



Methow Trails

Master Plan

11-18-2016



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1.0 Introduction

Methow Trails is dedicated to accomplishing its core mission: *Connecting people to the special nature of the Methow Valley and supporting vitality through world-class sports trails.* Methow Trails created and maintains one of the largest interconnected winter trail systems in North America. Large portions of this trail system are also part of, and allow access to, a vast network of multi-use year-round recreational trails.



Methow Trails pursues its mission through the maintenance and development of non-motorized winter and summer recreational trails and facilities, hosting community and racing events, public outreach and educational partnerships. Methow Trails is committed to practices that generate long-term local economic sustainability and natural resource protection for the Methow Valley. Methow Trails maintains active partnerships with the U.S. Forest Service, other public agencies, private landowners, local businesses and non-profits.

This Master Plan lays out a conceptual direction for the management and future development of Methow Trails, along with specific projects to be accomplished over time. The Master Plan forms the basis of a yearly work plan. That plan is developed by the staff and includes timelines and measurable outcomes for each project.



The Master Plan looks over 25 years into the future and ensures public transparency and consistency within the organization over time. To remain viable and current, the Master Plan is updated on an ongoing basis and re-endorsed by the Board of Directors at least every five years.

2.0 BACKGROUND

Methow Trails' unique history, along with current events and anticipated trends, provides relevant background for both the Master Plan and the organization's future development.

2.1 History

2.1.1 Groomed Nordic Skiing in the Methow Valley

The Methow Valley has long been home to a few unconnected ski trails that were maintained by individuals. However, no trail system existed until 1977, when the Methow Family Sports Club was formed. This non-profit organization was dedicated to promoting non-motorized community sports, recreational activities and entertainment for families. Its articles of incorporation limited use of motorized vehicles to accessing, maintaining and improving the club's facilities.

In 1980, the club reorganized to focus on cross country skiing, and was renamed The Methow Valley Ski Touring Association. The association's purpose was to "develop, establish and maintain a system of ski touring trails in the Methow Valley, which may also be used for other non-motorized recreational uses, such as running, hiking, biking and horseback riding." The association initially focused on organizing sponsored races and other events but by 1983 amended its mission to also encompass the establishment and maintenance of a Nordic ski trail system, including trailhead parking, signs, maps, toilets, and a ski patrol.

In 1992 the association expanded its purpose; this time to include the promotion and maintenance of a year-round multi-sport trail system and related events. The organization also changed its name to Methow Valley Sport Trails Association., before shortening the name in 2014 to Methow Trails.



2.1.2 Connected Trail System

Initially, the trail system was divided into three separate clusters: The Diamond T Ranch in the Rendezvous area, Sun Mountain, and Mazama. In the mid-1980's a group of highly engaged individuals formed the Methow Valley Institute Foundation whose sole purpose was to acquire right-of-way easements through private property to create the Methow Valley Community Trail in the valley floor. Once completed in the early 1990's, this trail effectively linked the three separate clusters into one continuous system. This created an interconnected Nordic skiing trail network that is unique in all North America for its length and continuous connection of all trails. The easements acquired by the Methow Institute Foundation were then deeded to Okanogan County for grants that allow Methow Trails to develop, maintain and operate the trail system under a non-exclusive franchise agreement with the county. This agreement was recently extended to 2043 to allow sufficient time for Methow Trails to apply for state grants for its continued operation in the future.

2.1.3 Funding

Methow Trails' primary funding source is from annual ski trail ticket and season pass sales, which together covers 2/3 of Methow Trails' annual expenses. The remaining 1/3 comes from vital partners that help support the trail system year round, including the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO), the Community Foundation of North Central Washington (CFNCW), the Methow Fund, Title II Recreational Advisory Council (RAC) and many other grantors over the years. A very important component of Methow Trails funding is private and corporate donations.

