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Former Champion Lands Hiking Corridor Management Proposal

Submitted by:

Green Mountain Club

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Introduction and History

In the fall of 1998, Champion International Paper, Co announced the sale of 300,000 acres of land in Vermont, New Hampshire and New York – approximately 130,000 acres were for sale in Vermont, primarily in rural Essex County. The Champion sale led to the eventual conservation of its properties through the combined efforts of the State of Vermont, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Essex Timber Co, the Nature Conservancy and the Vermont Land Trust.

A complex arrangement protected the timber, wildlife and recreational values of the land while ensuring that the public would be able to continue, in perpetuity, such uses as hunting, fishing and dispersed recreation. The planning process for the Champion Lands also required all 'corridor-based' recreation uses such as bicycling, snowmobiling and hiking be managed by designated Corridor Managers.

In February of 2001, the Green Mountain Club (GMC) formally announced its intention to become Corridor Manager for hiking trails in the former Champion Lands following similar commitments by the Vermont Association of Snow Travelers (VAST) to manage snowmobile trails and the Vermont Horse Council to manage equestrian uses.

The Green Mountain Club was founded in 1910 and is Vermont's premier hiking organization. Its mission is *'to make the Vermont mountains play a larger part in the life of the people by protecting and maintaining the Long Trail System and fostering, through education, the stewardship of Vermont's hiking trails and mountains'*. For over ninety years, the Green Mountain Club has been dedicated to stewarding Vermont's Long Trail System, with its 270-mile footpath, 175-miles of side trails and nearly 70 backcountry overnight sites. The Green Mountain Club has accomplished its mission through an extensive volunteer base, by offering public educational seminars and recreational outings, providing trail information through publications such as the Long Trail Guide and the Day Hiker's Guide to Vermont, working with private landowners and State and Federal Agencies to steward trail resources, and advocating for land conservation and trail protection efforts in the State Legislature and in local communities.

Qualifications

The Green Mountain Club has over 9,000 members divided into 14 Sections throughout the State. The GMC also maintains a staff of approximately 13 employees based out of

its Waterbury Center headquarters. The Northeast Kingdom Section of the Green Mountain Club was established in 2000 and includes nearly 100 family and individual members. Unlike other GMC Sections that are responsible for maintaining designated portions of the Long Trail System, the Northeast Kingdom Section works with local organizations such as the Westmore Association, Kingdom Trails, the NorthWoods Stewardship Center, and the St. Johnsbury office of the Agency of Natural Resources to maintain hiking trails throughout the Northeast Kingdom. Currently the Northeast Kingdom Section adopter program is responsible for maintaining some 35-40 miles of trail.

Through its partnerships with the State of Vermont, Green Mountain National Forest, Appalachian Trail Park Office, and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, and the volunteer efforts of its Sections, the Green Mountain Club has shown that it can responsibly and cooperatively manage hiking trails and their public uses - fostering a harmonious balance between the hiking public and the concerns of land management agencies, adjacent landowners, and local residents.

Vision

The Green Mountain Club's vision for the former Champion Lands includes a variety of day and multi-day hiking trails that provide hikers with opportunities for a remote backcountry experience. The Green Mountain Club seeks to preserve the wild and remote nature of the Champion Lands, preferring narrow trails that are non-intrusive to the forest canopy and constructed to be both durable and protective of the landscape.

GMC recognizes the potential for developing hiking trails on or adjacent to existing and historic roads, trails and rights-of-way, as well as the potential to connect existing hiking trails on adjacent public lands through the development of new trail corridors. To strike a balance between keeping the lands as wild as possible and providing trail-based hiking opportunities, we believe the development of hiking trails should be slow and deliberate. Such trails will be developed in a manner consistent with the terms and conditions of all applicable policies and easements.

