

## Kelsey Notch Trail approved as designated ATV trail in Nash Stream Forest

Barbara Tetreault  
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ODELL — The New Hampshire Council on Resources and Development has voted that the state recognize the Kelsey Notch trail as a designated ATV trail in Nash Stream State Forest. As part of its approval, the council specified that monitoring for environmental impacts occur twice annually during the riding season and that year-end maintenance work, if needed, be done prior to seasonal trail closure.

Allowing ATVs on the Kelsey Notch Trail has been debated since the snowmobile trail was opened to ATVs as a pilot project in 2013. It was given a two year extension in 2021.

Proponents and ATV enthusiasts note the four mile trail serves as an east-west connector for the Ride-the-Wild network of 1,000 miles of interconnecting ATV trails in Coos County. As the region struggles economically to recover from the loss of its paper mills, ATV supporters point to the revenue generated by visitors coming here to ride.

Opponents, including four conservation groups, point out that the original 1995 management plan for the Nash Stream Forest prohibited ATVs on the forest. The groups also argue the Kelsey Trail was not properly developed and the state has failed to do the studies required to deterr

potential impacts.

David Govatski, chair of the Nash Stream Citizens Advisory Committee, said allowing ATVs in the forest “is contentious because this use and the associated trail development was not part of the original vision for this nearly 40,000-acre tract of public land in the North Country.” In addition to the Kelsey Notch Trail, the seven mile West Side Trail was opened to ATV use in 2002.

CORE took up the status of the Kelsey Notch Trail at its March 9 meeting. CORD is charged with managing state properties purchased with Land Conservation Investment Program grants, which includes the almost 40,000-acre Nash Stream Forest. Former paper company timberland, the state acquired the land in 1988 and sold a conservation easement to the U.S. Forest Service to help finance the purchase.

CORE Chair Taylor Caswell, commissioner of the NH Department of Business and Economic Affairs, asked first for input from state agencies, according to minutes of the meeting. Patrick Hackley, from the N.H. Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, provided a statement that his agency recommends the Kelsey Notch Trail be made permanent, conditional on monitoring be conducted twice a year, in July and October, and maintenance work be performed at the end of each year. If significant erosion or other environmental impacts are observed by the monitoring team, those issues would be addressed as soon as possible. Persistent erosion or water quality issues would result in the status of the trail being reassessed.

Representing N.H. Fish and Game, Betsey McNaughten said her agency concurred on the statement by DNCR but added that Fish and Game is concerned about the impact of ATV noise on high volume days during nesting season and wants that concern included in the monitoring.

“The department recognizes the popularity of the trail, and that the increased use of ATVs in the North Country has an economic impact, “ she read.

Fish and Game Supervisor of the Wildlife Program Jim Oehler said an examination of how OHRVs effect wildlife would be beneficial in understanding how to manage them. After a motion was made to recognize the Kelsey Notch Trail, Caswell opened the discussion up to the public. Office of Strategic Initiatives planner Stephanie Verdile said CORD had received 66 emails from the public and a large crowd of state officials, ATV riders, and conservation group representatives were in attendance.

Coos County Commissioner and Colebrook Selectman Ray Gorman said the county commission and delegation are in favor of keeping the trail open to ATVs. He spoke about the economic importance of the ATV industry to the North Country and the importance of the Kelsey Notch Trail to the system.

Larry Gomes, trail master for the Milan ATV Club and a past member of the Nash Stream Citizens Advisory Committee, said he felt the local citizens committee should be making decisions on use of the Nash Stream forest. He pointed out that the Kelsey Notch trail is on a hill and a distance away from Nash Stream. Gomes said the embankments are wooded and serve to stop erosion from getting into the stream.

Craig Washburn, of the Metallak ATV Club, said he grew up in the area and knows it well. He said some N.H. Department of Environmental Services originally helped plan the Kelsey Notch trail. He agreed with a need to monitor the trail and mentioned that the club's patrols are regularly check the trail.

Bob Gale, of the Stark planning board, said Nash Stream Forest is public land and belongs to everyone. He said the Nash Stream Road is a bigger threat when it comes to erosion and flooding because it is right next to the river. Gale said a lot of people are trying to financially recover from the closing of the mills and local businesses need the activity generated by ATVers. He said his town is willing to work with CORD to keep the trail open.

Echoing Gale's remarks was Joshua Phillips, president of the North County ATV Club. He said there are few businesses left in the town of Stratford and closure of the Kelsey Notch Trail would make it a lot harder for those remaining.

Speaking for the NH Society for the Protection of NH Forest, The Nature Conservancy, The Appalachian Mountain Club, and the Audubon Society was Matt Lahey of the Society. He noted his organization and the Nature Conservancy worked very closely with the state to purchase Nash Stream forest. He said the fundamental question is whether the state followed the law when the ATV trail was established and there is also concern about a lack of studies on the impact of the trail on wildlife, water resources, and other users of the forest.

"We have heard anecdotal evidence – and observed first-hand – that the impacts of the trail on wildlife and water resources have been significant," the four groups said in a joint letter. "Observing how the Kelsey Notch Trail was established, and the lack of study as to the impacts of increased

ATV use, we believe that continued ATV access on this trail would be inappropriate,” they stated.

Emphasizing he was speaking for himself and not the Nash Stream Advisory Committee, Jamie Sayen of Stratford, said when the state purchased the land the original owner did not allow ATVs to operate on it and the state’s initial management plan maintained that ban. Sayen said monitoring on the Kelsey trail got underway two years late and described the monitoring on both the West Side Road and Kelsey Notch Trail as “utterly inadequate.” He urged CORD to require the state to demonstrate how it will pay for the monitoring work since Sayen said funding has been an issue in the past.

After the public comments, NH Commissioner of Agriculture and CORE member Shawn Jasper said while the initial intent may have been to prohibit ATVs, he said that is not relevant to what is happening today. He said the easement with the Forest Service does not restrict ATVs. He said the fact neither CORD or the state has the money to order studies is not really anyone’s fault. He moved to recognize the Kelsey Notch ATV Trail as permanent. CORE member Patrick Hackley, of the NH Department of Natural and Cultural Lands, suggested permanent be changed to designated OHRV trail and the change was approved. The motion was then passed on a majority vote.

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**Barbara Tetreault**

Editor