Another vital source of funding comes from cooperation of Methow Trails and Okanogan County. Over the years Methow Trails, Methow Valley tourist businesses, and Okanogan County worked together to establish a 2% tax on overnight lodging in

the unincorporated areas of Okanogan County. The Tourism Advisory Board (TAB) distributes these tax revenues to help support efforts by nonprofit organizations within Okanogan County to advertise, promote, enhance, and encourage tourism. An additional 2% tax on overnight lodging was established to support the maintenance of the “Methow Community Trail system.” These funds are approved annually by the Okanogan County Commissioners.

2.2 Current Situation

The current trail system is approximately 200 kilometers in length (the longest continuous groomed Nordic trail system in the U.S.) and provides a variety of year round experiences on terrain ranging from gentle trails through the rural setting on the valley floor to challenging trails in mountainous terrain at Sun Mountain and in the Rendezvous area. In 2008 Methow Trails participated in the development of a trail at Liberty Bell High School in Winthrop. This trail was specifically designed for Nordic ski



racing events and race training by members of the Methow Valley Nordic Ski Education Foundation and for winter outdoor activities for the school district. Methow Trails maintains the trail in cooperation with MVNSEF. This trail is not open for general public use. Of the larger trail system, approximately 39 kilometers are designated for dog use in the winter, which is growing in demand. There are at least 40 kilometers of snowshoe trails and at least 35 kilometers of fat tire winter trails.

The trail distance by land management agency is approximately 52% on USFS lands, 2.1% on Washington Department of Natural Resources lands, 1.7% on Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife lands and .02% on U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lands. Approximately 44% of the trail system is on private property.

Use of the trail system has increased in visitor user ski days from 6,300 in 1983-84 to 72,000 in 2015, according to the surveys referenced below. There is also a significant amount of use by mountain bikers and hikers in other seasons. Nevertheless, it is estimated that 65% of all reported Methow Trails trail user visits occur during the winter months of December, January and February. Winter trail users provide a significant economic and employment boost to the valley community when many other tourist attractions are not available.

In 2012-2013 Methow Trails piloted a “Fat Bike” program. The pilot program, while controversial at first, proved to expose thousands of new potential trail users to our organization and to the Methow Valley. Methow Trails plans to expand the program cautiously and is experimenting with fat bike and snowshoe specific groomed trails.

At the request of the Forest Service, Methow Trails adopted its first summer-only mountain biking trail; the Buck Mountain Trail. This trail, with stunning views of the valley, has quickly become a Methow Valley flagship mountain bike trail and the organization plans to expand its summer trail system in the future. This is an example of commitment of Methow Trails to expanding year-round use opportunities through collaboration.

2.2.1 Events and Programs

Methow Trails runs four events that reach thousands of trail users. There are two running events: Cutthroat Classic and the Sunflower Marathon, ½ Marathon and Relay.



There are two winter events: Methow Nordic Festival (includes a community Loppet and the Pursuit cross-country race) and the Doggie Dash.

Programs such as seventeen and younger ski free, Backyard ski days (free ski days) and snowshoe tours are hosted by Methow Trails on the trail system.

In 2014 Methow Trails facilitated 10,000 direct participants and 11,000 participants through partner event organizations. Programs and events are developed to bring high quality of participation for all users and are designed to support and collaborate for trail use, develop recreation opportunities, and support the community.

2.2.2 Economic Impact

In 2014 an economic impact analysis was conducted for Methow Trails by Resource Dimensions. It updates the 1998 and 2005 surveys and extends the analysis to reflect the broad range of economic impacts of the trail network and land resources on the local economy. Some key findings of the survey include:

- Nearly 12.4 million dollars (20 14 dollars) in direct and indirect expenditures are made to the Methow Valley economy by trail users.
- Seventy-six percent (76%) of resident and 84% of trail user respondents said the network of Methow Trails was the most important factor in their visit. Another 20% and 15%, respectively, indicated it was an important factor.
- Fifty-two percent (52%) of all businesses indicated that trail visitors and resource based tourism has increased significantly (24%) or somewhat (28%) since they have been in business.
- Annual expenditures by all trail users for the period between 2012 and 2014 generated an estimated \$292,740 in city and county tax revenues; \$94,391 in state shared lodging taxes; \$ 97,269 in additional hotel/motel taxes, and \$211,896 in state taxes.
- Almost 92% of both resident and trail user survey respondents indicate their access to and the provision of public and private recreational facilities in the Methow Valley is very important (80 %) or important (12 %).

