

# Finding of No Significant Impact

## North Country National Scenic Trail Feasibility Study, Corridor Plan, and Environmental Assessment For Addison County, Vermont

In compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the National Park Service (NPS) has prepared a Feasibility Study and Corridor Plan to analyze the feasibility, desirability, and various alternatives for extending the North Country National Scenic Trail to meet the Appalachian National Scenic Trail. The extension would take the North Country Trail through Addison County, Vermont. This recommendation will inform an amendment to the National Trails Systems Act of 1968, which established the Eastern terminus of the North County Trail at Crown Point, New York.

The exact route on the ground for the trail within this corridor is not yet known, but some possible alternative routes within the preferred corridor are presented in the Study and Environmental Assessment. Finding the best location for the trail, negotiating with landowners and actual construction will take place over 10 or more years, with National Park Service providing assistance under the National Trail System Act.

### **PURPOSE OF THIS DECISION**

The Purpose of the North Country NST is:

*To establish a trail within scenic areas of the Nation to provide increased outdoor recreation opportunities and promote preservation of, public access to, travel within, and enjoyment and appreciation of the national scenic and historic resources.*

*To provide for superlative outdoor recreation opportunities and for the conservation and enjoyment of nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, and cultural qualities through which the trail passes.*

*To provide a premier non-motorized trail and experience consistent with preserving the landscape in which the trail is established.*

*To encourage and assist volunteer citizen involvement in the planning, development, maintenance, and management of the trail, wherever appropriate.*

### **NEED FOR EXTENSION OF THE NORTH COUNTRY NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL**

When Congress amended the National Trails System Act in 1980 to authorize the establishment of the North Country National Scenic Trail (NST), it described the trail as “extending from

eastern New York State to the vicinity of Lake Sakakawea in North Dakota.” This truncated the trail from its original conceptual design as extending westward “from the Appalachian Trail in Vermont,” stated elsewhere in the Act. The deletion of the Vermont portion of the proposed trail route was in response to the desires of public and private interests in Vermont that expressed opposition to the proposed section of the trail in their state.

Despite this authorization, a connection with the Appalachian Trail in Vermont has remained an important goal and vision of the partners working on the North Country Trail. The National Park Service, as trail administrator, maintained occasional communication with Vermont trail interests to determine whether attitudes and perspectives had changed to a point that would allow reopening the question about the North Country Trail extending into Vermont to connect with the Appalachian Trail (AT). Those contacts became more regular in the past decade.

In 2003, *Backpacker* magazine published an article proposing the interconnection of the Appalachian, North Country, Lewis and Clark, Continental Divide, and Pacific Northwest Trails to create a transcontinental hiking trail through the northern tier of states called the Sea-to-Sea Route. This article stimulated grassroots interest from various groups (including some who originally opposed the North Country Trail in the 1970s) that encouraged the National Park Service (NPS) to re-examine the feasibility and desirability of extending the North Country NST into Vermont to connect with the Appalachian NST. This proposal revitalized the original design of the National Trails System from the 1960s, which would have created such an interconnected route with the Appalachian, North Country, and Lewis and Clark Trails, except for two events: the deletion of the Vermont portion of the North Country Trail (and thus a connection to the AT) and the authorization of the Lewis and Clark Trail as a National Historic Trail rather than a National Scenic Trail. (National Historic Trail designation does not include the goal of creating an on-the-ground hiking trail along its route).

Because an amendment to the National Trails System Act will be necessary to revise the authorized route of the North Country NST and extend the eastern terminus into Vermont, an evaluation of the public support and routing opportunities for such a proposal is needed to inform Congress as they consider such a proposal. Without passage of such an amendment, the National Park Service would be unable to designate a North Country Trail Route through Addison County (as described under the No-Action Alternative in the report).

## **PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE**

The study and planning process identified and evaluated two alternative corridors for extending the North Country Trail into Vermont, plus the alternative of not undertaking the proposed project (a *No-Action Alternative*). The process inventoried and assessed the potential effects of extending the trail through each corridor, as well as the effects of the No-Action Alternative.