Goals

The goals of the GMC Hiking Corridor Management Plan are as follows:

1. Provide corridor-based access for hikers on the former Champion Lands through the development of single and multi-day hiking trails.
2. Provide trail facilities such as trailheads, signs, and informational kiosks that will facilitate public education, access to trail corridors, and the protection of cultural and natural resources.
3. Where practical, work collaboratively with other trail managers such as the Vermont Horse Council, VAST, and ANR to establish multi-use corridors that are suitable for hiking as well as the access and maintenance of remote hiking trail corridors.

Trails

At the present time, GMC envisions developing hiking trails on only a small portion of the former Champion Lands – primarily in the northern and western regions of these land holdings. This emphasis achieves a number of the goals set forward in the Champion Lands public meetings as well as the long-range goals of the Green Mountain Club. The proposed trail network addresses these goals by 1) honoring the need for trail-less peaks in much of the region, 2) limiting trail development to areas that provide or lead to future linkages with existing trails and public lands, 3) providing a mix of remote backcountry and shorter ‘front country’ trail opportunities, 4) avoiding impacts on areas of ecological sensitivity, and 5) limiting conflicts with other recreational and land uses.

The overall vision of the proposed plan calls for the development, over time, of a continuous long-distance backcountry trail with several additional side trails that provide day hiking opportunities, possible loop routes, and access for emergencies and maintenance work. The primary long-distance corridor would eventually stretch north from the Village of Island Pond to Norton Pond, Gore Mountain, and, possibly, Monadnock Mountain. Long-range plans could connect this proposal with trail systems to the south to Willoughby State Forest and potentially to Groton State Forest.

To facilitate the development of the Champion Lands Trail Network, the proposed Corridor Management Plan includes two (2) trail building phases and one additional section that identifies other potential future trails. This trail development proposal is a conceptual proposal where specific trail locations may need to be adjusted based on field review to minimize impacts on sensitive areas and species. Trail impacts will be carefully evaluated before trail locations can be finalized. No timeframe has been identified for the individual phases; each phase’s implementation will span several years depending on project approval, funding availability and various challenges of terrain and construction.

The following outline provides a more detailed account for each phase of trail development.

Phase I – Unknown Pond/ Middle Mountain Loop

GMC would develop a trail from VT Route 114 (near the Hurricane Road) to Unknown Pond and over Middle Mountain to the lower Gore Mountain Trail - linking the existing but unimproved Unknown Pond Trail with the lower portion of the established Gore Mountain Trail. The development of the Unknown Pond/Middle Mountain Loop Trail would include 1) formalizing and maintaining an existing route to Unknown Pond, 2) pioneering a new route over Middle Mountain and 3) establishing a short trail link between the Gore Mountain Trail and Middle Mountain.

Unknown Pond. The development of the Unknown Pond Trail would include improving the existing route from VT Route 114 (following portions of an existing log road, footpath and snowmobile trail) to reduce erosion and relocating, where

necessary, upper portions of this route to a more permanent and stable corridor that minimizes conflicts with timber harvesting and snowmobiles while providing an optimal connection with the Bluff Mountain and Middle Mountain Trails. An existing spur to Unknown Pond would be improved to provide public access to the water - minimizing conflicts with leased camps and avoiding trail development within the 200-foot Special Treatment Buffer Zone around the Pond.

Middle Mountain. The Middle Mountain Summit Trail would climb northward from Unknown Pond and follow the southeastern crest of Middle Mountain. It would highlight the mountain summit, and one or more scenic lookouts, before descending, at times on existing ways, the northern ridge and connecting with the lower Gore Mountain Trail.

Phase II – Bluff Mountain Ridge

Bluff Mountain. The Bluff Mountain Ridge Trail is the central component to the hiking network proposed for the northern portion of the former Champion Lands. The Ridge Trail, combined with the Phase I trails proposed for Unknown Pond and Middle Mountain, would link the existing hiking trails on Bluff and Gore Mountains.

