

Catamount Community Forest Planning Committee

Minutes of March 19, 2018

Draft

Members Present: Terry Marron, Michael Clauss, Jeff Dickinson, Patrice Maloney, Rita Dessau, Ben Norris, Anthony Jordick, Kort Longenbach, Ben King, Steve Page.

Members Absent: Barb Evans

Others Present: Melinda Scott (staff), Kim Coleman (facilitator), Kate Wanner (Trust for Public Land), Andrea Shortsleeve (Department of Fish and Wildlife).

Goal: Discuss and develop recommendations for protection of wildlife habitat at Catamount.
Discuss and develop recommendations for horseback riding at Catamount.

1. Housekeeping items:

- Approve 2-26-2018 minutes: The minutes were approved with one minor change. Terry Marron noted that on page 2 under #2, Questions for Andrea, the statement reading “Terry Marron stated that she and other landowners have requested VELCO not use herbicides” should be changed to “Terry Marron stated that she and other landowners have requested Vermont Electric Coop not use herbicides.”
- Kim reminded the group that she had sent out an email with a link to the Hinesburg Town Forest Committee website, for this Committee’s consideration of a recommendation to the Selectboard to appoint a permanent Town Forest Committee. Kim asked the members to look at the Hinesburg Town Forest Committee site prior to the next meeting.
- Melinda stated she has received some preliminary feedback on the draft plan from the VLT. Thus far there are no major changes requested. Some points made include:
 - The conservation easement should not be paraphrased, as it can create confusion
 - Clarify where the COFC operations will run out of, as well as any plans for maintenance of existing structures and potential development of new structures
 - Note that vernal pools, though unprotected by state or federal regulations, are protected by the conservation easement, which limits forest management activities
 - Clarify which activities are free and which are not
 - Clarify whether dogs are allowed or not
 - Clarify whether horseback riding is allowed or not
 - Clarify whether snowshoeing is allowed on all trails or only on certain trails
 - Clarify whether hunting and/or trapping is allowed or not, and if not, provide adequate justification for the policy. Easement allows it to be prohibited for these reasons only “to assure compliance with the requirements of this Grant, to protect natural habitats, or to protect the public health or safety”

- Noted that if a formal camping area is developed it would require approval from VLT
 - Clarify that all public events will be non-commercial
 - State where people will pay fees
 - Noted that the Forest Management Plan needs approval by VLT
 - Patrice asked whether the federal USFS grant allows the town to prohibit hunting, did anyone check on this? Melinda stated she did look at the grant agreement and it does allow the town to prohibit hunting.
 - The group discussed having a separate discussion on whether or not to allow trapping, as it had already voted to disallow hunting. Although Melinda stated logistically it is easier to disallow both, it was noted that trapping presents different safety issues than hunting, so the justification may have to be worded differently if trapping as well as hunting is not allowed. Kim suggested adding trapping to the list of topics to be visited at a later date.
 - Melinda reminded the group that the objective was to develop recommendations for the management plan that would be accepted by the Selectboard. If the Selectboard thinks that the plan does not adequately reflect consideration of the broader community and multiple stakeholders, they could reject it and send it back to the Committee for further reworking.
2. Discuss and vote on wildlife habitat recommendations:
- Grassland Birds
 - Kim reviewed the recommendations for mowing schedule and trail closures in the eastern and southern meadows.
 - Kort stated that closing off the through trails could be problematic as the area where perimeter trails could go is wet and not ideal for biking
 - There were some questions and clarifications made to the reasons for trail closures. Andrea said that bobolinks need 5-10 acres of undisturbed habitat to successfully breed.
 - Ben Norris made some suggestions on how the trails, specifically the racing routes, in the eastern field might be rerouted. He also suggested a compromise for the southern field, where one bisecting trail could be closed during the nesting season but others could remain open.
 - Kim suggested monitoring the southern field to identify if bobolinks are present.
 - Kate asked whether not allowing dogs would be enough to mitigate the habitat disturbance
 - Patrice noted that the trails could be open to use before and after the nesting season (May 15-August 15)
 - Kim clarified that bobolinks have been observed in both Patrice's and the Catamount fields but have only bred successfully in Patrice's fields.
 - Terry expressed concerns that the group was only considering the needs of the Outdoor Center at the exclusion of other users and considerations.
 - Michael Clauss stated that as a biker he is concerned about sacrificing too much to other user groups, and if there is too much negative impact to the trails, he would stop going to Catamount.

- Patrice noted that the COFC has struggled with sustaining itself, and from the outset town residents have been concerned with taking on that burden.
- The Committee revised the proposed policy recommendations as follows:

Protection of Wildlife Habitat - Bobolink/Grassland Birds

- Mowing in Eastern and Southern field will be avoided from May 15 to August 15 to encourage bobolink and other grassland bird nesting habitat.
- Through trails in Eastern fields will be closed to all uses and unmowed May 15 to August 15.
- In the southern field, the north/south bisecting trail will be closed to all uses and unmowed May 15 to August 15, as shown in attached map.
- Consider building perimeter trails to avoid the grassland habitat and also support recreational activities.
- We support continued monitoring of the fields to assess usage by bobolinks and other grassland birds to inform future management.
- In the event that there is no longer an active hay harvesting program at Catamount, all fields should be mowed or brush-hogged once a year in the autumn.

- The Committee voted on the policies as a whole, but they failed to carry (6 fully supportive, 1 supportive, 1 neutral, and 1 strongly opposed). 2 members were absent, Mike Clauss having left just before the vote.
- The following policies were considered and voted on. All recommendations were carried unanimously.