The Feasibility Study, Corridor Plan, and Environmental Assessment conclude that it is both feasible and desirable to extend the North Country NST into Vermont to connect with the

Appalachian NST. The Preferred Alternative (Alternative C) calls for Federal approval and adoption of an identified “Corridor of Opportunity,” 5-7 miles wide, across central Addison County. The NPS would work with and assist public and private interests and landowners in establishing and managing a connected network of foot trails within this corridor, between Chimney Point on the shore of Lake Champlain and the Long Trail on the ridge of the Green Mountains in Green Mountain National Forest. Within this corridor, a strip of land ideally approximately 200-1,000 feet in width, known as the “trailway,” would be protected for North Country NST purposes. A wider trailway may be necessary in places to incorporate significant features of a particular area. There is no intention to acquire or protect all of the lands within the corridor. The corridor is intentionally designed wide enough to allow options in finding landowners that are willing to cooperate in establishing the trail and trailway across their lands, since all participation is voluntary. The corridor will define the area within which lands may be purchased using public and private funding and will serve as advisory information for town and county land use planning. The Preferred Alternative fulfills the process for trail route determination outlined in Section 7(a) of the National Trails System Act [16 USC 1246(a)].

The proposed *Corridor of Opportunity* is approximately 32 to 40 miles long and runs in a generally east-southeasterly direction across Addison County. From the Lake Champlain Bridge, the corridor heads eastward through the developed area of West Addison and a fertile, flat agricultural region. Reaching Dead Creek, the corridor climbs gradually toward the village of Addison, crossing VT Route 22A before ascending Snake Mountain. Descending to the east, the corridor crosses the Lemon Fair River lowlands and rises again to the village of Weybridge Hill. Further eastward the corridor enters the town of Middlebury, where the Trail Around Middlebury (TAM) provides existing trail and access to the village. East of Middlebury, there are two alternative routes in the corridor: the northern route continues directly eastward to Green Mountain National Forest, joining the Long Trail in the Breadloaf Wilderness; the southern route travels southeastward to East Middlebury and existing trails in the Moosalamoo National Recreation Area and Green Mountain National Forest, joining the Long Trail at a point in the Joseph Battell Wilderness (see Map 5: Alternative C (Preferred Alternative) Proposed Corridor in the report).

The Alternative C *Corridor of Opportunity* ends at this point, and the trail would follow the Long Trail south to Maine Junction and the Appalachian Trail, an additional distance of approximately 25 miles. Within the corridor, alternative trail segments have been identified and defined by discrete geographic features (see Appendix A: Identification of Possible Trail Routes in the report).

## **MITIGATION MEASURES**

### Invasive Species

A wayside exhibit and boot brush, as shown here, has also been located at some entrances to North Country Trail segments to inform hikers about the existence of invasive species, their effect on the native environment, appearance, and control measures. These interpretive

materials include information about how the hiker can help to limit the spread of invasive species by staying on the trail and using the boot brushes.

#### Trail construction practices

Appendix B contains the section of the North Country National Scenic Trail Handbook that specifies the most low impact trail design standards.

#### Cultural resources surveys

Once on-the-ground trail alignments are determined, NPS will coordinate archaeological surveys according to Department of the Interior Standards. If any cultural resources are present, consultations with state historic preservation officers under section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act will be done by the National Park Service.

#### Water quality permits

Once the trail alignment is planned, the need for structures such as puncheons, boardwalks, and bridges will be determined and water quality permits will be obtained in cooperation with the appropriate landowners.

#### State listed Sensitive Species

Once on the ground trail alignments are determined, the NPS will consult with State heritage Program staff in Vermont to determine any possible effects of trail construction and use on these species.

