

MAINE BUREAU OF PARKS AND LANDS (BPL)
Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry
22 State House Station - Augusta, Maine 04333-0022

MEETING MINUTES

**FLAGSTAFF REGION MANAGEMENT PLAN – 15-YEAR REVIEW AND UPDATE
ADVISORY COMMITTEE (AC) MEETING**

U. Maine – Farmington, Olsen Student Center

August 20, 2024

6:00 – 8:30 PM

COMMITTEE MEMBERS AND THE INTERESTED PUBLIC PRESENT

AC Members

Leah Beck, Appalachian Trail Conservancy
Edie Dunlap, Flagstaff Area ATV Club
Richard Fecteau, Maine Appalachian Trail Club
Paul Kennedy, North Franklin Snowmobile Club
Elizabeth Latti, IF&W Fisheries
Alan Ryder, Timber Resources Group
Steve Swatling, Friends of Bigelow
Brent West, High Peaks Alliance
Wolfe Tone, Maine Huts & Trails
Joshua Tauses, Carrabassett Region NEMBA

Interested Public and Other Organizations

Simon Rucker, ME Appalachian Trail Land Trust
Bob Weingarten, Friends of Bigelow
Doug Merrill, JV Wing Snowmobile Club
Travis Roderick, "
Patrick McGrath, "

BPL STAFF PRESENT

Bill Patterson, Deputy Director
Rex Turner, Director of Planning and Acquisitions
Jim Vogel, Management Plan Coordinator
Mike Pouch, Chief of Silviculture
Joe Higgins, Supervisor - ORV Program

Sarah Spencer, MDIFW Biologist assigned to BPL
Will Jeffries, Forester - Western Region
Frank Henry, Forester - Western Region
Nick McDougal, Forester - Western Region
James Turner, Recreational Trails Coordinator

INTRODUCTIONS

After a welcome by Rex Turner, introductions were made by members of the Committee, other BPL staff and other attendees, followed by a brief statement by Jim Vogel of the purposes of the meeting, which initiated engagement with the committee in the plan update process: 1) to review the accomplishments since 2018 in implementation of the Flagstaff Plan recommendations and recreation improvements allowed by past Plan amendments, 2) to review forest management on the Flagstaff Unit, 3) to review and discuss ecological reserve, snowmobile and mtn. bike trail proposals that may require plan amendments if approved, and 4) to begin discussion of resources and management issues on the recently acquired Perham Stream and Orbeton Keystones lands. A meeting agenda (attachment 1), and scoping notes for the Perham Stream and Orbeton Keystones lands (attachment 2) were distributed in advance via email and were also available at the meeting. PowerPoint slides were used in support of the discussion (attachment 3).

ACCOMPLISHMENTS/ACTIONS

Jim presented highlights of recreation and other improvements that have been accomplished since the last Plan review at the Flagstaff Unit/Bigelow Preserve, Chain of Ponds, and Crocker Mtn. units, primarily implemented by others and as allowed by the 2014 and 2018 Plan

amendments and the 2015 Crocker Mtn Unit Management Plan. The presentation also reviewed recent and ongoing changes to multiuse trails on management roads in the Bigelow Preserve due to road improvements required for timber harvesting. Attendees were also given the opportunity to discuss and ask questions about other accomplishments, as summarized in the Plan Review table (AC members were provided with the table several weeks in advance of the meeting). No questions or comments were forthcoming.

FLAGSTAFF TIMBER MANAGEMENT REVIEW

Mike Pouch presented data that summarized timber management over the past 20+ years and for the next 5+ years on the Flagstaff Unit, including the Bigelow Preserve. The presentation touched on several subtopics, including 1) total acres treated each year, 2) the silvicultural treatments applied, 3) the total yield each year (cords or equivalent) by product and as compared to the annual allowable cut (AAC)/sustainable harvest level (SHL) and estimated growth, 4) average harvest (cords) over 3-year and 10-year periods as a percentage of SHL and by management unit, and 5) harvest plans by town and compartment over the next 5 years (through 2030).

