



**Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry
Bureau of Parks and Lands**

Advisory Committee Meeting
**Kennebec Highlands Public Land Management Plan
2nd Five-Year Plan Review**

March 1, 2023, 5:30 to 8:00 pm
7 Lakes Alliance Office, Belgrade Lakes
(* participated via MS Teams videoconference)

Meeting Notes

Advisory Committee Members participating:

Laura Rose Day	7 Lakes Alliance, President & CEO
Bill Swan *	
Elizabeth Payne *	Abutting landowner
Lincoln Nye *	Rome Ruff Rider snowmobile club, President
Gary Kielty *	
Ann Gibbs *	Vienna Mountain resident
Julie Davenport *	Maine Forest Service
Brian Alexander	Central Maine Chapter of NEMBA
John Simoneau	Backcountry Hunters & Anglers
Dave MacLeay	

Other members of the public participating:

Jonathan Milne	7 Lakes Alliance, Land Steward
Roy Bouchard	7 Lakes Alliance volunteer
Doug McCosh *	Rome Ruff Riders snowmobile club, Vice-President
Shawn Landry *	Rome Ruff Riders snowmobile club member

BPL Staff participating:

Bill Patterson	Deputy Director
Tim Post *	Western Region Manager
Stephen Richardson	Forester/Engineer
Nicholas McDougal	Forester
Rex Turner	Outdoor Recreation Planner
Sarah Spencer *	MDIFW Wildlife Biologist assigned to BPL
Jim Vogel	Sr. Planner, Management Plan Coordinator

Background

This meeting was convened to discuss with the Advisory Committee a number of topics that are particularly relevant to the development of a Trails Plan for the unit, and for the management plan for the newly acquired Allen parcels. The committee and members of the public on the contact list were provided the meeting agenda (see attachment 1) in advance.

Discussion Notes

After a welcome and introductions, Jim alerted participants that the Teams meeting would be recorded and shared some opening thoughts on the significance and complexity of the plan review and update in relation to the Bureau's management of the Highlands as public land. He continued by outlining the objectives of the meeting, emphasizing discussion of numerous "potential" actions mentioned on the agenda, with BPL sharing initial ideas, considerations and preferences, and attendees having the opportunity to react and share their own ideas, pro and con, about the potential action and ask questions. He mentioned field visits by himself and other BPL staff in recent months to gain a better understanding of the land, especially the new parcels, and to consider access and trail opportunities and constraints. Lastly, members were encouraged to send any follow-up comments in the next few weeks, given that limited time is available during the meeting.

Summarized comments from both BPL staff and AC members/other participants on the agenda topics are provided below. At various times in the meeting, maps of the Kennebec Highlands were shared via Teams (one featuring trails and one featuring specialized wildlife habitats; see attachments 2 and 3), visible to those attending in person and those on the video conference.

Discussion of Trails Issues

Potential zoning to help maintain a "unique, semi-remote, 'backwoods' experience" as a primary element of the overall Vision and to preserve hunting opportunities

- Dave: asked how the current resource allocations in the plan relate to this zoning concept; Jim explained that the allocations do not dictate the presence or especially absence of trails.
- Brian: "Absolutely love the quiet" but also an advocate for trails and think there is enough territory that there can be both.
- John: Want areas where there are trails and that disruption and areas where not. He steers away from trails areas, easier to not bump into trail users. Quiet is not a problem now – but let's be strategic about where we develop our trails.
- Elizabeth: Absolutely in favor; don't need to crawl all over, some areas can be set aside.
- Bill S.: Avid hunter; now steers away from areas that he used to hunt where there are now trails, doesn't like that interaction. Noted the trail-free area is not just for people who hunt but wildlife watching, bushwacking.
- Laura: Echoed Bill's point. Noted that trail-free areas could be reversed in the future but that once trails go in, it is unlikely / difficult to go back on that.
- Sarah: Noted recent research out of Vermont about the impact of trails and users on wildlife. Exciting to see some of this research being produced in our NE region. Important to have areas that are less disturbed. Also that potential for forest management is stronger in trail-free areas.
- John: Looked at Beginning with Habitat maps; encourages more ground truthing of mapped wildlife areas and how accurate and up-to-date these are, including deer wintering areas. Jim noted that DWAs are depicted in the plan, but new data is needed to determine levels of use (as described in the Plan).
- Sarah: Explained basis for mapped DWAs in the unit (less scrutiny/validation in organized towns), noted that she is trying to line up the right snow conditions with her schedule so she can do some update work on deer use with the regional IFW biologist. Sarah also notes that DWA's highly benefit ~50 native vertebrate species.

