

Management Plan FAQs

The questions below reflect a range of perspectives ACF Committee members have heard and expect to hear from the community. They are presented in pairs because, while they approach the plan from different angles, they often share the same underlying considerations and can be addressed with a common response.

Q: Why has the original ACF Management Plan been revised?

Q: Why has the revision process taken so long?

In late 2022, an initial draft of a revised management plan was presented by ACFC. It included a proposed trail design to replace the concept map. The revised plan was necessitated by a provision in the 2018 management plan, which calls for a full revision if a trail design inconsistent with its provisions is approved: "Trails not appearing on the Trail Concept Map shall not be approved for construction until a new Trail Concept Map is adopted through a full revision of the management plan, which is subject to review and approval by the Selectboard, and the easement holders. The Trail Concept Map shall not be revised independent of the Management Plan."

In March of the following year, the plan and map were presented to the public for feedback. This management plan was never presented to the Selectboard. Within two months, three members of the committee resigned or termed out, and by July, two more had left. With over half of the committee turning over, new members coming on and much public feedback to consider, the committee continued revising the management plan.

During this process, the committee utilized new information about the Andrews Community Forest, advances in forest ecology, and improved understanding of how human use affects natural systems have all informed the revision process. The ACF committee also incorporated community input, worked to align the document with the Conservation Easement, Town Plan, and local regulations.

This plan reflects several years of analysis, discussion, and refinement. It is designed to be both well-informed and practical to implement now, with the understanding that it can be adjusted over time through monitoring and adaptive management.

Q: Does the plan overly restrict recreation?

Q: Why allow recreation at all in a conserved forest?

The Conservation Easement requires the Town to protect the forest's ecological integrity and provide meaningful recreational opportunities. To achieve these dual mandates, this plan does not treat those goals as equal in every location. Instead, it keeps the entire forest open to human access while allowing new recreational development only where the forest can sustain it without long-term harm.

In areas closest to Rt. 2 and our population center, that means maintaining or even improving access to the widest variety of recreational activities. In the more rugged and remote northern section, it means limiting or redirecting some trail-based uses to protect sensitive habitats.

The goal is not to maximize recreation, favor or disfavor one form over another, nor to exclude it altogether – but to ensure that the types and volumes of recreation that do occur are compatible with a healthy, functioning forest.

Q: Why not expand trails to meet growing demand?

Q: Why route trails near sensitive habitats at all?

The plan is written to promote trail expansions and connections where they aren't constrained by ecological conditions. New or rerouted trails are considered only in the most visited areas and where natural features are resilient enough to handle increased use. At the same time, the plan uses clearly defined buffers to protect critical wildlife habitats, refuge areas and connectivity routes.

At the same time, the plan includes a degree of flexibility to allow small encroachments when there's a justified need. Overall, the broader objective is to concentrate trail traffic where it can be sustained, while keeping other areas as undisturbed as possible.

Q: Is mountain biking being unfairly limited?

Q: Are high-impact uses being allowed where they don't belong?

No user group is being singled out. Different activities have different ecological footprints, and the plan reflects those differences. Activities that tend to create greater traffic volumes, soil disturbances, noise or other impacts are directed to areas that can better absorb those effects.

At the same time, the plan sets limits to ensure that no activity – regardless of user group – compromises sensitive habitats or ecological processes. The focus is on impact, not identity.

It is also important to recognize that the Andrews Community Forest is one of many nearby areas with trails open to hiking, mountain biking, backcountry skiing and other types of recreation. This plan focuses on ensuring that use within the ACF aligns with its specific ecological characteristics and the Town's conservation responsibilities, while still contributing to the region's overall recreational offerings.

Q: Can't good trail design solve most environmental concerns?

Q: Does trail design really prevent wildlife disturbance?

Good trail design is essential, and it can significantly reduce erosion and direct damage to soils and vegetation. However, design alone cannot eliminate all impacts – especially those related to wildlife's well-documented and cumulative sensitivities to disturbance from people and domestic animals.

Research shows that many species negatively respond to human presence at a distance, sometimes many hundreds of feet from a trail, disturbing their feeding habits, disrupting reproduction and rearing of young, and inhibiting movement. For that reason, the plan combines design with careful placement, buffering, and limits on where trails are appropriate.

Q: Isn't there a study showing that hikers disturb wildlife more than mountain bikers?