## **OTHER ALTERNATIVES ANALYZED**

The Alternative B *Corridor of Opportunity* loops through the northern portion of Addison County. The corridor heads north from the Lake Champlain Bridge and crosses Lower Otter Creek near its mouth, requiring construction of a substantial bridge. The corridor passes through typical Champlain Valley agricultural land and two State Parks with opportunities for camping before reaching the historic city of Vergennes. From Vergennes, the corridor heads east through portions of the towns of Ferrisburgh, Monkton, and New Haven that are characterized by smaller farms, exurban development, young forests, and the foothills of the Green Mountains. A significant number of small tracts of private land would need to be secured to cross this area. Reaching the village of Bristol, where the proposed corridor continues southeast and encompasses the Bristol Cliffs Wilderness Area (3750 acres). Because the Forest Service is not contemplating a new route for the trail within this designated Wilderness Area, which is one of the smaller units in the United States, and has only one minor trail (FT 203), the Alternative B Corridor allows for the route to be established adjacent to the Wilderness to avoid potential impacts. The corridor continues to the Breadloaf Wilderness and joins the Long Trail at a point north of Breadloaf Mountain (see Map 4: Alternative B Proposed Corridor). The Alternative B *Corridor of Opportunity* ends at this point, and the trail would follow the Long Trail south to Maine Junction and the AT, an additional distance of approximately 35 miles.

The Alternative B corridor was not selected as the Preferred Alternative because it is a significantly longer route, requiring construction of more miles of new trail. The longer route would also mean that it would affect many more private landowners. Some of the areas consist of small ownerships, which would be difficult, if not impossible, to traverse. It also crosses ecosystems of greater sensitivity. It would run adjacent to or traverse three wilderness areas in the Green Mountain National Forest, compared to only one or two in Alternative C. Finally, Alternative B would require construction of a major bridge in order to cross Lower Otter Creek. Alternative C would not require any major new bridges.

**The NPS decision is to approve and adopt the Alternative C corridor, identified as the Preferred Alternative in the “North Country National Scenic Trail: Feasibility Study, Corridor Plan, and Environmental Assessment for Addison County, Vermont.” This is also the “Environmentally Preferred Alternative.”**

## **ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERABLE ALTERNATIVE**

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations (40 CFR 1500-1508) and NPS Director’s Order #12 require the NPS to identify the alternative that best promotes the goals of Section 101 of the National Environmental Policy Act. The *Environmentally Preferred Alternative* is defined by the CEQ as: “...the alternative that causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment; it also means the alternative which best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources” (CEQ 1981).

The Environmentally Preferred Alternative for extending the North Country NST into the State of Vermont is Alternative C, the Preferred Alternative. The Preferred Alternative will help to permanently protect some of the geological, biological, and historic resources within the corridor from development and create a protected, undeveloped trailway of diverse habitats (both uplands and wetlands) that will promote an increase in biodiversity. The Preferred Alternative will increase public recreational opportunities and connect existing recreational resources. Securing a trailway that is permanently protected or in public ownership will help maintain existing wildlife. It will also provide opportunities for local residents and visitors to have access to features and vistas along the trail as well as enhance public awareness of Vermont’s landscapes and history through interpretation of features found along the trail.

The Alternative B corridor is a significantly longer route affecting many more private landowners, and is constrained by the Bristol Cliffs Wilderness, which does not currently have suitable trails, and developing new trails within a designated Wilderness is not often the best course of action to protect wilderness values.

The No Action Alternative contemplates no Federal involvement in, or Congressional authorization of, the North Country NST in the State of Vermont, thereby abandoning any coordinated, collaborative effort to attain the goals of developing a connection between two of our nation’s greatest trails. Without a coordinated effort, the No Action Alternative may not

recognize and bring together efforts with other groups to create mutually beneficial recreation opportunities or protect significant natural or cultural resources relating to the trail.