- Jim: Shared map with DWAs on screen, discussed current deer use and if some are missing.
- Jim: Asked the group to share ideas about what areas might be good to keep trail free?
 - Brian mentioned the area around Beaver Pond as nice habitat and currently trail-free and a place to keep that way.
 - Jim outlined a large area to the west of Vienna Mountain that BPL some staff have preliminarily discussed to remain trail free (other than existing ORV trails and possibly short pond access trails).
 - John mentioned the area west of Kidder Pond as favored area to explore off trail.
- Bill S.: Wants consideration for access to McIntire Pond either by vehicle or by foot (if access via Roxy Rand Rd is not restored) and would not want this trail free proposal to foreclose that. Otherwise would be good with keeping indicated area trail free.
- Shawn/Steve: Planned trail from west side of Allen as replacement for Roxy Rand Road closure. This connector trail would not be an “additional trail”. This needs to be resolved. There is an unresolved question about access of the Roxy Rand Trail up to Vienna involving other landowner; so, potentially in the future may need both.
- Jim: Zone would not need to have a strict prohibition – e.g., could do short portage from New Sharon blueberry field to McIntire Pond if Roxy Rand Access is not recovered.
- Laura: Protecting water quality is important. Where there are better options, should think about if and where trails could be moved to if there are positive tradeoffs for wildlife, etc.
- Shawn: What considerations for life safety access? No cell service. Trail use up there is picking up a lot but that also leads to more needs for rescue and safety.
- Jim: Mentioned that the Chief of the Vienna Fire Department has been contacted by BPL about this plan update and is on the contact list. He will be a resource regarding life safety access.

Potential new hiking and walking trails?

- Rex: Shared some BPL thoughts -- new connections between Sanders Hill Trail and/or Round Top that could get hikers up onto the Allen blueberry fields. Focused on low-hanging fruit.
- Brian: Throughout history of unit there has been talk of a circular trail that hits all of the highest peaks – Roberts Hill [east side, just west of Watson Pond] and No Name Hill [west side, west of Kidder Pond]. But no new trails area described by Jim would eliminate connection to “No Name Hill” on the west side.
- Jim: Acknowledged that the trail Brian describes is a “consider” item in the 2011 Plan. Also, BPL staff discussed during a field day the opportunity for marked walking trails that would utilize some part of the existing double-tracks on the Vienna Mtn blueberry fields. Could provide access to the peaks for views as well as to recreational berry picking.
- Roy: There is a good low-impact opportunity to connect the two high points on the Vienna Mtn blueberry barrens. Easy construction and maintenance, due to presence of ledge. Only ¼ mile or so.
- Roy: Asked whether there is still interest from bike community to connect A trail (bike trail) over to Round Top Trail. Brian says not committed one way or the other. Waiting to see how this planning process works out.
- Rex: We should be thinking about the intended experience and rationale for any new trail. E.g., what is the goal of a long-distance trail? Is it backpacking? Trail running? See new places?

- Brian: One reason is to more utilize the whole parcel; unbelievable features no one knows anything about. Experience the geological diversity. Roberts Hill is a very unique and interesting area. Opportunity to do a 15-mile hike or trail run (longer hiking experiences than now available on the unit).
- Dave: The chain of peaks is a pretty unique hiking opportunity that the existing trails don't really take advantage of.
- Roy: Developing more trail/peak connectivity also opens up multiple opportunities for loop trails. A relatively short spur would be needed to reach from Sanders Hill to Vienna Mountain.

Potential Mountain Bike Trail Expansion?

- Jim: What would be the purpose of any new bike trails in terms of experience?
- Brian: A Trail is not for the timid, gets hardcore bikers. A great challenge and unique offering but is not user-friendly.
- Jim: So there is an easy trail at Monataka, and the difficult A Trail, but a more moderate-difficulty riding experience is not available.
- Shawn: Would like a map that shows all existing trails by use -- one map for each use to really see individually plus as a complete overlay of the property. [Jim will follow up by sending a copy of the recreation map being shown on the screen]
- Roy: What about gravel biking; could existing roads be used more or less as is for longer distance biking?
- Stephen: Pointed out the difficulty of setting public expectations about future "trail use" on management roads when timber harvesting does happen every 20 years or so. People forget about discussions around recreation use of roads that will be reopened later for harvesting.
- Brian: Mountain bikers typically don't have as much objection to logging as hikers. Cited places out west he had visited.
- Laura: Observed that many visitors are not aware that timber management is even a possibility.
- Rex: Are there areas we don't want bikes in particular if we put accessible trail in the Blueberry barrens and if become popular for other recreation uses?
- Elizabeth: Looks to me like there are plenty of trails, why do we need any more? What are the per acre limits on trails? See heavy trail development locally in Orono. How do you know when you have overdone it? Don't see why there needs to be any more.

