

NASH STREAM FOREST OHRV BRIEFING PAPER

Revised Southern Connector Trail Proposal 2021

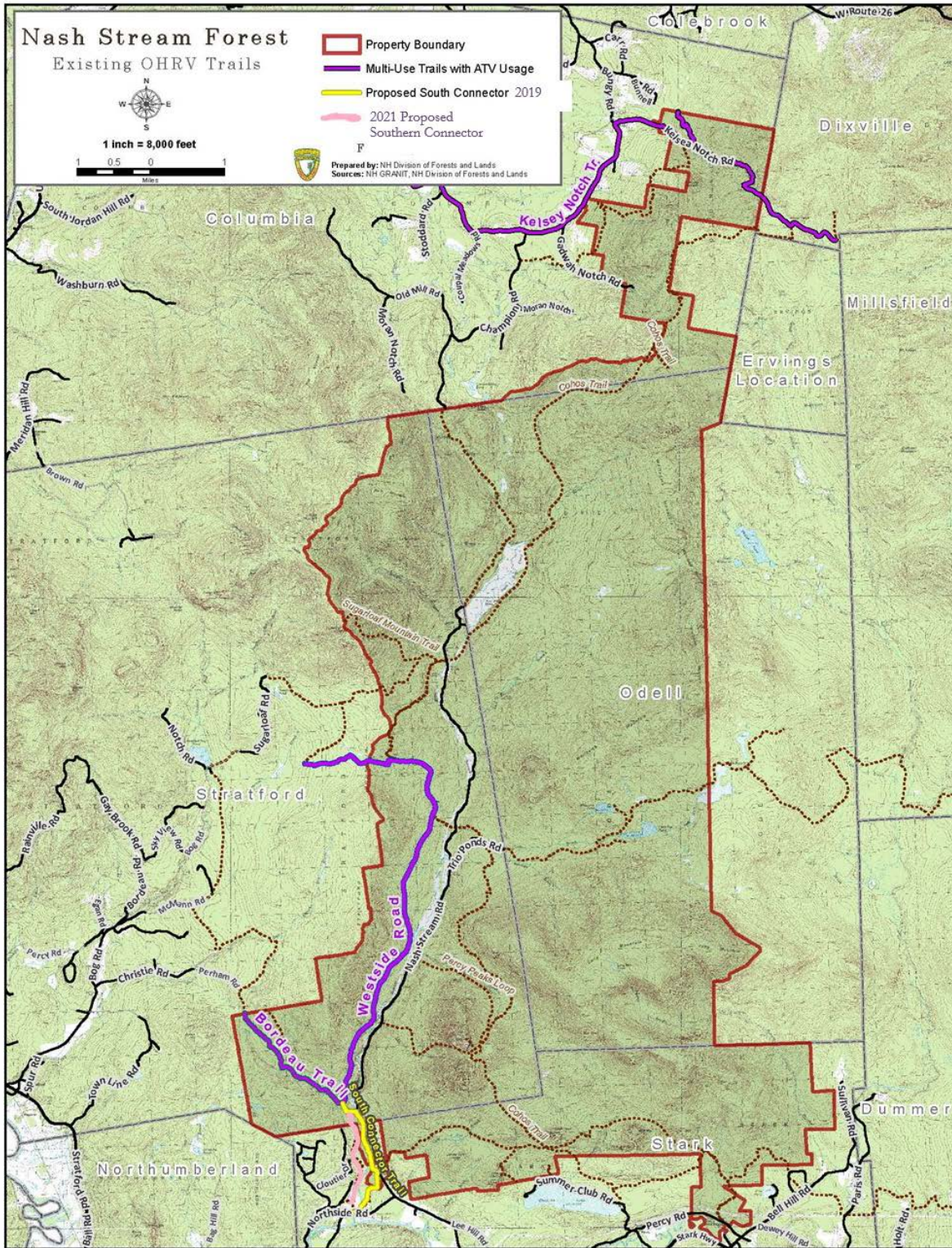
History:

At nearly 40,000 acres, Nash Stream Forest (NSF) is the largest state reservation in New Hampshire. When the lands that make up Nash Stream Forest came on the market in 1988, there was great concern by the conservation community, government officials and the public that a large area of the North Country could potentially be purchased and developed, forever changing the character, ecology, and way of life in this part of the state. In an unprecedented show of cooperation and collaboration between the state of New Hampshire through the Land Conservation Investment Program, the Nature Conservancy, the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests and the federal government, funds were secured to permanently protect this piece of property which ultimately resulted in state ownership under a conservation easement held by the federal government (for more information refer to pg. 10 in the 2017 Nash Stream Forest Management plan (NSF Plan 2017)).

