

Chapter 4

STANDARDS FOR TRAIL CONSTRUCTION

The objective of trail standards is to ensure a consistent look without compromising local initiative, a high standard of quality without over-building, a basic level of safety without removing all risk, accessible portions without compromising the character of the trail, and environmental and resource protection. Standards were developed to meet these objectives without compromising the character of the trail or imposing undue hardship upon those who maintain the trail. Whenever it is possible to retain the foot-trail-through-the-woods character, but still allow a very determined, mobility-impaired individual to get through simply by increasing trail width by an inch or two, it should be done. There are case-by-case exceptions, but every effort should be made to conform to the trail standards when building or rebuilding trail.

The North Country NST passes through a variety of recreation settings (ROS). Therefore, the trail should not and will not look exactly the same from end to end. It is not appropriate to build the trail to urban standards in a semi-primitive setting, nor vice versa. For this reason all standards are based on the ROS setting. Consistency is achieved through signing, blaze color, and the fact that a segment occurring in a particular ROS setting (roaded natural, semi-primitive, etc.) will look similar to a segment in another area that is in the same ROS setting.

Figure 1 on page 33 summarizes the desired trail design standards. If a trail segment is significantly below these standards, it should be gradually improved. However, if no attempt is made to rectify the situation, it may be decertified or closed. Whenever a portion is being reconstructed or receiving heavy maintenance, attempts should be made to bring it up to standard. Although these guidelines do not prevent a particular trail segment from exceeding desired standards, it should not be assumed that doing so is always desirable. Routinely exceeding the standards will adversely impact the character of the trail and hiker experience.

Exceeding trail standards in selected locations may be appropriate, such as the trail segment in the Little Miami Scenic Trail (OH)—a converted rail-trail that accommodates multiple use and is designed as fully-accessible. (See Figure 1.)

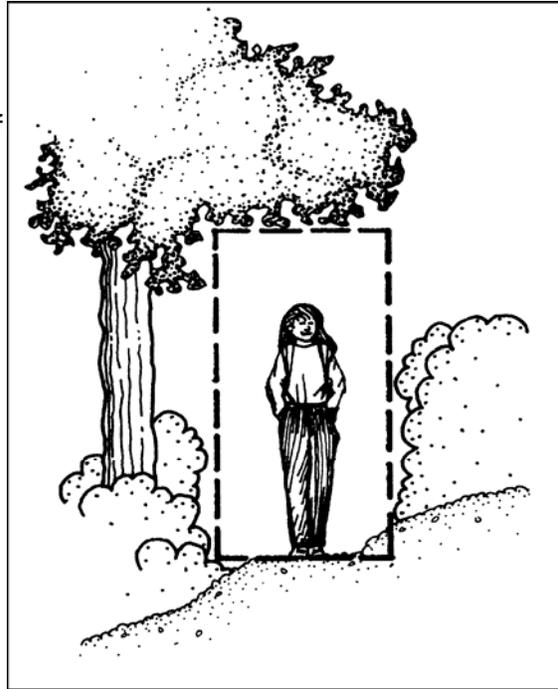
TREAD WIDTH

Tread width refers to the actual walking surface of the trail—whether native soil, grass, or surfaced. Initial tread should be constructed or smoothed to this standard. In less used areas the bare tread may gradually transform into a tread that needs to be mowed. This is acceptable as long as the basic underlying, smooth structure is still in place.

CLEARING WIDTH

Clearing width is the area kept free of brush, limbs, briars, tall grass, weeds, and other obstructions which would slap against the hiker or their pack, or soak them following a

rain or heavy dew. In heavily wooded areas, the clearing width is normally maintained simply by pruning limbs. Here, the area between the edge of the tread and the edge of the clearing is normally leaf litter or short herbaceous plants. While four feet is the average standard width, some variation is allowed and encouraged—it is visually appealing and often more sensitive to adjoining natural resources. In wooded areas there are occasions when it is desirable to narrow the clearing width in order to route the trail between two large, visually interesting trees. Generally, the trail winds between existing medium to large size trees, and is created by cutting only smaller trees and saplings. Narrowing the clearing width below the desired standard is done only for reasons of aesthetics—not merely to reduce trail construction/maintenance efforts.