Universally Accessible Trails

- Jim: BPL understanding is that the Vienna Mtn peaks, where views can be enjoyed, is the target area. Will be engaging with experts on the contact list.
- Laura: Have talked with Travis Mills Foundation and brought them on site and they think that there is a tremendous opportunity. The draw is an accessible trail to a mountain top with accessible views. Have someone on staff who is quite an expert.
- Jim: Sees challenges as to providing direct vehicle access to an accessible trail, while also providing trail access to peak(s) which are not near existing road where a trailhead might be.
- Laura: Mentioned existing track behind farmhouse as potential part of UA trail.
- Rex: Noted BPL plans to engage with experts to figure out costs. Engage with community also. Determine, level of accessibility, distance, specifications, materials, etc.

- Jim: BPL has discussed the possibility of BPL scheduling a field day this summer focused on this topic.

Winter Trails

- Jim: Described recent ride with Bill and Brian on the fat bike trails; learned they are often used for skiing, snow shoeing, running when conditions are not good for bikes. Want to make sure the general public knows about it.
- Brian: If fat bike trails gets “opened up to the general public” may incite high enough use that present parking on private land will be inadequate. Then it will need an access point located on public land.
- Stephen: If we can get it reestablished, would access from Roxy Rand road work? Brian, yes for sure.
- Rex: Catch-22 here; Brian’s management of current private landowner/BPL trail situation has worked well, but given substantial use of public resource want it to be a public resource. What’s the balance? Want to thread the needle, not agitate those who are letting public use their land.
- Bill P.: What about off of Mile Hill Road? What about from Watson Pond Road area? Group discussed North Access Road north of Watson Pond.
- Dave: Noted challenge of getting up Roberts Hill that would exist from trailhead in that area. Also noted that glade skiing potential is strong -- mentioned recently harvested areas on Vienna Mountain.

Roads and Access

- Ann: Noted that Vienna Mountain Road from snowplow turnaround up to the base of the hill is an absolute mess – has to be upgraded if going to have public access further up the hill.
- Stephen: Gave a report on Vienna Mtn Road work to date; what the approach has been with neighbors, drainage, etc. Got some of the brush cut on “the neighbors” side of the road. Trying to ease into it to preserve relations. Described LMF funding. Issue with lack of gravel on-site; have to truck it in. York Hill Road – may be a little work done if we end up doing timber harvesting; in worse shape in some ways than Vienna Mtn Road.
- Group discussion of winter parking, plowing; potential summer parking across road from farm house; where parking and connection to accessible trails might start. Possibility for a smaller parking lot for disability access only. Noted built-in purpose with Travis Mills Foundation, though would be open to all. Would be relatively accessible to population.
- Jim: Asked Steve to review potential installation of gates; Stephen showed some locations gates would be needed to block jeeps, on Berry Hill Road and Cross Road. Using “slot gates” that allow ATV’s but not jeeps and could be swung open for the winter for snowmobiles. Stephen mentioned potential of cemeteries that provide rights of access and could not be gated. This previously stopped BPL ATV program from installing such gates. Gating on Vienna Mtn Road is less clear due to abutters access. Closures might be seasonal during mud season.
- John: Hunts the west side of unit into December and there are problems with hunting and where to park without blocking the road. Some pull-offs would be needed, and good information made available for hunting. Discussed road access on Kimball Pond Road; perhaps could be improved for parking. Young hunters often don’t have high clearance vehicles.

- Bill P.: Not only provisions for parking but maps on paper or online to direct hunters about where they can access and where they should not.