Work on the first Nash Stream Management Plan began shortly after the purchase. The plan was written over a seven-year period by a technical team, with considerable public input. Finalized in 1995, the plan stressed the protection of the natural resources, but recognized the importance an area of this size contributes to the forest-based economy of the North Country. A balance was struck to maintain Nash Stream Forest as a working forest, utilizing ecologically-based, sustainable forestry, and to continue to provide traditional, low-impact, dispersed recreation. In addition, large portions of the forest, including sensitive and unique areas, high elevation forests and control areas, were set aside during the planning process to allow the natural processes of forest succession to take place without human disturbance.

In 2002, due in part to strong political interest, the plan was amended to develop an Off Highway Recreational Vehicle (OHRV) trail on the property. A nine-mile section of trail known as the “West Side Trail” was identified, studied and finally approved as a pilot trail to allow OHRV riders to enter onto the property from Stratford and make a loop, parallel and west of Nash Stream, and then exit the property (refer to **Map 1** on page 2).

Map 1 – Nash Stream Forest OHRV Trails



Since that time, OHRV use has grown significantly in popularity and has become an economic driver in the North Country. New Hampshire now has one of the largest OHRV trail networks in the nation.

In December 2017, the first full revision of the Nash Stream Forest Management Plan (NSF plan, 2017) was completed and signed into effect. During the four-year revision process, the technical team (Tech Team), which consisted of professional staff from state agencies with a diverse area of expertise, and the Nash Stream Citizen's Advisory Committee, a statutorily defined committee of members who make recommendations on the management of the property, worked closely together. Many public meetings and several listening sessions were held during the process as well as over 165 public comments received. One of the most contentious issues was the question of OHRV expansion in Nash Stream Forest. There was both significant support and opposition from the public on both sides of this issue.

OHRV use on the property continues to be one of the most challenging management issues. The 2017 NSF plan established Recreation Management Guidelines (Section 11.5) for OHRV's based on the findings of the Council on Resources and Development (CORD) (pg. 163). Under the Implementation section (Section 11.4) of the Recreation chapter, the NSF plan reviewed proposals for expansion throughout the property and with guidance from CORD, came up with a way to move forward to address OHRV trail use during the life of the current plan (pg. 160). CORD's involvement in this issue is a result of its statutory responsibility for oversight of lands acquired through the Land Conservation Investment Program.

The Kelsey Notch Pilot Trail was implemented before the 2017 revision and was one of the drivers behind the revision. The trail needed to be added to the management plan in order to be compliant with the management plan, which had previously called for no ATV expansion. The 2017 NSF plan allowed for limited expansion, which included continuing the use of the Kelsey Notch trail for a three-year provisional period that ended in 2020. At the end of the provisional period, CORD reviewed the annual reports and determined that the trail could remain open for an additional two years with some additional information gathered during the continued pilot period.