Comments and Questions:

Wolfe Tone: What is the relative change in starting cordage per stand as compared to the average 11.7 cord harvest removal? Answer: Usually about a 30% removal.

Brent West: Why was the proposed ecological reserve (ER) expansion area not previously harvested? Mike pointed to Steve Swatling who stated it had been eyed for an ecological reserve and so he stayed out of it.

Brent West: What is the value of the timber in the proposed ER area to the Bureau for funding other purposes? Answer: BPL is cutting so far below allowable annual harvest that the effect is negligible though it will play a role in the unit's overall annual allowable which will need to be recalculated.

Dick Fecteau: Says that the ER addition has good ER value. Dick questions whether any of the harvesting along the Stratton Brook road is worthwhile in terms of value vs. public perception. Answer: Stratton Brook road is close to mills so does offer good returns on harvest activity.

Brent West: Asked a question about the broader presence of late-successional forest (as found in the proposed ER area) within the Bigelow Preserve, and how those are addressed in BPL's silviculture. Mike replied that we review all harvest areas for late-successional value.

Steve Swatling: Asked if BPL can identify what acres have not been entered for forest harvest in the last 40 years. His point being that maybe the allowable cut is too high as a result of those inaccessible areas contributing to the AAC but not the yield. Answer: This is true in concept but the reality is that BPL harvest is so far below allowable cut that we don't believe it is having a measurable effect on long term sustainability. BPL is currently in the process of conducting a new inventory and typing data acquisition; this issue among others needs to and will be assessed.

NEW MOUNTAIN BIKE TRAIL PROPOSALS

Josh Tauses, representing CR-NEMBA, has recently provided BPL with proposals for additional mtn. bike trail development that were not considered in the development of the Flagstaff or Crocker Mtn. Plan or the 5-year Plan reviews and that may require plan amendments. These proposals reflect the ongoing development of bike trail networks in the Carrabassett Valley area

over the past 10+ years, as well as recent changes in the networks due to BPL road improvements and trail closures on abutting lands. The proposals include:

- 1) an additional short trail near the new Stoney Brook trailhead on the Wyman Lot, connecting to the existing newly built trail,
- 2) a reroute of a section of the Esker Trail (AKA 60s Road) in Dead River Twp. to move the trail off the recently improved management road, and
- 3) several short sections of trail near Stratton Brook Pond Road, where timber harvesting has recently concluded.

Josh presented the trail proposals, with maps shown on the slides, and described the purposes of each proposal in relation to existing trails and riding conditions and experiences. [Note: The Esker Trail reroute was approved by a Plan amendment approved in 2014, in anticipation of planned timber harvests that are now nearly complete, but was not built.]

Comments and Questions:

Discussion of proposal #1 focused on a desire for more trails closer to the trailhead to allow for a shorter trail experience. Mostly compacted into the small block near the parking. There was a suggestion for using the new parking lot for winter parking to avoid parking conflicts with the camp owners on the opposite side of Rt. 27. Bill commented that BPL prefers to avoid people crossing the Highway on foot, especially in the winter. Instead, BPL is developing a plan to plow a small parking lot just past the camps on the Stratton Brook road.

Discussion of proposal #2/60's road: Josh stated that even though access on Penobscot tribal land has been lost – some of the now dead-end trail on BPL land is still being ridden. CRNMBA is requesting to build a new trail off the widened gravel road to restore a riding experience similar to what formerly existed on the Esker Trail.

Steve Swatling expressed concern about allowing additional bike trail development as a use that did not exist in 1976 at the time of the Bigelow Act. BPL needs to look at the Bigelow Act to determine if “new” uses are allowable. Steve suggests that BPL should require data or evidence of need when considering new recreational use additions. Brent responds that bike usage in the region could be a surrogate for how much demand for a new trail exists.

Leah Beck commented that it is not a simple thing to figure out use levels. Jim commented that the expansion of mountain bike access on the Bigelow Preserve allowed by past plan amendments focused on opening management roads near the south boundary of the Preserve to bike use as part of the regional network, with the potential Esker Trail bypass being the only exception, as a new single-track trail. Jim also described some limited data collection he completed several years ago on the Esker and Approach Trails.