The Bluff Mountain Ridge Trail would follow the Bluff Mountain ridgeline north from the southern summit of Bluff Mountain to Unknown Pond and the base of Middle Mountain. The trail would follow along the open upper eastern slope of the ridgeline and cross a number of low knolls before reaching the true summit of Bluff Mountain and a short spur trail to the proposed campsite on private land. From the summit knob, approximately halfway along the ridge, the trail would turn north and pass over a number of additional knolls before dropping down to Unknown Pond and joining Phase I's Middle Mountain and Unknown Pond Trails.

Potential Future Recreation Trail Opportunities

Additional opportunities exist for the development of a broader hiking trail network in the Nulhegan region. These projects are presented in this proposal to solicit public comments at this time for future reference; these projects are conceptual at the GMC level and are not proposals at this time. These trails, where possible, would utilize existing corridors and provide both long-distance links and short distance destination hikes to some of the cultural, historical, and natural sites in the Nulhegan Basin. The development of these potential future trails is dependent on the progress made with Phases I and II as well as public demand, use levels, and other considerations that may arise. Therefore, these potential opportunities may be subject to change. A brief description of possible trail corridors is listed below.

- Averill Lakes. The Averill Lakes route could utilize an existing VAST trail near the Averill town line and connect with the Little Averill Lake Road. This corridor would provide a northern trailhead and could connect with the East Branch Road and trails on Sable, Brousseau, and Averill Mountains. Approximate length: 3.5 miles.

- Gore Mountain. The Gore Mountain Trail could become a major trailhead for the Bluff Mountain Ridge. The lower Gore Mountain Trail would connect to both the Middle Mountain Summit and Middle Mountain Gap Trails of Phase I while a Gore Mountain East (Headwaters) Trail from the summit of Gore could lead to a trailhead on Lewis Pond Road and provide a connection to the Averill Lakes Trail corridor to the north. Approximate length of Headwaters Trail: 2.2 miles.
- Black Mountain. (Essex/Hancock) GMC wishes to make the greatest use possible of existing multi-use corridors. In the future, however the GMC will evaluate the possibility relocating the proposed Averill Lakes corridor onto a more desirable woodland pedestrian-only route. Of particular interest would be the creation of a small trail corridor on the south shore of Averill Lake that would bypass the long Averill Lake road walk and connect the Gore Mountain East Trail to the East Branch Road and Sable Mountain.
- Madison Falls. (Essex) GMC will work with the Agency of Natural Resources to monitor pedestrian use at the Madison Falls site. Should public use increase or lead to significant resource damage at the site, GMC will consider developing and maintaining an access trail that will provide optimal access while protecting natural resources.
- Middle Mountain Gap Route. The Middle Mountain Gap Trail would provide an alternative route around the eastern side of the mountain and would be particularly desirable for winter use. The route would follow a number of game trails and existing haul roads to connect the Unknown Pond and lower Gore Mountain Trails via a low route.
- Monadnock. (Essex) The existing route currently used by VAST between the Sable Mountain Road and Willard Stream provides a potential multi-use corridor connecting Sable and Monadnock Mountains. It may be possible to incorporate Monadnock into the Champion Lands Hiking Trail network via multi-use trails or a western approach to the summit.
- Notch Pond. (West Mtn WMA) GMC will work with the Agency of Natural Resources to maintain and improve existing pedestrian access to Notch Pond.
- Sable Mountain. (Essex) GMC may develop a Sable Mountain Trail on the north slope of Sable Mountain, including a western lookout near the summit. Approximate length: 1.2 miles. (Note: both northern and southern routes have been explored on Sable and the southern route was deemed inappropriate due to drainage, terrain, and soils considerations).
- West Mountain. (West Mtn WMA) GMC does not anticipate developing new hiking trails on West Mountain given its location in the center of the West Mountain Ecological Core Area. GMC has conducted site work and flagged potential routes to the summit and a southern lookout over Ferdinand Bog. This route will remain inactive for the time being. Should the lease on the summit tower come under public ownership, GMC could consider maintaining the existing summit access trail. GMC wishes to retain the option to develop additional trails on West Mountain if there is future public and Agency support.
- Westmore. A proposed route southwest from Island Pond to Job's Pond and Job's Mountain provides an ideal link to the extensive trails network in Willoughby State Forest. The proposed route (approximately 6-8 miles) would

leave Island Pond near Pleasant Street and cross municipal and private lands before reaching Route 114 near McKinley Brook. Again crossing private lands, the trail would reach Newark and follow public roads for a short distance to Job's Pond and conservation timberlands adjacent to Willoughby State Forest.