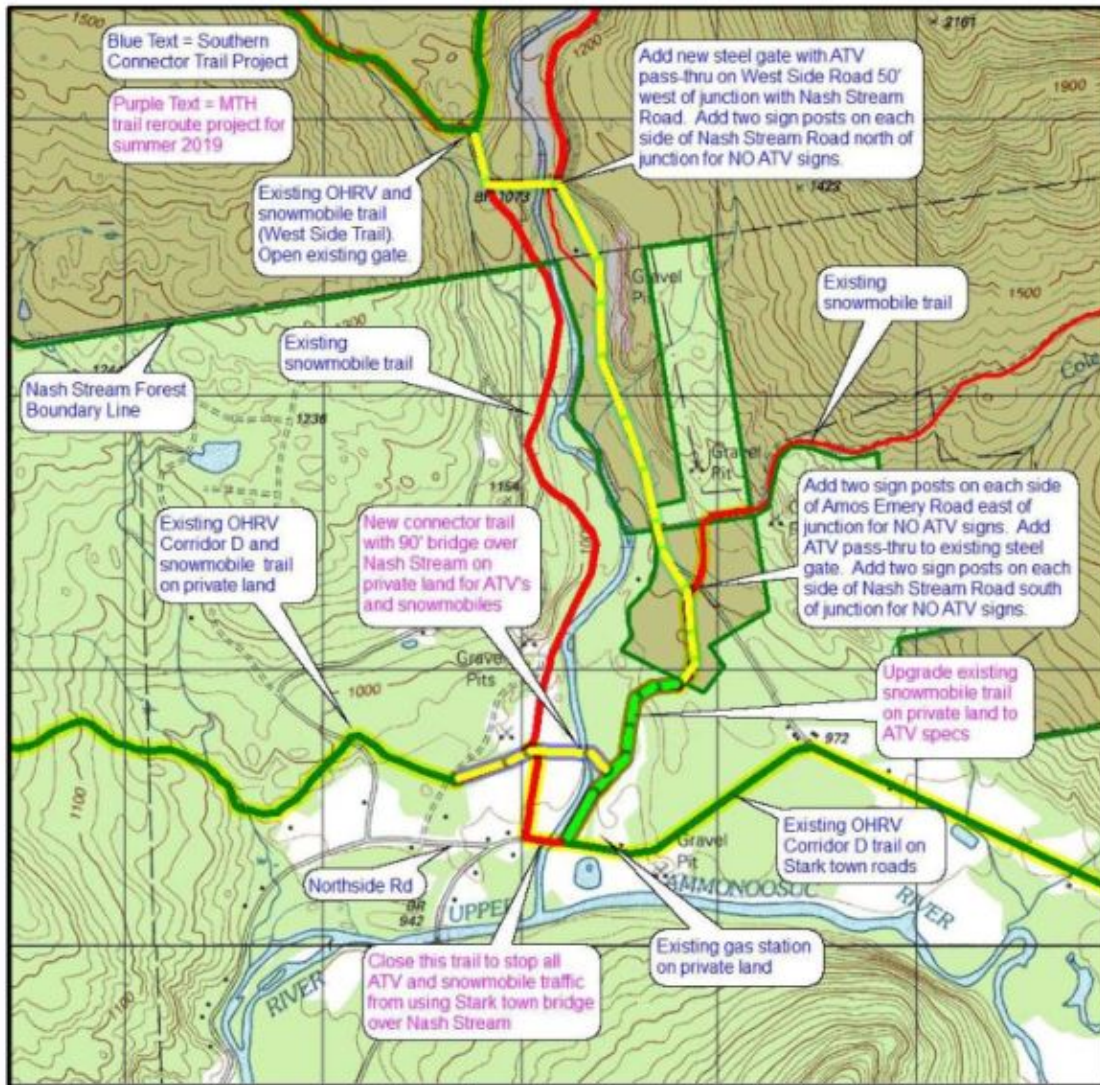
The 2017 NSF plan also addressed two new OHRV proposals; 1) the East-West Corridor and 2) the Southern Connector. After extensive review, the Tech Team found that the proposed location of the East-West Corridor would negatively impact several resources at Nash Stream Forest and would be inconsistent with the Vision of the NSF plan. This was detailed in a briefing paper prepared by the Division of Forests and Lands dated October 25, 2016. At the December 8, 2016 meeting, CORD found that the East-West Corridor was not consistent with the Vision or with RSA 162-C:6.

The Southern Connector trail proposal was an offshoot of the East-West Corridor and was retained in the plan for consideration as a stand-alone request to be brought forward through the process during the 10-year span of the 2017 NSF plan (Pgs. 160-161). Under the current plan, it is the only OHRV expansion that will be considered at this time.

