

NASH STREAM FOREST OHRV BRIEFING PAPER

Nash Stream Forest (“Nash Stream”) is the largest state reservation, at roughly 40,000 acres. The acquisition of Nash Stream occurred in 1988; it was complicated and took many years to close. When these lands went up for sale, there was a great concern by the conservation community that they would be bought up and developed based upon the sale price at the time. Funds to permanently protect this piece of property came from state, federal and conservation organization dollars, which included a conservation easement (the “Easement”) held by the federal government.

The first Nash Stream management plan (the “Plan”) took seven years to write by a specific technical team, along with considerable public input. The Plan, which was completed in 1995, stressed that recreation be low-impact and dispersed. There was a fine balance between keeping this as a working forest, but to also practice ecological-based, sustainable forestry. Large reserves were set aside during this process to allow for the natural processes to take place with little to no human disturbance.

In 2002 the Plan was amended, in part due to strong political interest to develop an OHRV trail on Nash Stream. A nine-mile section of trail known as “West Side Trail” was added to Nash Stream which allowed OHRVs to enter onto Nash Stream from Stratford and make a loop and exit Nash Stream.

Since then, OHRV use has grown significantly in popularity and has become a major economic driver in the North Country. New Hampshire now has one of the largest OHRV trail networks in the nation.

The Plan is currently being re-written. During this process, a technical team (the “Technical Team”) has been formed to help update the Plan (the “Revised Plan”). The Technical Team is comprised of state employees from various organizations with diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise. There is also a citizen’s advisory committee (the “Citizens Committee”) that makes recommendations on the management of Nash Stream.

One of the many decisions that need to be made while updating the Plan is the aspect of OHRV use. This continues to be one of the most challenging questions to be answered before the Revised Plan can be completed. As OHRV use has gained popularity, there have been several additional requests for new trails, resulting in a new pilot trail, known as “Kelsey Notch Pilot Trail”, in the north section of Nash Stream. As continued requests for further expansion continue to come in, DRED has decided to look at all the requests more holistically to make a decision based upon trails for the entire Nash Stream property, while examining the original conservation intent of why Nash Stream was acquired. The Technical Team asked the OHRV community to look long term at what they would like on Nash Stream (as well as other user groups). Two proposals came in to DRED, the first one has been rescinded, and a second, more modest proposal was submitted this spring.

DRED is presenting CORD the following three options, and we are looking for feedback regarding the options. Since CORD has the oversight responsibility over the LCIP purchased properties, and given that Nash Stream is the largest LCIP funded project, DRED is seeking advice and consultation before moving forward with the draft Revised Plan. While the Kelsey Notch Pilot Trail was already reviewed by CORD in 2013, DRED is asking that CORD look at all the potential options together and determine if one or all of these are consistent with the LCIP funding that helped acquire Nash Stream. As is consistent with DRED’s

long management practice of state resources, any decision regarding conservation, recreation, or land management are based on the resources, conservation goals, and public interest of the property.

Option 1: Status Quo

- No new OHRV trails within Nash Stream.
- Continue the Kelsey Notch Pilot Trail
- Continue to allow the West Side Trail.

In 2013, a new section of snowmobile trail was opened to use by OHRV's as a pilot project in Kelsey Notch. The purpose of the Kelsey Notch Pilot Trail is to allow an east-west corridor as part of the Ride the Wilds project and complete the 1,000 mile interconnecting network. This option will allow for the continued use of both the West Side Trail and the Kelsey Notch Pilot Trail. The Kelsey Notch Pilot Trail would be maintained as a pilot trail for a determinate amount of time, and made into a designated trail upon suitable completion of a set of pre-determined conditions. The Technical Team assessed the trail for the coarse and fine filter criteria in November, 2015.

Option 2: Keep OHRV use consistent with 2002 Plan amendment

- No OHRV expansion beyond the West Side Trail.
- Eliminate the Kelsey Notch (pilot) Trail.

Since the acquisition of Nash Stream, the focus of recreation has been on low impact. The Plan called for no motorized wheeled vehicles. This vision for recreation will be carried through to the Revised Plan and will continue to focus on traditional, low impact, recreation. OHRV use was never intended to be a major component of the recreation portion of the Plan. In 2002, the Plan was amended to allow for a three to five year pilot on the West Side Road (the West Side Trail Pilot”), which created nine miles of trail on Nash Stream connecting to the North Stratford trail system. During the West Side Trail Pilot there was a significant amount of oversight as well as various studies completed to understand the effects of OHRVs on many factors, including noise studies, water quality, bird studies, invertebrates, etc. After studying the effects of the West Side Trail Pilot, the Commissioner of DRED adopted the trail as a designated ATV trail – West Side Trail, in 2008.

Option 3: Expansion of the OHRV trail system

- Create an East/West Corridor Trail in the southern portion of Nash Stream
- Continue to allow the West Side Trail
- Adopt the Kelsey Notch Pilot Trail as a designated ATV rail – Kelsey Notch Trail
- Allow a southern connector from the existing West Side Trail down to services and connection to the new east/west corridor.