The Westmore route would provide a continuous long-distance trail network from Wheeler Pond in Barton to the Averill Lakes or Monadnock Mountain.

GMC will work with the Agency of Natural Resources and its partners to identify other potential trails on the former Champion Lands.

Signs and Blazes

A well-designed and well-maintained trail should be clear and easy to follow. Signs and blazes will be minimized, especially in order to preserve a primitive footpath.

Signs should be made of milled lumber with routed lettering, stained but not painted, and will be only as follows:

1. Trailhead sign with name of trail and length to end destination. The property owner(s) name and managing organization should also be on the sign.
2. Indication of private property as needed.
3. Trails that intersect should be marked with a small trail crossing sign that shows which routes are which trails, by name.
4. Trail length and distances may also be included on signs

Blazes should be minimized and used as necessary to make the trail clear. A well-defined trail – clear of brush and debris with a well-worn treadway – will require fewer blazes to direct hikers. Blazes shall be rectangular, two inches by six inches in size and placed no less than five and one half feet high (approximately eye level). Blazes shall be located no more than five minutes of comfortable walking distance apart (between six and ten blazes per mile) and in general, no more than one blaze shall be visible from any point (except in areas where the trail is difficult to follow). Blazes will be painted with water-soluble latex paint in a color to be decided by ANR and GMC (Essex Timber has requested that no blue or red paint be used so as not to confuse trails with marked property boundaries).

Trailheads and Parking

Trailheads and parking areas provide controlled access points to day and multi-day hiking corridors. GMC envisions parking and trailhead facilities - located at strategic points - that will provide optimal access to hiking trails, maximize the use of existing log landings, pull-offs and open areas, and, where possible, allow for shared access by other recreation users (i.e. snowmobiles in the winter). All trailheads will be well marked and located in areas with adequate parking for a small number of vehicles (6-12 cars). These will be large enough for vehicles to turn around in and safely park off of roadways. GMC will work with ANR to arrange for the maintenance of selected trailheads during the winter months.

Campsites

GMC hopes to develop a limited number of overnight campsites as part of its efforts to establish multi-day hiking opportunities on the former Champion Lands. Based on easement and policy restrictions for the Champion Lands, primitive camping on State lands is permitted subject to ANR's statewide rules and is permitted on Essex Timber Company Lands ONLY with prior consent from Essex or pursuant to written agreement between Essex and ANR. At this time Essex does not anticipate giving permission for overnight camping facilities.

If approved, campsites will be rustic in nature and may include a small clearing for tents, access to water supplies and an outhouse facility. Sites will be located on durable surfaces in areas of minimal impact to wildlife, water, scenic, and historic resources.

Shelters

GMC will consider establishing overnight shelters as necessary to address future needs on its long-distance hiking trail corridors. Currently, no plans exist to construct permanent shelters (including 3-sided lean-tos or 4-sided cabins) anywhere on the former Champion Lands. GMC will, however, consider maintaining existing structures where available within its trail network (e.g. the Gore Mountain summit cabin) to provide overnight facilities for long-distance hikers. Overnight campsites and/or shelters may be developed in the future with the approval of landowners/stakeholders.