Protection of Wildlife Habitat - Forest Birds

- Where not hazardous to recreational trail use, retain snags, dead or dying trees, and fallen timber.
- Encourage the development of understory trees and shrubs.
- Control invasive species.
- Replace Christmas tree plantation with native forest over time.
- Limit active timber management activities during the breeding season (mid-April through July). Logging should be avoided during this time.
- Minimize wide trail openings into the forest.
- Maintain a soft edge between fields and forest.

Protection of Wildlife Habitat - Shrubland Birds

- Support the management guidelines developed and implemented by VELCO for early successional/shrubland habitat in the 15-acres of powerline through Catamount, as this is an important resource for breeding birds of conservation concern in Vermont.
- In conjunction with Audubon Vermont's VELCO survey program, Green Mountain Audubon Society and Audubon Vermont should systematically survey the powerline habitat at Catamount for species of conservation concern.

Protection of Water Resources - Vernal Pools

- Vernal pools will be protected with a 100-foot buffer (Ecological Protection Zone, or EPZ Primary Zone) to create a 'No Disturbance' zone. Within this zone, there will be no trail construction or machinery allowed.
- Control of exotic species and activities that enhance amphibian habitat may be permitted within the EPZ Primary Zone only with written approval from Vermont Land Trust.
- Within 600 feet of vernal pools (the EPZ Secondary Zone), ground disturbance will be avoided as much as possible during times of amphibian movement. Trail maintenance or new construction that would alter the amount of water held in the pool or change the runoff into the pool will be avoided.
 - Bridges would be acceptable to avoid any impacts to amphibians
- Timber harvest is permitted in the EPZ Secondary Zone, but amphibian habitat needs such as coarse woody debris and shade must be considered. The forest management plan must state specific measures to protect and enhance amphibian habitat.

Protection of Water Resources - Wetlands

- All management activities, including without limitation forest management and ecological management, shall focus on the goals of a) maintaining or restoring soil integrity, natural hydrology, and water quality, and b) maintaining the natural structure and species composition of the natural communities present or communities that may develop naturally over time, as informed by the best current ecological science.
- Agricultural activities (including without limitation the grazing or pasturing of animals) are not allowed within the WPZ.
- The development of new trails or roads within the WBZ, other than perpendicular crossings, is not permitted.
- Existing trails within the WBZ should be rerouted where feasible.

Protection of Water Resources - Streams

- Any management or use of the RBZ shall be conducted in a manner designed to protect soil integrity and minimize erosion, shall incorporate up-to-date ecological knowledge and management practices, and shall be consistent with the principal goal detailed above.
- Agricultural activities (including without limitation the grazing or pasturing of animals) are not allowed within the RBZ.
- Forest management activities within the RBZ should be avoided.
- The development of new trails or roads within the RBZ, other than perpendicular crossings, is not permitted.
- Existing trails within the RBZ should be rerouted where feasible.
- Size crossing structures according to the VT DEC River Management Program guidelines and Guidelines for the Design of Stream/Road Crossings for the Passage of Aquatic Organisms in Vermont (VT DFW) and/or consult with the District Stream Alteration Engineer and District Fisheries Biologist for sizing, placement, and permitting requirements.

- Melinda noted that all the policies regarding water resources were stated verbatim from the conservation easement, thus are required to be adhered to.
- Steve Page asked whether a map would accompany these proposed policies, Melinda stated there is a map as part of the conservation easement that shows all the water

- protection zones. Steve noted that the map does not show the pond on the south side of Governor Chittenden Rd.
3. Discussion of horseback riding:
 - The group discussed the potential integration of horseback riding at Catamount. Some concerns raised included potential conflict with mountain biking, safety concerns especially with children mountain biking and encountering horses on the trail.
 - Kort suggested having a horse “Special Event” as a way to introduce people to the concept, a “soft” transition.
 - Kim suggested the development of dedicated horse only trails, but Patrice stated she doesn’t think it’s necessary to separate them from other uses.
 - Kate asked, how will the trails be maintained, and by whom? Patrice did not think much maintenance would be required. Kort stated he would rather not have a separate entity maintaining trails but that the COFC should do this.
 - Ben stated he is concerned about conflicts with other users and feels a more concrete proposal is needed.
 - Patrice stated the Committee needs to consider serving the needs of the entire community, not just the Outdoor Center.
 - Kort stated he can conceive of a fee-based system for horseback riding, although he is not sure how it would work.
 - Kate stated that the community recognizes the economic and recreational/cultural value of Catamount as it has existed and wants the COFC to succeed so those values will continue to benefit the community. She has concerns about a lot of other demands being placed on the Outdoor Center that are incompatible with their current programs, and that this could threaten their continued existence.
 - Kim asked whether there are models of organized horse events or integrated horseback riding.
 - Steve stated he would like more information about how existing trails at Catamount relate to trails on adjacent properties (Talcott Forest, Pine Ridge, Riverhill). Parking is also a concern.
 - Patrice stated that she feels horseback riding will not have a big impact, and there are opportunities for people to learn.
 - Patrice stated her concerns that the town is buying the property and will have the responsibility to maintain it, yet the Outdoor Center is not required to give consideration to other uses or other user groups in the community. The Committee needs to consider mountain biking at Catamount on an equal footing as other uses because Catamount will be a public asset.
 - Kim noted that the meeting has run over time, and that the Committee is slated to discuss timber management and dogs at the next meeting scheduled for March 26.
 4. Public Comment: There was no public comment.
 5. The meeting was adjourned at 8:06 pm.