For additional detail, the Executive Summary of the 2015 study is attached as Appendix E.

2.2.3 Budget and Finance

Methow Trails puts emphasis on cost control and efficient operations. Methow Trails has improved efficiency, combined with good snow conditions in the past few years, has allowed the organization to reduce debt and set aside some reserves. Methow Trails recognizes that the inevitable poor snow years will happen, and its annual budgets are intended to keep Methow Trails on a solid financial footing to continue to offer world-class trails into the future.

2.2.4 Resources

Methow Trails utilizes the following resources to manage and maintain trails for users:

- **Equipment:** The current inventory of equipment includes snowmobiles, snow cats, a snow bucket for the snow cats, mini-excavator, trucks, trailers, ATV's, mowers and a variety of hand tools.

- **Staff:** Methow Trails employees the following:
 - Full time: Executive Director and Trail Manager
 - Part time: Program Manager, Assistant Trail Manager, Trails Technician, Office Administrator, seasonal Groomers and Marketing Manager.



These are supplemented with a strong volunteer group of over 200 and a few contract employees throughout the year.

- **Trailheads:** Multiple parking areas and trailhead facilities (restrooms, kiosks, maps, trail signs and bulletin boards) are provided, managed and maintained to give users

convenient year-round trail access. Methow Trails is improving and expanding the trailhead facilities for future and year-round use.

- **Volunteers:** Methow Trails could not operate or maintain its trail system without the tireless support of dedicated volunteers who help at race events, assist in trail maintenance, check trail passes and provide information to trail users. Monthly volunteer work parties, led by Methow Trails staff, contribute hundreds of hours of physical work to keep the summer and winter trails in excellent shape.

3.0 Challenges

The following challenges represent some of the more notable trends that will affect the future of trail use on the Methow Trails system and were considered in the development of this Master Plan.

- **Climate Change**
The impacts of a changing climate have been felt throughout the Pacific Northwest in recent years, including in the Methow Valley. Increasingly, Methow Trails will need to ensure the organization's resilience to a changing climate by developing contingencies for both low-snow winters (e.g. by developing shaded trails on north-facing slopes or high altitude options) and dry summers with an increased fire risk (e.g. by creating a trail system that can act as a fire-break to protect the towns and other infrastructure).
- **Population Growth & Change**
As the Methow Valley's non-resident population continues to grow, the Methow Trails trail network will see a corresponding increase in use and fractioning of the private landowner holdings that form the basis of the trail system. An increase in user numbers can also be expected from the fast growth of the population in the greater Seattle area. This trend is likely to contribute to additional recreationalists visiting the Methow Valley year-round, with an increased need for trailhead parking

and other infrastructure.

- Increased User Diversity

A larger number of trail users will also lead to a more diversified use of the trail system. This is expected to result in additional winter demand for one-way Nordic ski trails, fat-bike and snowshoe trails, and a greater demand for summer mountain biking, running and hiking trails. More year-round trail access for physically challenged trail users and pet-friendly trails will also be needed. As the number and diversity of trail users increases, the potential for conflict among different user groups will also grow. To effectively address and reduce potential conflicts, Methow Trails will continue to deepen its relationships with other trail user groups, both one-on-one and through multi-organizational efforts like the local trails collaborative.

