

Trail Restoration Projects

Volunteers Work Together to Help Enhance Lincoln's Trail Systems

There is a long history of collaboration in the Blackfoot, Swan and Seeley Lake valleys. It's common for people—all representing various interests and values—to work across fences to protect the integrity of Montana's rural communities, maintain sustainable livelihoods and conserve the natural resources along the Blackfoot watershed. While the people and projects have changed over the years, the commitment to collaborative work remains strong especially as it relates to today's efforts by the members of the Southwestern Crown Collaborative (SWCC). Partners of the SWCC are working across boundaries to restore ecosystems within the Southwestern Crown of the Continent, and improve economies of the local rural communities.

The Southwestern Crown of the Continent was selected as one of the first national Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration (CFLR) projects in 2010. The SWCC, representing numerous groups and individuals, lead the planning and implementation for a myriad of innovative restoration projects across the Swan, Clearwater and Blackfoot valleys.



Lincoln, Montana is known as a destination location for a multitude of outdoor recreation opportunities for both motorized and non-motorized uses. To achieve its goals for restoration and further enhance some recreational activities, members of the SWCC are working on two separate, yet complimentary, trail projects on National Forest lands near Lincoln.

The entire Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (CDNST) corridor is about 3,100 miles long extending from the Canadian border to the border of Mexico. While some people set out to hike the entire trail-length, most visitors hike only segments of the trail at a time.

In 2011, the Helena National Forest and the Montana Wilderness Association (MWA) established a partnership for trail maintenance of the CDNST. Through a formal agreement the MWA received SWCC funds to promote trail maintenance along the CDNST. In that time, MWA volunteers spent several days improving conditions and maintaining portions of the CDNST near Stemple Pass last summer.

Volunteers cleared trail corridors of trees, brush and rocks to maintain the trail tread and maintained drainage structures to prevent soil erosion. Volunteers spent days locating priority points for new trail signs and installed the signs to clearly denote the trail route for users to safely explore and enjoy while on the nationally renowned CDNST.

“The CDNST is more than just a trail, it's also about connecting people,” said Shannon Freix, Continental Divide Trail program manager for MWA. “MWA's CDT Montana trail program is fueled by volunteer passion which means we are privileged to work with volunteers from around the country, and sometimes internationally. It's amazing to see horsemen, conservationists and mountain bikers swinging a tool side-by-side for a common recreation and restoration effort.”



While MWA and its volunteers worked to enhance recreational experiences on the CDNST, several other SWCC partners spent their time designing a trail realignment project on trail that has existed within the Stonewall Mountain motorized trail system for several decades. The National Off-Highway Vehicle Conservation Council has enlisted the help of local motorized groups, including the Montana Trail Vehicle Riders Association and Great Falls Trail Bike Riders Association, to implement a trail realignment and resource protection project.



In 2003 the Snow Talon Fire burned more than 30,000 acres in this area on Stonewall Mountain. As is a customary in fire management a fireline, two dozer blades wide, was constructed to prevent further spread of the wildfire toward the community of Lincoln. The fireline successfully contained the wildfire; however, it unfortunately damaged the entire length of a well-known motorized trail route. The dozer line was rehabilitated and the motorized trail re-established, however more work and care is desired to provide for a trail that is more fun to ride and designed to better fit the topography.

Through a formal agreement with the Forest, and under the mission of the SWCC, the motorized club partners began conceptual design of a newly realigned trail on Stonewall Mountain. When fully implemented, the rerouted trail will serve many purposes including: restoration of the damaged resources and land where riders by-pass the currently damaged portion of the trail; improve and maintain proper drainage for water; and simultaneously provide visitors with a motorized trail system that is enjoyable for residents and visitors alike.

Although additional design analysis is needed, trail work could start as early as 2013. Portions of the trail re-alignment will be done with small trail excavator type equipment, while other tasks will be done by hand with many volunteers from across the state.

“We think that the new design of the trail will be more sustainable and help protect the soils and resources from damage by ensuring a well-designed and enjoyable route,” said Russ Ehnes, Executive Director of the National Off-Highway Vehicle Conservation Council (NOHVCC). “Our goal is to restore the land to a healthy standard. We want to help make this even more of a ‘destination location’ to entice new riders to visit our trail and our community.”



With its budgetary and workforce constraints, it is difficult for the Forest Service to implement trail maintenance and restoration projects, which is why the partnership with MWA and NOHVCC, and other organizations, is critical to accomplishing both the mission of the Southwestern Crown Collaborative and the Forest Service. Under leadership of our partners, volunteers doing much more than maintaining the tread for a trail or installing a trail-marker; they are passionate and informed stewards of our public lands and trail systems.

While the people implementing these two trail projects differ in how they choose to explore their public lands, they share the mission of the SWCC to bring people together to restore ecosystems and create stewards of the land and advocates for collaboration.

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Photos: MWA photos: Volunteers clear and improve portions of the CDNST on the Lincoln Ranger District near Stemple Pass; NOHVCC photos: Riders watching a smoke column grow during a wildfire; Rider enjoys the natural scenery found at a stopping point along a motorized trail (“stock” photos from Russ)