Josh acknowledged that proposal #3 trail expansion will also be dependent on Bigelow Act consistency. He also noted the loss of the Currie Street trail experience as it is being converted to a more open logging road, and stated that post-harvest new trails in proposal #3 would be least intrusive to build now, and would not be visible from the road as the harvested areas regenerate.

BIGELOW ECOLOGICAL RESERVE EXPANSION PROPOSAL

Jim presented the ecological reserve expansion proposal, which would add ~1,440 acres to the existing 10,600-acre reserve. The attendees were presented with a summary of the exemplary resources within the expansion area mapped by the Maine Natural Areas Program (MNAP),

which were detailed in an ecological reserve nomination form provided in advance to the committee, and changes in resource allocations and allowed uses that would result from the expansion if approved. The primary change in allowed uses would be a prohibition on timber management, now an allowed secondary use, on 1,400 acres within the proposed expansion area. A map of the change in allocations was presented.

Comments and Questions:

Discussion returned to a concern for funding public lands with timberland coming out of production. The discussion touched on roads and value for recreation uses, which may be constrained by ER designations.

Steve Swatling and Dick Fecteau commented on personal observations they had made of forest conditions in the ER expansion area, with Dick mentioning in particular the several streams that would make timber management more challenging.

Steve Swatling asked about the status of the small patches of forest along the edges of the existing ER that he identified for other BPL staff (Will and Gena) to look at for addition. Bill noted the MNAP Public Lands ecologist position is vacant and BPL needs to follow-up on the status of those patches with respect to ER addition.

SNOWMOBILE TRAIL PROPOSAL – JV WING CLUB

Jim presented a summary of the proposed trail and its purpose and a map of the proposal. The proposal involves about 4 miles of new trail on the Wyman Lot and the Stoney Brook area of the Crocker Mtn. Unit, which would connect existing trails in the Bigelow Preserve/Flagstaff Unit and west of the Stoney Brook area (on private land). Most of the proposed trail is on Plum Creek Road, an existing management road (and former ATV route). Members of the JV Wing Snowmobile Club provided additional regional context and a more detailed explanation of the purpose of the proposed trail. It was explained that the trail is intended to help address the loss of more than 30 miles of trail in the region and restore important lost loop routes and connections to the town of Carrabassett Valley (“CV area is currently landlocked”), all of which have been identified as a priority for the local community and have been the subject of numerous requests from riders.

The current proposal includes crossing the AT on the shoulder of Rt 27, which club members noted would be a challenge due to the length and steep angle of the highway shoulders. Club members also described an alternate route that would use existing roads and cross BPL land on either side of the AT corridor north of Rt 27 and would connect directly across the highway from Plum Creek Road. This discussion noted conflicts with logging roads such as the Stratton Brook Road – club members asked, could the loggers cut new dedicated snowmobile trails? This would allow the club to get away from doing constant bypass trails.

The discussion briefly addressed a desired new trail south of the Crocker Mtn. Unit, from Caribou Pond to the Barnjum area; attendees pointed out that a Northeast Wilderness Trust (NEWT) easement on Lone Mountain would be a key obstacle, as would a crossing of the AT corridor.

Comments and Questions:

Joe Higgins reinforced the value of the proposed trail, pointing out that just 4 miles of new trail would create huge regional reconnection.

Sarah Spencer commented on the need for new bridges on Plum Creek Road over Stoney Brook stream, and noted the presence of roaring brook mayfly, which could help with obtaining funding for necessary bridge replacements. It was generally acknowledged that Plum Creek Road would eventually require major investment; while harvesting is many years away, improved crossings could be built now.

PLAN FOR PERHAM STREAM AND ORBETON KEYSTONES ACQUISITIONS

Jim presented a summary of these lands acquired in 2023-24, including acreage, roads and rights-of-way, and key components of the conservation easement on the Perham Stream lands. Highlights of timber, wildlife, fisheries, recreation and aesthetic resources on the nearly 9,300 acres of new public lands were reviewed, with several maps and photos. This was followed by a brief presentation of key management issues identified to-date, centered on roads/access, snowmobile use, existing informal and proposed hiking trails, and existing campsites.