## **THE SELECTED ALTERNATIVE AND SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA**

**As defined in 40 CFR §1508.27, significance is determined by examining the following ten criteria:**

### **1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.**

The Corridor Impact Analysis presented in Chapter 6 of the Feasibility Study, Corridor Plan, and Environmental Assessment identifies potential impacts across all categories of resources as “no effect,” “negligible,” or “minor and beneficial.” Among those resource categories with the latter conclusion, no significant impacts were identified in the analyses leading to that conclusion. Consequently, NPS has determined that the Preferred Alternative, which is also the environmentally preferred alternative, can be implemented with no significant adverse effect to geology and soils, water resources, air quality, visual resources, ecosystems, invasive species, wildlife, fisheries, threatened and endangered species, cultural resources, communities and businesses, and recreation resources. Implementation of the Preferred Alternative will actually produce long term beneficial effects for hikers and the environment.

The environmentally preferred alternative identifies a Corridor of Opportunity that is approximately 5-7 miles wide extending east and southeasterly through Addison County. Within this corridor, a trailway that is approximately 200-1,000 feet wide would be set aside and protected or acquired for North Country NST purposes. A wider trailway may be necessary in places to incorporate significant features of a particular area. There is no intention to acquire or protect all of the lands within the corridor. The corridor is intentionally designed wide enough to allow options in finding landowners that are willing to cooperate in establishing the trail and trailway across their lands, since all participation is voluntary. The corridor will define the area within which lands may be purchased using public and private funding and will serve as advisory information for town and county land use planning.

A continuous trailway would connect existing public lands and trail systems, allowing movement of wildlife and the perpetuation and enhancement of indigenous plant communities. Adoption of this corridor will allow Federal assistance to be made available to permanently protect lands for the North Country NST for future generations.

Proper construction of trail, clear and sufficient signage, and ongoing monitoring of completed trail segments by volunteers, should mitigate the minor effects of vegetation clearing and trail tread construction.

### **2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health and safety.**

None of the activities associated with establishing the Preferred Alternative will have an adverse effect on public health or safety. Establishment of the trail, connecting numerous Federal, State, and local public lands, will provide many opportunities for the public to walk and hike for healthful recreation and fitness purposes.

**3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.**

The Preferred Alternative corridor was selected because it connects, in a rather direct way, the current eastern terminus of the North Country NST in New York with that nearest point along the Appalachian NST in Vermont. The corridor was designed to include historic and cultural sites, public recreation and wildlife lands, existing trails and trail networks, scenic areas, communities, and recreational support facilities along this more or less direct route. Establishment of the North Country NST in Addison County will not have any significant adverse impacts on these resources. There will be minor beneficial impacts to some of these resources.

The Preferred Alternative does traverse some areas of prime farmland and some wetlands along rivers and streams. Location of the actual trail and trailway through farmland will be designed to have minimal impact on croplands. In many cases, existing farm lanes not open to motorized use by the general public will be utilized as the trail route through these farmlands. Wetlands will be avoided to the maximum extent possible. When they must be traversed, boardwalks and puncheon will be constructed to ensure minimal impact to these areas by trail users.

Ecologically critical areas along the corridor include Snake Mountain Wildlife Management Area and the Breadloaf and Battell Wilderness Areas in Green Mountain National Forest. If the extension of the North Country NST into Vermont is authorized by Congress, trail partners will work closely with the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department to determine where the trail would best be routed in the vicinity of Snake Mountain, where heavy use of its existing trail system is already creating adverse impacts. It may be that the North Country Trail will have to skirt around Snake Mountain. The route in the national forest wilderness areas will likely use mostly existing trails. Choices among various routing options can help balance use with current or anticipated user impacts.

Vermont is rich in cultural resources and the Preferred Alternative Corridor of Opportunity includes many such sites. Within the corridor are 20 sites listed on the National Register of Historic Places, two of which are also designated National Historic Landmarks. Sites include Chimney Point Tavern, covered bridges, churches, the Middlebury Village Historic District, Robert Frost Farm, Waybury Inn, and University of Vermont Morgan Horse Farm. How many of these will be immediately along the eventual trail cannot be known at this time, since the exact route must be worked out over time by local trail partners and public and private landowners within the corridor. These cultural resources will be discussed in more detail under Criterion 8, below.