- Sustainable Transportation

Methow Valley's population is growing and Methow Trails can expect to see an increased use of trails for purposes of transportation. Currently, no non-motorized trails exist that would, for example, connect the towns of Winthrop and Twisp with the valley schools or with each other. There is no commuter-friendly summer trail connector from Winthrop to Mazama. Travel between these towns on busy State Route 20 not only creates safety hazards that effectively prevent non-motorized commuting, but is also detrimental to the long-distance cyclists who pass through this area on popular national bike routes, such as the Adventure Cyclist's Northern Tier Route, Sierra Cascade Route, and a popular in-state route. A visitor entering the Methow Valley should easily be able to observe that the valley is a trail community through signs, trailheads, and observable trail sections.

- Changing Agency Roles

The U.S. Forest Service, the single largest land manager of the current system of trails, has recently shifting and changing priorities. It is of paramount importance for Methow Trails to maintain a positive relationship with federal and state agencies, such as the Forest Service, through which current or future trails run. This relationship needs to be both responsive to changing agency roles and continue to build confidence in Methow Trails as a reliable and resourceful long-term community partner.

- Proliferation of Maps

The increase in the number and type of trail users in the Methow Valley has been accompanied by a proliferation of maps by different user groups. Those maps differ in both emphasis and accuracy, resulting in considerable confusion about the trail system among visitors and residents alike. This underscores the importance of developing a single source and central web-based location for accurate trail maps. Given Methow Trails' diverse user-base and far-reaching trail system, the organization will likely play a central role in the development of future trail maps.

- Economic Stability

Economic volatility and other factors could also result in lower visitor numbers. Methow Trails must be prepared for the resulting financial challenges to sustain its

long-term viability and contribution to the community.

4.0 STRATEGY

4.1 Strategic Priorities

Strategic priorities are those issues critical to the long term success of Methow Trails to carry out its mission. **The following strategic priorities are the focus of this master plan, its goals, and resulting actions.** Key elements for each priority will be established and evaluated annually.

- **LEGAL ACCESS FOR TRAILS:**
 - Permanent rights-of-way, easements, deeds or licenses are critical for the long term existence of the entire trail system. The first priority is to secure these for winter use. Year-round access is desirable to provide for all season use.
- **TRAIL QUALITY:**
 - High quality trail design, maintenance and grooming are an essential part of the reputation of Methow Trails. Methow Trails will continually look for ways to enhance the users' experiences, including appropriate changes to the Methow Trails system, amenities and other supporting infrastructure.
- **FINANCIAL STABILITY:**
 - Methow Trails will ensure long-term financial viability while supporting community vitality. To execute these strategic priorities to their full potential, Methow Trails will also develop additional sources of funding.
- **CONTINGENCIES FOR CLIMATE CHALLENGES:**
 - Methow Trails will plan for changes in weather patterns that may result in inadequate snow coverage during future winter season. Methow Trails will work to mitigate the effects of other environmental challenges such as fire, flooding, and landslides.
- **YEAR ROUND TRAIL NETWORK:**
 - The trail network is a priority for Methow Trails and it relies on collaboration, connections, and partnerships. The trail network is a valuable resource for all seasons and all users. Methow Trails will continue to explore opportunities to improve the network and foster connections with the community.
- **EXPANDED USER BASE:**
 - Methow Trails will explore and monitor opportunities to attract new trail users for all seasons and look for ways to enhance all users' experiences.
- **COMMUNITY OUTREACH:**

- The Board and Staff will actively engage with the community, landowners, land managers, elected officials, and all other stakeholders and will engage in educational initiatives.

4.2 Strategic Goals



Goals are intermediate between Strategic Priorities (which identify Methow Trails' strategy at the most general level) and the Work Plan (which identifies specific projects and includes timelines). The goals presented below are arranged in groups identified by function. Taken together, the goals include and elaborate on each of the Strategic Priorities. The Goals will provide the basis for management to develop its annual Work Plans.

4.2.1 Trails and Facilities

The trails are the primary focus of the organization. The following goals encompass standards for trails including aspects of planning, maintenance, and type of use, reports, trailheads, signage, safety, and access.

Goal A: Maintain the existing system of trails to a high standard.

Goal B: Plan for expansion and changes to the system, including linking of trail sections.