Maps

Maps of the Champion Lands Trail network (and adjacent areas) will be made available locally to help hikers locate trails and set expectations. Maps may be sold for a small fee (a few dollars) to defray the costs of trail management activities. Currently the existing trails on Bluff, Gore and Monadnock Mountains (as well the nearby trails in Willoughby State Forest) are featured in the 50 Hikes in Vermont and GMC's Day Hiker's Guide to Vermont. Maps will be available locally through retail stores, ANR, Silvio O. Conte NWR, and other local organizations. To assist hikers traveling from other regions, other publications offered through the GMC may tell where to obtain maps and information.

Management

The Green Mountain Club will assume responsibility for coordinating the management and construction of hiking trails on the former Champion Lands. GMC will work with local organizations such as the NorthWoods Stewardship Center to develop and maintain trail corridors according to accepted trail building standards. Unless otherwise noted, all trail management and maintenance activities shall be in accordance with the standards demonstrated in the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's Appalachian Trail Design, Construction, and Maintenance, 2nd Edition (2000).

The GMC seeks to provide optimal routes for all proposed trails that will limit resource damage, minimize user conflicts, and maximize the efficiency of its trail maintenance efforts. To this end, trails on private timberlands will be located in a manner that, where

possible, avoids active harvest areas and provides maximum protection of sensitive soils, plants and wildlife habitats.

Trails crossing terrain scheduled for timber harvesting will be evaluated for alternative locations and relocated as necessary to minimize conflicts.

Maintenance

Maintenance will involve hand tools whenever possible, such as shovels, hoes, rakes, handsaws, loppers, rock bars, and axes.

The purpose of trail maintenance is to keep the trail in good condition in the location chosen. This should also result in a trail that is clear, well defined and easily followed by hikers. GMC suggests spring and fall trimming of branches and clearing away of fallen trees from the trail, as well as regular inspection of wet areas and drainage to see where waterbars and dips are needed to protect resources. Maintenance will also encourage regrowth of brush to keep trails narrow.

Resource Damage: Prevention and Repair

Principle forms of resource damage include water-induced erosion on slopes and the impact of feet on the trail. A well-designed trail should resist wear from feet, because the trail should be narrow, often relatively dry or with stepping stones or bridges. GMC will observe usage and make recommendations accordingly each year.

Waterbars and drainage dips need to be installed on hiking trails to reduce erosion. Construction details are contained in the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's Appalachian Trail Design, Construction, and Maintenance, 2nd Edition (2000). .

Trail Closure (Mud Season)

Hiking on trails during the spring and fall mud seasons produces resource damage and should be discouraged. GMC recommends closing trails during the spring mud season. This season should be defined as the period when the partnered landowners have woods roads gated shut for mud season, roughly from April to Memorial Day weekend (usually the last weekend in May). As soon as trailheads are designated, GMC will work with ANR to provide educational signage indicating timing and reasons for trail closure during mud seasons.

Outreach and Education

The Green Mountain Club provides education and outreach information to hikers on a statewide and local level through a variety of workshops, publications, and events. Information pertaining to the Champion Lands hiking trail system such as ANR rules and regulations, Leave No Trace, and backcountry safety will be available through the GMC website, its guidebooks, maps and publications, and through the Northeast Kingdom Section's regularly scheduled activities.

Reporting

GMC will provide annual reports to the owners of the Champion lands to describe trail conditions and maintenance efforts. Owners should also notify GMC immediately of trail changes as needed (especially if due to planned timber harvesting), trail damage observed, and other concerns. Reports should be sent to the GMC Director of Field Programs, Green Mountain Club, 4711 Waterbury-Stowe Road, Waterbury Center, VT 05677, phone (802) 244-7037, fax (802) 244-5867, or e-mail: gmc@greenmountainclub.org (specify Director of Field Programs in subject line please) and should be copied to the NorthWoods Stewardship Center: corps@northwoodscenter.org (specify Kingdom Corps in subject line please) or (802) 723-6551x117.

GMC field staff will meet in person with ANR at least once a year, to plan, discuss and evaluate hiking trail corridors on the former Champion Lands, and will notify ANR of each planned maintenance operation or trail crew on the lands.