The benefit of winding the trail through these areas is to provide a delightful hiking experience, educate the public about their significance, and through acquisition protect some of their scenic and natural values. Well-placed scenic overlooks could potentially provide dramatic views of the Lake Champlain Valley, the Green Mountains in Vermont, and the Adirondack Mountains in New York, as well as the scenic rural and community landscapes in and along the corridor.

Construction of trail through these areas may cause a slight amount of soil erosion. However, with proper layout of the trail on the landscape, erosion control techniques, planking or bridges, and trail monitoring, all potential impacts from constructing and using the trail can be mitigated to a non-significant level. Wetlands will be avoided where possible and where wetlands must be traversed, they will be crossed utilizing elevated structures to minimize impacts. There are no National Wild and Scenic Rivers that would be affected.

#### **4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.**

There are no highly controversial effects on the quality of the human environment identified during either preparation of the EA or the public review period. All potential public and private stakeholders involved in or contacted during the study support the proposal. There are three main areas of concern expressed:

- That the Federal Government would utilize eminent domain to condemn private lands. This concern was raised at the May 21, 2012, public meeting in Weybridge and in written comments. At the meeting, NPS staff emphasized that the National Trails System Act prohibits the use of condemnation by Federal Agencies to acquire lands for the North Country Trail. Additional material was added to the final study report to emphasize this point.
- That the Federal Government would approve the extension and then not commit the resources to assist the interested local partners in building and maintaining the trail. This is a valid concern in austere times and it was explained at the public meeting and in the report that the NPS is committed to this goal, but dependent on the congressional appropriations process to obtain resources to support its own and partner activities.
- The Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department is not committed to allowing the trail to traverse Dead Creek and Snake Mountain Wildlife Management Areas. Not only would these significant public lands be anchors for the trail within the corridor, they would also provide outstanding scenery for hikers, including stunning vistas from the top of Snake Mountain. The trail will not be able to cross these lands without the agency's agreement and permission. Working together with public and private partners is the way that the trail is established and the potential of these properties to have the trail will have to be decided over time.

One person anonymously submitted two long sets of comments via the NPS Planning website stating in very strong terms how the trail would be an environmental and socially detrimental to Vermont in general and Addison County in particular. There does not appear to be any



support for this extreme view among other parties involved in the study and through the public review.

**5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.**

There are no highly uncertain effects to building and maintaining a footpath through environments such as those within the Preferred Alternative corridor. The North Country NST is primarily a 24- to 32 inch-wide brushed or constructed footpath. State-of-the-art, sustainable trail construction and maintenance techniques are used by all trail partners; there is extensive experience building such trails and the possible effects are well known, avoided to the extent possible, and mitigated as necessary. This action will not involve any unique or unknown risks.

**6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration:**

Approval and adoption of the Preferred Alternative corridor, and eventual establishment of the trail within the corridor, is a finite action. It will connect Chimney Point on Lake Champlain with Maine Junction on the Long Trail-Appalachian Trail. No other extensions or additions to the trail would be needed or suggested by taking this action.

**7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulatively significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by breaking it down into small component parts.**

The cumulative affects analysis considered development of the North Country Trail in Addison County in relation to the maintenance and improvement of the approximately 35 miles of the Long Trail in the County. The cumulative impacts were found to be minor or negligible for the various resources considered.

**8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.**

Vermont is rich in cultural resources and the Preferred Alternative Corridor of Opportunity includes many such sites. Within the corridor are 20 sites listed on the National Register of Historic Places, two of which are also designated National Historic Landmarks. Sites include Chimney Point Tavern, covered bridges, churches, the Middlebury Village Historic District, Waybury Inn, University of Vermont Morgan Horse Farm, Robert Frost Farm, and Emma Willard House on the campus of Middlebury College. (The latter two are the National Historic Landmarks.) How many of these will be immediately along the eventual trail cannot be known at this time, since the exact route must be worked out over time by local trail partners and public and private landowners within the corridor. However, there is no reason or activity

inherent to the establishment of the North Country Trail that would bring about an adverse impact on these cultural resources.

