’s natural resources management, other existing uses, safety, planning documents, legal constraints and other stewardship activities.’*

In consideration of the interests of the equestrian community and the FPR-VHC cooperative agreement, the Vermont Horse Council has proposed an amendment to the Willoughby State Forest Long-Range

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Management Plan to expand equestrian access on durable roads and trails. The current LRMP notes *'equestrian use is evident on some of the forest roads, but this activity appears to be low at the present time'* (WSF LRMP, p. 103). Per FPR Policy #4, equestrian use is designated for gravel surface roads and Forest Highways, limiting equine activity in Willoughby State Forest to the CCC Road, the Bartlett Mountain Road, and portions of the Duck Pond and Bean Pond Roads. This totals approximately 6.8 miles.

VHC Proposal

Working with and responding to input from FPR staff, VHC has drafted and revised over six iterations of an equestrian proposal for Willoughby SF. Most recently, the VHC has proposed adding approximately 14.5 miles of equestrian terrain and one new parking area in the southern portion of Willoughby SF. On January 8, the St. Johnsbury DST agreed to approve approximately 9.7 miles of forest roads and woods trails, and conditionally approve another 1.5 miles, for expanded equestrian use. Additionally, the DST approved the creation of a new overnight parking area that expands access to routes on the less visited southern portion of Willoughby.

The map below shows the approximate location of the proposed equestrian routes, including the following gravel surface roads and/or Forest Highways, permitted under FPR Policy #4: Mountain Bicycles, Horseback Riding, and Pack Animals:

- The entirety of the CCC and Bartlett Mountain Roads and portions of the Bean Pond and Vail Pond/Duck Pond Roads (approx. 6.8 mi.)

Additionally, the DST is seeking to have the following routes, not addressed under FPR Policy #4, approved for equestrian use:

- The section of Class 'C' forest road(s) between Bean Pond Road and Buggee Road (approx. 4.5 mi.)
- The section of VAST trail/forest road between Bean Pond and Vail Pond (approx. 1.5 mi.)
- The Middle Loop and Bartlett Mountain Summit Loop portions of the WSF Nordic trail system (approx. 2.5 mi.)
- The unimproved forest road referred to as the 'CCC Loop' (approx. 1.2 mi.)
- The unimproved forest road referred to as the 'Dogleg Trail' (approx. 1.5 mi.)

Lastly, the DST recommends the development of a designated overnight equestrian parking area, located near the CCC-Dolloff Pond Road junction, which provides parking and access to the routes situated on the south side of Willoughby State Forest.

Note: Per the 2019 FPR-VHC Cooperative Agreement, VHC is required 'To obtain, by September of each year this agreement is in force, written landowner permission from private property owners who allow trails that connect to trails located on state-owned land to be located on their property, and to allow FPR access to this written information upon FPR's request.'

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LRMP Amendment

Given the scope of the proposal and the potential for a high level of public interest, we are seeking public comments and recommendations to inform the LRMP amendment. After public comment has been considered and any changes to proposed routes have been finalized, we will provide a detailed map depicting equestrian access in Willoughby State Forest and make the following changes to the original LRMP:

- Table of Contents, amend to reflect the following:
 - Add Appendix G: Approved 2024 Amendment and map
- Under **Public Access**, page 41, amend the following sentence to read ‘the Bartlett Mountain cross-country ski trail system will be managed for ~~winter pedestrian~~ non-motorized use only.’
- Under **Recreation Resource Management- Background** page 43: amend the following sentence to read: ‘A wide variety of dispersed recreational activities occur on the forest including but not limited to hiking, mountain biking, ice and rock climbing, snowshoeing, dog sledding, primitive camping, horseback riding, and cross-country skiing.’
- Under **Bartlett Mountain Area**, pages 97-98, after the fifth paragraph, insert the following: *‘Equestrian use is permitted on portions of the so-called Middle Loop and Bartlett Mountain Summit Loop trails. Use shall be restricted to the summer season, generally starting after Memorial Day, and include managed routes approved by ANR. In order to avoid disturbance of bear feeding activity in the ‘Key Mast Area’, use of the Middle Loop shall end on September 15.’*
- Under **Trails: Equestrians**, page 103, amend as follows: *‘Equestrian use is evident on some of the forest roads, ~~but this activity appears to be low at the present time~~ and there is interest in expanding access in the forest. FPR recognizes that horse activities, defined as horseback riding and driving of horse drawn vehicles, are important recreational activities and supports the use and development of horse and multi-use trails on state-owned land where consistent with FPR’s natural resources management, other existing uses, safety, planning documents, legal constraints and other stewardship activities. The Vermont Horse Council helps manage and maintain equestrian trails in Willoughby State Forest.’*

