Ashland watershed trail network to be expanded and upgraded

Mountain bikers barreling down legit trails built for hikers and horseback riders were already causing headaches for Ashland watershed managers in 2011, but then things began to get egregious on a little stretch of hiking heaven called Marty's Trail.

Someone drove a backhoe around a trail gate and dug in a series of bumps and jumps for "downhiller" cyclists, much to the chagrin of darn near everyone else.

"That was a bold move," says Jeffrey McFarland, central division manager for the Ashland Parks and Recreation Commission. "That was pushing the envelope too far and got some wheels turning."

Those wheels have produced enough momentum to completely expand, upgrade and legitimize the network of trails that draw 50,000 visitors annually to the watershed, giving the often at-odds user groups access to trails of their own.

Hikers, traditional mountain bikers, downhillers and others have joined forces with the U.S. Forest Service and the city of Ashland to create the newly approved Ashland Trails Project designed to provide maximum recreation by dedicating trails to specific user groups.

The project will add 25 miles to the existing 16 miles of dedicated trails within the watershed on both Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest land and city of Ashland property.

They will include 17.5 miles of previously unapproved trails, which include a mix of "historic" old trails not part of the network as well as eight unapproved "rogue" trails previously built illegally in the watershed and used largely by downhillers blazing down Mount Ashland toward town.

The new plan also calls for decommissioning almost 10 miles of unapproved rogue trails that are creating unacceptable impacts to soil, water, plants and wildlife there, according to an extensive review of the area.

Each of the plan's trails will be marked for specific users based on the trail's features, so hikers and traditional cross-country riders will gain access to up-and-down trails that suit their passions while downhillers will get trail features that suit their passions.

The plan's authors tout the effort as a systematic approach to the watershed’s entire trail system, maximizing the growing interest and use of these trails while reducing the urge for some watershed users to go rogue.

"It's a pro-active approach, as opposed to a reactive approach," says Torsten Heycke of the Ashland Woodlands and Trails Association, one of the partners that helped craft the plan. "We're not responding to rogue trail users. We're trying to give them something before they feel compelled to build something in the wrong place."

"I think this trails plan will make it easier to play nicely together," Heycke says.

The idea is that, over time, the various users will migrate to the trails designated for them because they are better suited for their needs instead of relying on heavy-handed enforcement, says Brian Long, the Forest Service's project leader.

"Hikers like to go places where they won't run into bikes," Long says.

Trail rider Jacob Pew of Ashland thinks he and his fellow downhillers will welcome and honor the trail designations, in part because it reduces the worry of crashing into hikers.

"It will be good, at least for the first few years," says Pew, 24. "It just depends how bad the trails get."

If the trails are not well maintained and develop unfavorable ruts, then downhillers "will just go find what still rides," regardless of their designation, he says.

Though more than four years in the making, the actual plan became official last month with the approval of an environmental assessment that lays out the various trails' intended uses and the justifications for them.

For instance, the historic 2.2-mile Wagner Glade Trail, a one-time trail to a fire lookout but not part of the system, is now designated for hikers and trail-runners, as is the 3.2-mile Split Rock Trail.

Likewise, the illegally built upper and lower Missing Link trails are now officially recognized bicycle trails.
The 7.4 miles of new trails outlined in the plan all have names and specific designations, such as the 1.2-mile Red Queen Trail that will be for hikers and equestrians. The new Lizard Trail will be a half-mile of downhillers' delight that keeps them off a nearby hiking trail, and the 1.3-mile Wonder Trail will be open to all.

New-trail construction will begin as early as this spring and will be done by Forest Service and Northwest Youth Conservation Corps crews as well as user groups and other volunteers, forest spokeswoman Chamise Kramer says.

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