Often the trail helps to bring more attention to the protection and preservation needs of cultural resources. Nevertheless, if any other historic properties are discovered during trail design and construction, such as previously unknown archeological resources, the trail will be relocated or other mitigating measures will be taken in consultation with the SHPO, as required under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

The NPS carried out consultations with the Vermont State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) on a finding that the selection of the trail corridor would have “No Adverse Affect” on historical resources, and that site specific cultural resources surveys and consultations will be done once on-the-ground trail alignments are determined. The SHPO concurred in a letter dated September 10, 2013.

**9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), New England Field Office, has reviewed the Feasibility Study, Corridor Plan, and Environmental Assessment and states in a letter of January 9, 2013 that the proposed alternatives “would not likely adversely affect the endangered Indiana bat (*Myotis soladis*). Although the Indiana bat is known to occur in the vicinity of the project, we anticipate that any effects will be insignificant, as long as none of the tree canopy is removed, as indicated in your letter. Therefore, we concur that neither proposed alternative is likely to adversely affect the Indiana bat. Preparation of a Biological Assessment or further consultation with us under section 7 of the Endangered Species Act is not required.”

**10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.**

The Preferred Alternative violates no Federal, State, or local law.

**PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

There has been considerable emphasis on public involvement during this trail planning effort. As a part of this planning process, representatives of MALT, NPS, and North Country Trail Association (NCTA) made numerous contacts with key stakeholders and the public, and in 2012 were given the opportunity to provide comments which have been incorporated into the final.

Letters of Support from Key Stakeholders

Because the 1975 final feasibility study for the North Country Trail eliminated the portion of the trail route in Vermont in response to requests to do so from key trail groups and state officials in Vermont, it was imperative that the NPS first obtain support for this study and planning

process from key stakeholders. Letters of support were solicited and received from the Green Mountain Club (GMC), Green Mountain National Forest (GMNF), MALT, and NCTA in the spring of 2008.

#### Core Planning Team

In the fall of 2009, the study and planning process began with a meeting of representatives from the NPS, MALT, NCTA, GMC, GMNF, Addison County Regional Planning Commission, Middlebury College, Moosalamoo Association, and the towns of Middlebury, Ripton, and Weybridge. This group was formed to oversee the planning – these team members were selected for their past interest in the North Country NST, their expertise in local trail networks and trail maintenance, their knowledge of relevant laws and policies, and, most importantly, their familiarity with potentially affected landowners. The task of the core planning team was to provide input to MALT and the NPS on conceptual ideas for corridors and possible route options for the North Country NST, and shepherd these ideas through the public review process.

#### Initial Public Meetings to Announce the Study and Solicit Input

In February 2010, three public meetings were held to announce the study and present conceptual corridors. Local residents offered opinions about “can’t-miss” natural features, routes through difficult areas, potentially friendly and cooperative property owners, and important services such as lodging and food. Several suggestions resulted in substantial changes to the proposed corridors identified on the concept maps that were displayed at the meetings. In particular, routes through remote areas of Middlebury and Ripton that were impossibly wet or otherwise unsuitable were eliminated from further consideration. This input saved a tremendous amount of time and expense in field-checking and route-finding.

#### Meetings with Town Planning Commission Representatives

Following the public meetings, the executive director of MALT and other representatives of the core planning team met with representatives of the planning commissions of the towns of Addison, Weybridge, Middlebury, and Ripton to explain the North Country NST and the purpose of the study. Questions about the nature, purpose, and status of the trail were answered and they were encouraged to offer opinions about potential routes and concerns specific to their town. The commissions were also encouraged to adopt language in their Town Plan in support of the North Country NST as the plans are revised.