There was such a study but it didn't yield a single "which is worse" answer. Effects depend on how often, how far, and where an activity occurs, not just the activity itself. Some research suggests wildlife may be more likely to detect a hiker than a biker due to the hiker's slower speed. However, that does not capture overall impact across the landscape. Activities that involve more people, move faster or cover greater distances can extend the frequency, reach, and unpredictability of disturbance, especially in more remote areas. That broader pattern of use is an important consideration in managing impacts.

Q: Is logging a greater threat to wildlife than recreation?

Forestry is different in both purpose and duration. It is conducted in the ACF under a Forest Management Plan specifically designed to improve long-term ecological conditions, including biodiversity, habitat diversity, and resilience. While harvesting will

cause short-term disturbance, it is limited in area and time. Moreover, in the ACF it is used intentionally to support forest health – for example, by creating conditions for regeneration and increasing structural diversity.

Recreation, by contrast, represents a continuous and cumulative presence on the landscape. For that reason, the management approach does not rely on comparing user groups or activities in isolation. Instead, it focuses on where and how use occurs, directing higher, longer-lasting levels of activity to areas that can sustain them and limiting disturbance in areas that cannot.

Q: Why not rely on education and responsible use instead of restrictions?

Q: Is voluntary compliance enough to protect wildlife?

Education and stewardship are important parts of this plan, and they are strongly supported with expanded and clarified content. However, they are not sufficient on their own. Even well-intentioned use can have unintended ecological consequences, especially when use levels are high or concentrated.

Clear guidelines about where and how recreation occurs are necessary to prevent cumulative impacts that cannot be addressed through behavior alone. Education works best when paired with a framework that sets appropriate limits.

Q: Is the plan reducing access for current users?

Q: Why not designate larger, “no-go” areas to protect the ACF’s wildlife?

To the contrary, the management plan expands access by maintaining existing uses, and laying the foundation for new and improved trails and uses. The new plan calls for trail development in areas that are better suited to recreation, while other areas are allowed to continue playing critical roles in supporting wildlife and ecological functions.

Rather than creating large, fully closed zones, the plan uses a combination of low-use areas, buffers, and careful trail placement to reduce disturbance while still allowing people to explore and enjoy the entire forest. This approach reflects both the easement’s requirement for access and its requirement for conservation.

Q: Are you prioritizing ecological integrity over recreation?

Q: How do we know the plan goes far enough to protect biodiversity?

Ecological integrity is the foundation that makes all other uses – including the many types of recreation – possible over the long term. If the forest’s soils, habitats, and species are degraded, recreational opportunities will decline as well.

For that reason, the plan treats ecological capacity as a limiting factor. It incorporates current science, site-specific assessments, and a precautionary approach to ensure that biodiversity, habitat connectivity, and natural processes are maintained and, where possible, restored.

Q: What happens if these limits prove too restrictive?

Q: What happens if impacts on wildlife are worse than expected?

This is an adaptive management plan. Conditions will be monitored over time, and adjustments can be made as new information becomes available.

If impacts are less than anticipated, there may be opportunities to revisit certain restrictions. If impacts are greater than expected, the Town has a responsibility to respond – potentially by modifying or reducing use in affected areas. The plan is designed to be responsive, but always within the framework of the Town’s conservation goals and obligations.

The ACF and its surrounding forestland are a long-lived system, and management decisions made for the ACF today will shape its condition for decades. Reflecting the Conservation Easement, this plan reflects the ongoing commitment begun in 2018 to current users, future generations, and the ecological systems themselves.

Accepting reasonable limits now helps ensure that the forest remains healthy, resilient, and accessible over time – rather than reducing its many ecological values and recreational opportunities.

Q: Why does the management plan not include a proposed trail map? When will we see a new trail map?

Now that we have a plan with established parameters for trail design, we’ll be inviting the public to submit designs as we work on some of our own. To avoid confirmation bias, the committee believes that it is necessary to first create a science-backed framework for responsible trail design, and then design trails that adhere to that framework.

Q: How were the northern and southern zone designations determined?

Q: Why aren't dogs or bikes allowed in the northern zone?

A: Designations were made based on existing ecological features and trails. The northern zone has a greater number of sensitive ecological features, steep slopes, and rugged terrain, making it a haven for wildlife. The southern zone is more easily accessed and has fewer of these precious features. The combined former VAST trail and power corridor conveniently serve as a clear and existing boundary separating these two areas. The moratorium on specific uses reflects a precautionary approach while the committee develops a monitoring program to establish baseline data — with the intent to revisit restrictions as that evidence warrants.