The North Country OHRV Coalition has come forward with two different proposals; the Coalition first requested that all of the roads in Nash Stream be opened to OHRVs, the second was a significantly scaled down and more modest request. This second proposal requests a connection from the existing West Side Trail down the main road to connect to gas and services, and then heads east out the Amos Emery Road. Sections of new trail would have to be built across Nash Stream where currently no roads/trails exist to connect off Nash Stream to the east.

Limited OHRV use is currently permitted on Nash Stream. Surrounding Nash Stream is the 1,000-mile “*Ride the Wilds*” OHRV system which offers large scale riding opportunities to the immediate east and west of the Nash Stream. The “*Ride the Wilds*” could benefit from an east-west trail connector to allow riders on either side of Nash Stream to access the trails on the other side.

The North Country OHRV coalition also requested two parking areas within Nash Stream. These have been eliminated from the proposal. The East/West Corridor, as proposed, is to be a through trail in order to get from one side of Nash Stream to the other. Nash Stream is not meant to be a destination for OHRVs, so for this reason the parking areas have been eliminated.

Review by the Technical Team:

DRED administration has not come to a decision regarding the proposals to date, and is waiting for feedback from CORD, the Citizens Committee, and the public. The technical Team has been working on re-writing the Plan for approximately three years. During this time, they visited every aspect of the Plan and had many discussions regarding the original vision and management principles as well as looking at the Easement. The Technical Team has concerns about Option 3 based upon the following review:

The proposed East/West Corridor was walked by the Technical Team on July 28, 2016. There were representatives from many state agencies, including Forests and Lands, Natural Heritage, Trails Bureau, Fish and Game and the Office of Energy and Planning. The proposed East/West Corridor was evaluated according to RSA 215-A:43. During the field visit, the coarse and fine filter criteria were examined; however, there are elements of the criteria that need to be evaluated on GIS and at a higher level than the Technical Team. The proposed East/West Corridor can be broken down into four sections: The first is along a gated, gravel road known as the Amos Emery Road. The second section breaks off from the gravel road and follows the Cohos Trail, and then follows an old woods road down to Rowells Brook. The third section follows the boundary line through undeveloped woods and would require new trail construction. The last section re-connects to the Cohos Trail down to the town road.

Some concerns regarding the proposed trail were brought up during the site walk. Fish and Game has reservations about the increase in traffic along the Amos Emery Road. This is a prime beech ridge for black bears. Beech nuts are a significant food source for bears and this area contains numerous “bear trees”, or trees that bears repeatedly climb for nuts. Currently, the Amos Emery Road has a locked gate with little to no traffic, which allows the bears and other wildlife to feed relatively undisturbed during the spring and fall. Fish and Game was also concerned about the third section of trail which would require new construction through an undisturbed, un-fragmented spruce-fir forest which provides ideal habitat for martin, bobcat and lynx. There was also a hardwood forest with boulders and rocks outcrops that would be ideal denning locations for multiple species.

The Technical Team also has concerns regarding the length of shared use between the Cohos Trail and the proposed East/West Corridor. There would be several miles of shared use which would present user conflicts. The southeast corner of Nash Stream has always been an area with numerous hiking trails coming in from the Christine Lake area. The Summer Club trail is a historic trail which has been in existence since the early 1900's and the Potter's Ledge trail has been used since the 1880's. There are trails that lead to the Percy Peaks, Victor Head, Bald Mt. and Potter's ledge, which would be affected by the addition of OHRV traffic to a very remote, quiet part of Nash Stream, which is currently quite secluded.

There was some discussion about the beginning of the road on the abutter's property. The property has been under the same ownership for a long period of time, but the property may change hands as the owner is in the process of divesting a portion of his holdings. In addition, while the State has a right-of-way across his property for forest management, it is unclear if this right-of-way allows the public to cross his property. The land owner has always allowed the snowmobile trail access across his property and he has agreed to allow OHRV crossing as well, however, if the trail goes through it will need to be reviewed as a permitted use of the right-of-way.

There were no rare plant species or exemplary natural communities documented within the proposed East/West Corridor. However, a wooded talus community on the southern slope of Bald Mountain, immediately adjacent to the proposed trail, appeared to be of high quality. Additional field work would be necessary to determine if this community is exemplary.

There were some discussions regarding a few sections of the proposed trail which were steep. One section in particular was an old trail that was steep and gullied, which would likely lead to erosion. Another section on concern was steep and angled toward a stream, which has the potential for runoff directly into the brook. There were significant rocks and boulders and ledge in areas. The logistics of trail construction and maintenance through parts of this area would result in significant impact to Nash Stream.

Lastly, we had a discussion about the south connector that would lead from the existing West Side Trail to the proposed East/West Corridor. This portion of trail would travel along the Nash Stream Road which is the main access into Nash Stream. This gravel road is open to motor vehicle traffic to allow public access. It would be difficult to install a gate in this area to prevent OHRV traffic from traveling onto the rest of Nash Stream.

Expanding the OHRV trails to the main road and the Amos Emery Road would lead to an increase in maintenance and could conflict with forest management activities in the future. Though there is limited riding allowed on Nash Stream today, the majority of the Technical Team had concerns that further expansion of OHRV use was not consistent with the management vision or the purpose for why Nash Stream was originally acquired.