#### Contacts with Key Landowners and Stakeholders

As field investigations of potential trail routes within the corridors were conducted, key landowners in the corridors were contacted to determine their willingness to host sections of the trail on their lands. The NPS North Country Trail Manager, Jeff McCusker, and NCTA Executive Director Bruce Matthews met with key stakeholders during a visit to Vermont in October 2011. Meetings were held with key leaders of the GMC, Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation, Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department, Vermont Trail Collaborative, MALT, and GMNF. Each supports the extension of the North Country Trail to the

Appalachian Trail in Vermont and made specific recommendations based on their perspectives, policies, and experience with trails and working with landowners.

#### Public Review of Draft Report

On May 2, 2012, an electronic copy of the draft report was posted on the NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website for a 45-day public review and comment period ending June 15, 2012. Individual letters announcing the availability of the draft study report, corridor plan, and environmental assessment, the PEPC website address, and the date, time, and location of the public meeting were sent to 100 public officials, elected representatives, organizations, and individuals.

A public meeting to review the draft report was scheduled at the Weybridge School on May 21, 2012. A press release announcing the public review, the public meeting, and the availability of electronic and printed copies of the report was distributed to news media in the Addison County vicinity.

The meeting was conducted by staff from MALT, NPS, and NCTA. Besides the staff of these planning partners, 24 people attended the presentation and the lengthy question and discussion session. There was broad overall support for the extension of the North Country Trail into Vermont to connect with the Appalachian Trail, and for the preferred alternative as the way for accomplishing that connection. Questions and answers addressed the way the trail is established and managed by the NPS and its partners, what assistance the NPS provides to trail partners, the working relationships among the partners, and the way the partners work with landowners to obtain access to lands for new trail segments. Assurances that the NPS has not and will not utilize eminent domain to secure lands was solicited and given. NPS staff explained the legislative restrictions which prevent the use of condemnation. Some concerns were expressed about the level of detail in the environmental analysis and NPS staff explained that the level of detail is appropriate for a corridor-level analysis. Additional environmental compliance may be needed when the location of an actual segment to be constructed is determined.

Following the public meeting, 10 letters from agency officials, organization representatives, and individuals supporting the extension and the preferred alternative were received. One letter and two anonymous commenters on the NPS PEPC site expressed their opposition to extension of the trail into Vermont. All of the key stakeholders—NPS, Green Mountain National Forest, Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, GMC, NCTA, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, MALT, and Moosalamoo Association---plus several individuals who sent in comments favor Alternative C, the Preferred Alternative.

On October 25, 2013 the document was posted on the NPS Planning website for a final 30 day review. Five comments were received: one updating the status of a highway bridge described in the document, two comments supporting the preferred alternative, one comment asking how the proposed action would affect the Forest Service and NPS backlog of deferred maintenance, and several comments from the Green Mountain National Forest asking us to clarify our route

descriptions and noting that the maps in the document did not reflect their previous comments. Based on these comments, we edited the bridge description, clarified the Alternative B corridor narrative, and put the correct maps in the document.

## COORDINATION WITH OTHER PLANS

Local and state recreation plans were reviewed to assure that this document does not conflict with other government land use or recreation plans for the area. The development of the North Country Trails supports many of the objectives of these other plans.

## CONCLUSION

The preferred alternative shown in the *Feasibility Study, Corridor Plan and Environmental Assessment for Addison County, Vermont* dated December 6, 2013 does not constitute an action that normally requires preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS). The selected alternative will not have a significant effect on the human environment. Negative environment impacts that could occur are negligible to minor in intensity. There are no significant impacts on public health, public safety, threatened or endangered species, or other unique characteristics of the region. There are no unmitigated adverse impacts on sites or districts listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. No uncertain or controversial impacts, unique or unknown risks, significant cumulative effects, or elements of precedence were identified. Implementation of the action will not violate any Federal, State, or local environmental protection law.

Based on the foregoing, it has been determined that an EIS is not required for this project and thus will not be prepared.

Recommended:  6 DEC 2013  
Superintendent, North Country National Scenic Trail Date

Approved:  12.16.13  
NPS Midwest Regional Director Date