Comments and Questions:

Brent West of High Peaks Alliance, which was intimately involved in the acquisition process, provided several comments and additional details on roads, trails, and campsites and an overview of new trail opportunities. He particularly noted a lot of use on the existing 2.2 mile informal trail up Mt Abram, and that users only need to hike 1 mile to get up to a 360 degree view.

Brent also described a proposed 8-mile loop trail across the summit that would use the existing informal trail, blue-blazed AT side trail and the AT, with a new trail segment to reconnect to the Perham road system. "A well-built and promoted loop trail could take some pressure off of Tumbledown." Brent and Dick discussed the merits of different routes for the new trail segment, to be continued with BPL staff. Brent stated that the AT executive committee is currently considering whether to approve the proposed new connecting trail; Leah Beck confirmed this review is in process.

Brent noted the White Mountains in NH are over-run with hikers and observers are already beginning to see increasing hikers in this direction.

Brent described historic recreational access and use in the area and his understanding of the desires of motorized users, hikers, and others for access and recreation improvements based on personal knowledge and experience, and interactions with those use groups. He pointed out the new ER area historically contained an ATV route that was discontinued by the prior owner and noted that ATV riders would like to be able to go up to mile 7 on the primary access road.

Brent notes historic reports of lynx as well as great density of large moose. Regarding access, he stressed the importance of keeping the upper road in good drivable condition and noted that due to the safety of some bridges, there is an urgent need to replace the water crossings. Brent notes that some of the posted signs on the recently acquired Keystone parcels are now coming down by volunteers, expanding hunting access. Brent notes that camping demand in the area is high (citing Flagstaff camping as evidence).

Brent stressed that the ITS snowmobile trail on these lands is very important whereas the snowmobile loop shown briefly entering the easement south of Farmer Mtn is not currently used but may be in the future. KEY QUESTION: Does the easement allow snowmobile use on the designated roads and will BPL allow it? Once again, the NEWT Lone Mountain easement north of the Perham area was noted as a major impediment to regional snowmobile connectivity.

Snowmobile club members stated that it is very frustrating that A.T. corridor cannot be touched by snowmobiles. Leah Beck offered to follow up on behalf of the A.T. about the motorized blockages the AT presents.

Sarah notes the importance of bear baits in the area and the desire to explore what potential may exist to add some sites on the Perham and Orbiton tracts. Brent has contact info for some bear baiters, who had baits at Perham in as far as mile 9. These are not in the BPL database and we need to get information on the guides if we can.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Steve Swatling of Friends of Bigelow commented on two topics related to the Bigelow Preserve:

- 1) The importance of the Bureau reinstating a dedicated Bigelow Preserve Manager, with specific responsibilities for timber and recreation management, including interaction with recreation visitors. [This is a practice that was followed in past years, implementing a recommendation of the 1989 Bigelow Preserve Management Plan, but has not been formally followed in more recent times, although the BPL Forester responsible for the Bigelow Preserve/Flagstaff Unit continues to perform both timber and recreation management duties.] Steve's concern is that important tasks are not getting done under the current system.
- 2) Steve (joined by Dick Fecteau) also commented on recent timber harvesting in the Stratton Brook Pond Road area, expressing the opinion that the revenue generated for the Bureau does not justify the resulting aesthetic/visual resource disruption.

NEXT STEPS

Jim explained that additional comments on any of the agenda topics were welcome through the next month, after which BPL staff will develop a Draft Plan for Perham Stream and Orbeton Keystones and other plan amendment recommendations, which may allow the mountain bike and snowmobile trail proposals with certain conditions. These will be provided to the AC members for review and comment. The final draft of the updated Flagstaff Region Plan would then be presented at a public meeting to gather further public input. Target date for the updated plan is Spring 2025.

ADJOURN

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 8:40 pm.

*Respectfully Submitted by
Jim Vogel*

Attachment 1: Meeting Agenda

Attachment 2: Perham Stream and Orbeton Keystones Scoping Notes (Aug 2024 Draft)

Attachment 3: Meeting Presentation (PDF of PowerPoint slides)