The Southern Connector OHRV trail request was formally proposed at the June 25, 2019 meeting of the Nash Stream Citizen’s Advisory Committee to connect the existing OHRV trail system to the west of the property with trails and fuel to the south of the property via the existing West Side Trail through Nash Stream Forest. The initial 2019 Southern Connector Trail proposal would have traveled south from the existing West Side Trail (West Side Road/Bordeau Trail junction), crossed an existing bridge over Nash Stream onto the main Nash Stream Road, then continued south down the main Nash Stream Road onto a side road that connects to an abutter’s property (refer to **Map 2**).

Map 2 – Original 2019 Southern Connector OHRV Trail Proposal

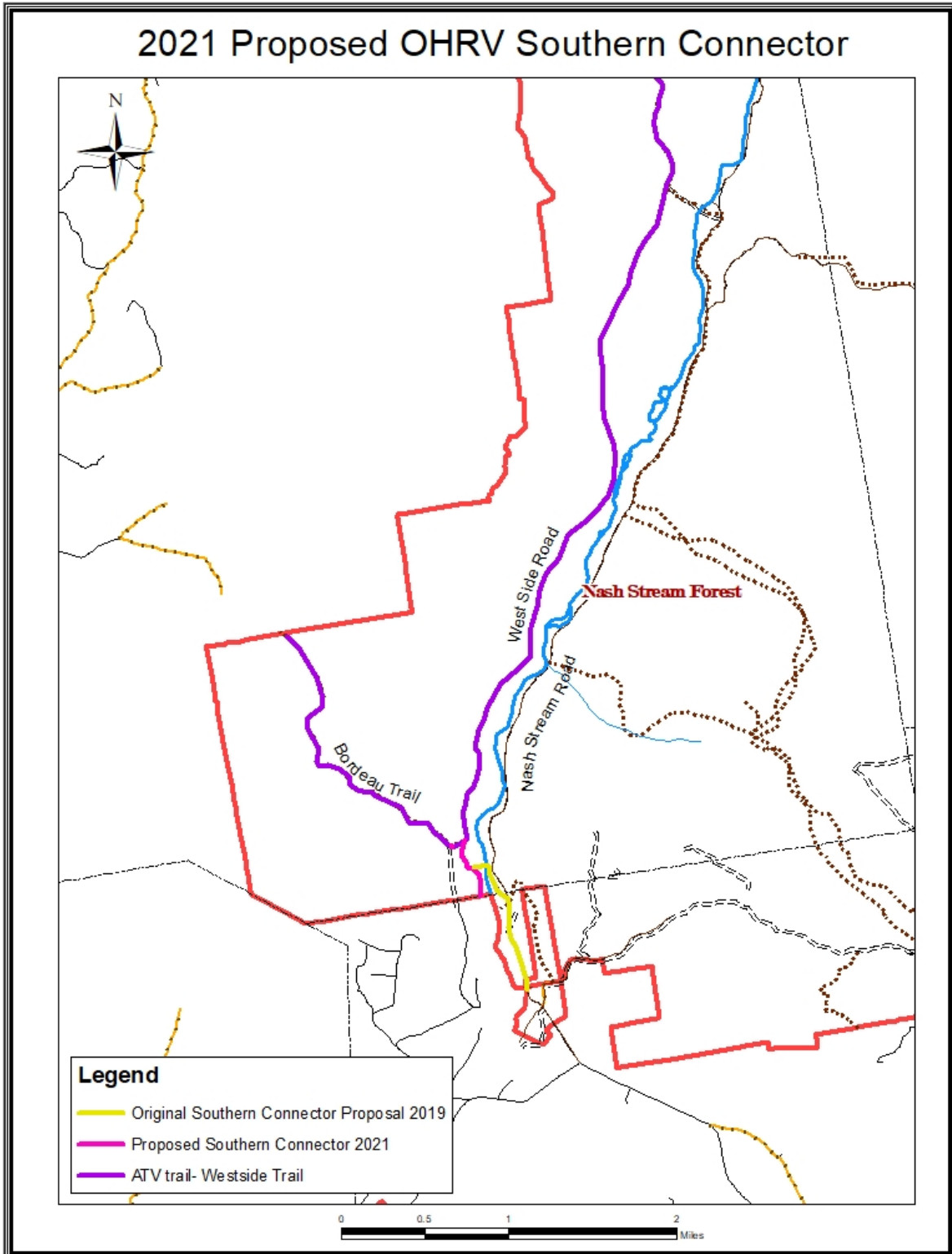
Proposed Southern Connector Trail – Topo Map



The Tech Team reviews of the proposed trail were also provided at this meeting. There was a lot of discussion between committee members as well as public comment (refer to pg. 3 of the June 25, 2019 meeting minutes of NSF Citizens Committee). The NSF Citizens Committee asked the Tech Team to come up with a list of data and information that would need to be collected and monitored to make a recommendation regarding the trail proposal and what information would be needed to potentially allow the Southern Connector Trail a provisional status similar to the Kelsey Notch Trail.