Goal C: Design, maintain, and construct facilities and infrastructure to support the year-round trail system, that enhance the trail experience and includes all users.



Goal D: Support year-round recreation opportunities and collaborate to enhance the overall quality and use of our trail system.

4.2.2 Community Relations

Methow Trails is committed to operate as a respected major contributor to the Methow Valley Community.

Goal E: Be a valuable community resource.

Goal F: Foster good working relationships with private landowners, public land managers, local government, chambers of commerce, sports advocacy organizations, businesses, and local/ regional non-profits.

Goal G: Maintain an effective trail collaborative.



4.2.3 Environmental Practices

Environmental stewardship is key to conserving the natural resources and the special nature of the Methow Valley. Methow Trails takes responsibility for minimizing the environmental impacts of creating and maintaining its trail system.

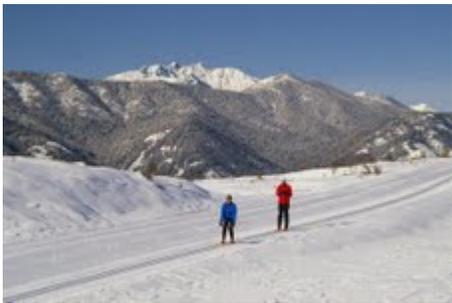
Goal H: Be an exemplary care-taker of the land in use.

Goal I: Educate and promote conserving natural resources

4.2.4 Finances

Sound financial management ensures that Methow Trails continues to provide the public with a high quality trail system into the future.

Goal J: Provide sound financial management.



Goal K: Openly communicate financial information.

Goal L: Maintain a revenue stream sufficient to support the goals of the organization.



4.2.5 Organization

Methow Trails will work to improve the skills and abilities of its employees, ambassadors, and board members. Methow Trails members will have opportunities to readily interface with the organization.

Note: Members are lifetime pass holders, trailside landowners, service program members, business members, board members, annual donors of \$50 or more, and ski school instructors. There are currently over 1000 members.

Goal M: Maintain a program of volunteers who understand and support the service and culture of Methow Trails.

Goal N: Provide a safe and healthy work environment.

Goal O: Utilize membership as an important contributing part of the organization.



4.2.6 Events and Programs

Events and programs are activities organized by Methow Trails. Events are activities that take place on one day or on several continuous days of the year; programs are activities that continue for a substantial part of a season. Methow Trails supports both events and programs in order to promote awareness, use, and enjoyment of the trail system, and to earn money to help support Methow Trails operations.

Goal P: Promote awareness, use, and enjoyment of the year-round trail system.

Goal Q: Contribute to Methow Trails' financial wellbeing.

Goal R: Define and measure success of each program or event.



4.2.7 Marketing

Methow Trails marketing is focused on expanding and improving the mission and goals of the organization. Methow Trails promotes a strong partnership between local businesses, promotional partners, sports advocacy organizations, chambers, and tourism agencies

Goal S: Increase the popularity of the Methow Trails.

Goal T: Increase the awareness of our year-round trails and organization locally, nationally and internationally.

Goal U: Support year-round recreation opportunities and partnerships that will enhance the overall quality and use of our trail system.

4.2.8 Education and Communication

Methow Trails will provide education for, and communicate to trail users.

Goal V: Provide effective maps for winter trail use.

Goal W: Communicate year-round trail opportunities through links to web-sites, apps, office resources and publications.

Goal X: Provide educational opportunities for environmental stewardship and a healthy life style.

Appendices:

- A. Trail matrix document: This document is updated as needed and is used to prioritize projects based on a feasibility, practicality, and physical characteristics/ attributes of current and potential trails.*
- B. Maps of Existing Trail System- <http://www.methowtrails.org/maps/>*
- C. Maps of Proposed Improvements- Maps updated annually*
- D. Current Financial Statements- <http://earthandskystudios.net/mvsta2014/#12>*
- E. Executive Summary of the study (add current version)*
- F. Trail construction/ maintenance standards*