When the trail is crossing fields or prairies, it is suggested that as a minimum, the entire desired clearing width should be mowed. It may be desirable to widen the mowing to create a variety of gentle clearing undulations. Some of these may highlight a particularly bright clump of wild flowers or a well-developed flowering shrub such as a hawthorn or dogwood.

In selected wooded areas (especially near roads) a common practice is to reduce the clearing width for a short distance (25 to 100 feet) to discourage unauthorized use by ATVs, horses, etc. (When this is done accessibility may be compromised).

Figure 1 (on page 33) shows the clearing width on each side of the tread. On a hiking segment in a rural area, the total clearing width would be the 24-inch tread plus 12 inches on each side for a total of 48 inches (the commonly accepted 4-foot clearing window).

CLEARING HEIGHT

The trail should be cleared to a height of 8 feet (10 feet within Wisconsin DNR properties). At this height, branches that could snag on a tall hiker's extended pack or attachments, such as a fishing rod, are removed. Branches that could restrict the trail when weighted with rain or snow are also removed. If the trail is in an area of deep snow and it receives winter use, clearing may have to be higher. Whatever the reason for a higher clearing height, an overhead canopy of branches should remain to slow the growth of grasses and shrubs that thrive in sunlight.

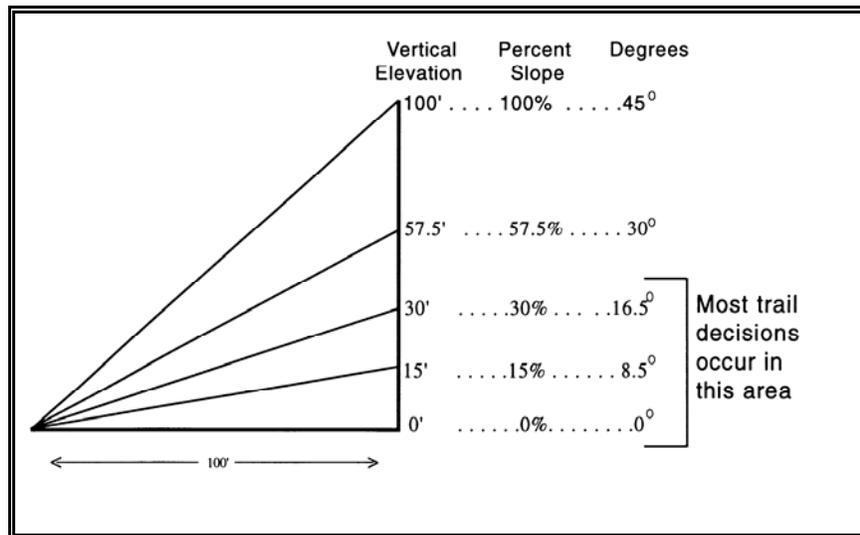
SLOPE (SUSTAINED)

The slope (grade) of the trail may be the key factor contributing to tread stability. Trail grades must be moderate to promote a stable, maintainable tread and a more pleasant hike. The trail should be designed to traverse a hilly area with gentle changes in grade. Grade and slope are interchangeable terms.

To avoid erosion, the slope should normally be less than 10%—even in steep terrain. Grades less than 7% in all soils are ideal, but in sandy soils are almost a necessity to prevent erosion. In flatter areas, trail should be located so that there is some grade to provide for proper drainage. A grade should undulate gently to provide natural drainage and to eliminate monotonous level stretches and long, steep grades that are tiring to trail users.

Slope can be calculated in degrees, but is normally calculated in percent by dividing the vertical distance by the horizontal distance and multiplying by 100 (10

feet of rise/100 feet of horizontal distance X 100 = 10%). An easier, more accurate way to determine slope is through the use of a tool, about the size of a compass, called a clinometer. By sighting through the clinometer, the percent of slope can be read.