A subsequent meeting of the Tech Team identified numerous areas that would require baseline data collection and continued monitoring due to the potential impacts of the initial 2019 proposal. One of the main concerns was run off and impacts to water quality due to the lengthy and steep approach and departure from the bridge. Another large concern was impacts to the state maintained Nash Stream Road that provides access for camp owners, public recreation, and forest management activities. Shared use of Nash Stream Road also raised the concern of the inability to stop OHRV traffic from illegally continuing up the main road as well as changing the quiet atmosphere of the property for long time visitors and camp owners along the main road. Other major concerns included increased OHRV use on the existing West Side Trail and the impacts this may have on wildlife and other recreational users.

The amount and depth of information the Tech Team identified for collection was extensive and costly, and shortly after this time the pandemic was upon us all, and as a result the project stalled. In the meantime, newly installed NH Snowmobile Club Representative for the Nash Stream Citizens Advisory Committee, Tim Emperor, secured permission from 14 individual landowners adjacent to the property that would allow for a much shorter route utilizing an existing woods road/corridor snowmachine trail, resulting in a revised Southern Connector Trail proposal. The revised proposal would eliminate the need to cross Nash Stream or share the Nash Stream Road, by keeping the Southern Connector Trail on the west side of Nash Stream, and would also reduce the amount of trail on the property to approximately 1,200 feet. (refer to **Map 3**)



Review and Recommendations by the Technical Team:

The Tech Team met on site in October of 2021 to review the revised Southern Connector Proposal. The new proposal would still travel south from the existing West Side Trail (West Side Road/Bordeau Trail junction) and head south down the snowmobile trail to private property to connect to services and the existing trail OHRV network to the south of the property.

While many of the issues with the 2019 proposal were eliminated as a result of the new proposal no longer crossing Nash Stream or sharing Nash Stream Road, the Tech Team still had concerns regarding the anticipated increase in OHRV traffic on the existing West Side Road and Bordeaux Trail that make up the West side Trail loop. Currently, the West Side Trail is an “off the beaten path” loop trail and more of an occasional destination or scenic loop for riders. The incorporation of the Southern Connector Trail will result in the West Side Road and Bordeaux Trail becoming through trails serving as shorter, convenient connectors to a larger trail network to the east and north. Serving as such a connector and pinch point between the two existing trail networks will most likely result in a significant increase in OHRV traffic with potential impacts to trail erosion, water quality, wildlife and diminished experiences for other users.

During the discussions of the original southern connector, it was clear to the Tech Team that no significant OHRV data had been collected since the inception of the West Side Trail. During the 2021 season, the NH Bureau of Trails did place counters on the Westside Trail to determine present OHRV usage as well as on the Kelsey Notch Trail to the North.

While this data is useful, additional data is needed to evaluate and monitor the potential impacts to resources and users, and therefore, the Tech Team proposes a second season to gather additional data and information to determine if the pilot trail proposal could be conditionally approved. Based upon discussions in the field and via emails, the Tech Team would like the following information to be collected during the 2022 season and monitored each year during the pilot status of the trail:

- Additional OHRV trail counter information on the West Side Trail and Kelsey Notch Trail during the 2022 season and annually during the pilot status.
- OHRV trail counters to the south of Nash Stream to help establish anticipated increase in OHRV traffic during the 2022 season and annually during the pilot status.
- Measure the distances from the existing West Side Road to Nash Stream, as well as the distance from the proposed Southern Connector Trail to Nash Stream.
- Determine the slope of the terrain to the stream from the existing West Side Trail.
- Survey traditional user groups (fisherman, hunters, hikers, etc) during the 2022 season and annually during the pilot status to determine impacts on those recreationalists.
- Botanical and Natural Community surveys within the vicinity of the trail in the 2022 season.