Blueberry Field Management

- Bill P.: Discussed Yarborough report on the blueberry fields; reported on discussions with Wyman's, other blueberry growers about resumed commercial production (organic vs. non-organic), management of non-commercial fields, pros and cons of burning. Goal is to have management not cost us money, rather than make money. MFS could do burning of fields for training purposes, as have successfully done on other BPL-owned fields in the East Region.
- Laura: Vienna Fire Dept. recognizes burning as good management technique.
- Steve: Wyman's understands need to coexist with local uses.
- Jim: Discussed current mapping of fields (commercial, other) based on Yarborough report; ideas about viewsheds as priority for what non-commercial fields to keep open.
- Brian: "Hire Wymans"
- Others: Be sure to retain areas for blueberry picking. It has been a popular opportunity with the public.
- Ann: Important not to let it go too far with brush encroachment in fields. Takes some time to bring blueberry fields back if you have too much hardwoods growth.
- Laura: Understanding is that we are looking for integrated management, once contractor to manage both commercial areas and some part of non-commercial (vegetation management).
- Stephen: Ideally, BPL would cover costs for keeping fields open through an agreement that would include commercial production and management of non-commercial fields.
- Sarah: Blueberry field on top of mountain is unique habitat in itself even though not big enough and narrow shape prevents it from being high value habitat for upland sandpipers or grasshopper sparrows. Still valuable habitat for other species.

Other Topics

Potential Formalization of User-created Campsites

- Jim: Formalization of campsites on Kidder Pond would provide a unique opportunity for the area. Would increase fishing pressure which IFW would like. Downside is we don't have the staff to monitor it. May become an ATV magnet / problems.
- Sarah: There are some areas away from wetland habitat that could be potential but a summer visit is needed to look at on the ground in more detail.
- Rex Turner: Reminded that camping is allowed in general on public lands, if no fire and don't cut vegetation. Also pointed out that is unique but also could become popular and difficult to manage.
- Roy: Question about vehicle traffic to Kidder Pond. Stephen, says it is greatly reduced. Some limited ATV use still.
- Jim: Road to Kidder Pond has been blocked by BPL in past to prevent vehicle access to pond. Steve reported that rock barriers were moved; road to pond has grown in enough now to discourage trucks. If informal campsites on the pond are formalized, could use some accommodations to improve the road and/or add parking at that location.
- Laura: Noted that there are times when the area is a wreck. Formalizing that can potentially help reduce rogue camping problems.

- Rex: Would not be realistic for BPL Rec Rangers to be able to manage the campsites.
- Stephen: What happens if the two sites are taken on a busy weekend? Noted that IFW would like to see increased fishing pressure on Kidder. Questions how to do that without negative impacts of crowds.

Potential Bear Bait sites

- Jim: Highlighted that BPL has not designated sites on the southern lots but acknowledges there is high demand; that Backcountry Anglers and Hunters have commented in favor of establishing sites; that IF&W has noted increase of complaints about problem bears in the area, which hunting pressure may help reduce
- John: Not a lot of opportunities for bear bait sites on public lands in this part of the state. Has seen bear on-site and notes good habitat. Would advocate for it to be individuals only if possible. Thinks the property is big enough to put sites in and not create conflict.
- Tim: The Bureau generally splits bear bait site permits between individuals and guides.
- Laura: How many sites would be established?
- Jim: Not determined; noted that location of any sites would need to be coordinated with trails planning to ensure desired buffers are maintained. Sarah described approach to locating sites near roads and maintaining buffers.
- Laura: Allen family has not identified bear as an issue in the blueberry fields.
- Jim: There were some people that had inquired about BPL establishing bait sites who stated they had permission for baits in or around the Allen property. Someone suggested it was in the vicinity of the triangle inholding at north end of Vienna Mtn.

On-Site Stewardship Capability

- Jim and Rex: Noted the BPL presence on site is limited; Recreation Rangers in West Region are not based nearby and have to cover many rec facilities at units far from here.
- Jim: Noted that BPL's recently signed agreement with 7 Lakes provides an improved basis for communication and collaboration regarding on-site management needs. Noted 7 Lakes requests in 5 year review comments for more data collection on use of trails and parking area.
- Rex: Noted that BPL is acquiring more traffic/trail use counters and can provide those to 7 Lakes to use at Kennebec Highlands.
- BPL and others noted that use levels have moderated somewhat from Covid peak but remain higher than pre-Covid.
- Jim: Circled back to trailhead topics missed earlier; BPL believes Sanders Hill trailhead needs to be enlarged. ORV program wants to take an area-wide look at Rome Ruff Riders request for expansion of Round Top trailhead for snowmobile rig parking to determine need.

Next Steps

Jim described the next steps, which will involve BPL drafting both the management plan for the Allen parcels and the Trails Plan. Drafts of both documents will be provided to the committee for review and comment. [Note: A Final Report on the review will also include BPL responses to comments submitted on the Five-Year Review Table, which were not directly discussed during the meeting.]

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 8:00 pm.

Attachments:

1. Meeting agenda
2. Map – Updated Kennebec Highlands Conservation Lands and Recreation Features
3. Map – Kennebec Highlands Wildlife Habitat Features