SLOPE (MAXIMUM)

While reasonable efforts should be made to construct the trail using the sustained slope guidelines, there are occasions where doing so is impossible. Because of terrain obstructions, such as cliffs, it may be necessary to use a short, steep segment to regain access to more moderate slopes. In these instances, the maximum slope guidelines should be used and additional erosion control measures incorporated. Sections of trail exceeding the sustained grade standards should normally be less than 100 feet. In some areas, it may be necessary to go up a very steep slope for a short distance. In these areas, steps may be necessary but should be considered as a last resort due to the barrier they impose on many people.

CROSS SLOPE

Cross slope is a consideration when constructing trail across the face of a hill (sidehill trail). Some degree of cross slope, or out slope, is desirable so that water moving down the face of the hill continues across the trail. A cupped trail or a trail that slopes back into the hill collects water and is undesirable. However, the cross slope should not exceed the percentages shown in Figure 1. Cross slopes greater than those shown make walking on the trail uncomfortable and serve as an impediment to mobility-impaired individuals. A 5% cross slope on a 24-inch tread amounts to a drop of 1.2 inches.

OTHER STANDARDS FOR ACCESSIBLE TRAIL

These standards apply only when a trail segment is designed to be fully accessible. Figure 1 specifies the maximum distance between passing and rest areas. Each passing space should be 60" × 60". At intervals specified, rest areas are built adjacent to passing areas and may include a bench or other facilities.

TRAIL SURFACE

In most cases, the native material found during trail construction will be satisfactory for surfacing the trail. However, if the material consists of large amounts of topsoil or organic matter, it should be set aside for later use as a cover and planting surface for exposed sub-soil.

Figure 1 shows a range of surfaces that are acceptable in the various ROS settings. While several options are shown for rural/roaded natural areas, the strong preference is for native surfacing. The Accessible Surface Standards apply only when a trail segment is designed to be fully accessible. Wood chips should not be used to correct wetness problems. They only add more organic material to the site and compound the problem when they rot. Also, wood chips can not be used on steeper slopes as they do not stay in place. They are acceptable on relatively level sections of trail to smooth an otherwise rough tread surface and to help retard weed infestation and wear of the natural surface.

**FIGURE 1. NORTH COUNTRY NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL
TRAIL CONSTRUCTION DESIGN STANDARDS**

Standards (desired)	ROS Class			
	Urban	Rural and Roaded Natural	Semiprimitive	Primitive
<u>Tread Width</u> Hiking Segments Accessible Segments	48" 60"	24" 36"	18" 28"	*
<u>Clearing Width</u> (each side of tread)	24"	12" (WIDNR-24")	12"	*
<u>Clearing Height</u> (min.)	10'	8' (WIDNR-10')	8'	*
<u>Slope(max.sustained)</u> Hiking Segments Accessible Segments	10% 5%	10% 8%	15% 12%	*
<u>Slope (max.)</u> Hiking Segments Accessible Segments	15% for 100' 8% for 30'	20% for 100' 10% for 50'	30% for 100' 10% for 50'	*
<u>Cross Slope (max)</u>	3%	5%	8%	*
<u>Other Accessible Segment Standards</u> Passing Spot Int.-max Rest Area Interval-max	N/A 1200'	600' 1200'	1200' 1/2 mile	N/A N/A
<u>Surfaces</u>	Asphalt. Concrete. Stabilized- aggregate. Screening(1). Wood Chip. Sod.	Native. Wood Chip(2). Stabilized-aggregate. Screening(1).	Native	Native
<u>Accessible Surfaces</u>	Asphalt. Concrete. Stabilized- aggregate.	Asphalt. Stabilized-aggregate.	Native. Stabilized- aggregate.	Native

*In Primitive ROS (wilderness), human impacts and changes to the scenery are meant to be less obtrusive—when entering a wilderness area, one accepts greater personal risk. Trails in primitive areas lay "light-on-the-land." Because of this, no hard standards have been established. Generally, the tread is more faint, the grade varies depending on the terrain, etc. However, it is still important to consider trail design standards which protect the environment. Because trails in wilderness areas may receive less frequent maintenance, designing a trail that requires little maintenance is of utmost importance.

- (1) Limestone screenings include the fines.
- (2) Not in wet areas—adds to the problem.