- Determine if any wetlands would be directly impacted by the proposal.
 - Ideally, baseline data would also be collected on reptiles, amphibians and birds, but more importantly monitoring should occur annually during the pilot period to determine impacts.
 - A survey of vernal pools in relation to the southern connector, Bordeaux Trail and West Side Trail should be completed. Amphibians have the potential to be significantly impacted by expanded OHRV use if there are vernal pools nearby.
 - There is also a concern for nesting wood turtles, if they are found within the trail project area.
 - A bird survey is also recommended, with data collection points spaced out along the existing trail and proposed route to determine presence, abundance and reproductive capacity and potential impacts.
- Fish and Game's greatest concern was to the impact to wildlife in the river corridor along the longer West Side Road portion of the West Side Trail. Over the next year, they would like to gather and review existing research to develop a potential threshold or carrying capacity of OHRV traffic before there is a detrimental effect on certain wildlife species. It was discussed that a few focal species be chosen to help in this determination. If comparable data is not available in the research literature, the only way to determine a potential threshold is through actual data collection. Utilizing these data, they may propose a shortened season for the West Side Road portion of the Westside Trail if OHRV numbers reach or exceed a certain level. If OHRV numbers continued to increase to a second, pre-determined threshold the West Side Road portion of the Westside Trail may be closed all together. In both of these scenarios, the much shorter Bordeaux Trail would remain open to facilitate the southern connection.
- During the Tech Team's field visit, a raptor nest was identified in close proximity to the trail. In order to be in compliance with the Course and Fine Filter (RSA 215-A:43), a raptor nest cannot be within 330 feet of a proposed OHRV trail on state lands. Fish and Game will visit the nest a few times during breeding season to determine if the nest is active and determine what species is using it.
- Finally, the largest hurdle for this proposal may come back to landowner permission. The Tech Team was just informed this past week that 13 of the 14 landowners have signed off in agreement to cross their properties, but the 14th landowner has had a change of heart and has refused to sign the agreement.

Pilot Trail Status

If the Southern Connector OHRV trail is granted pilot status, it will be necessary to continue to gather the number of OHRV trips on both the West Side Road and the Bordeau Trail annually. The Bordeau Trail, is the shorter leg of the West Side Trail, and will likely be the preferred OHRV route. The West Side Road is much longer and runs close to Nash Stream in several areas and increased OHRV use on this section will likely have more impact on wildlife and traditional recreational users. Therefore, the Tech Team developed the seasonal restrictions and/or closure of this portion of the West Side Trail discussed above in recommendations. Additionally the Tech Team felt frequency of use was an important part of the equation as well, meaning if traffic increased significantly on weekends or specific holidays that made it detrimental for certain species breeding then this would play into the decision making process. Additionally, the length of the OHRV season on Nash Stream Forest is longer than most of the surrounding trail networks - remaining open until December 15. How this longer season affects hunters utilizing the property should also be considered.

Ultimately, if all these data in the recommendations above are collected and monitored as described, and the requirements of the Course and Fine Filter are met, along with securing all landowner permissions, the Tech Team anticipates that this trail proposal could move forward with conditional approval of a five-year pilot trail. This time-frame is similar to the other pilot programs that have occurred on NSF. A monitoring report should also be prepared annually by the same members of the Tech Team that prepare the Kelsey Notch annual report. If at any time during the pilot status negative impacts to the resources highlighted in the recommendations are reported, verified, and documented by the same annual review members of the Tech Team, the trail shall be shut down promptly, until the negative impacts are properly mitigated. If repeated incidents occur, the trail may be suspended and brought back to the Nash Stream Citizen's Committee and CORD for reconsideration of pilot status.

Finally, it is important to note that while the various state agencies on the Tech Team may be able to provide some of the initial baseline data and some of the annual monitoring, such as OHRV trail counts, limited time, resources, and funding will necessitate that many of the annual surveys identified in the recommendations be carried out by third party contractors hired by the requesting club. Any third party survey methods would require review and approval by the appropriate members of the Tech Team prior to any data collection.