

The Future of County Trails

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Marin County Open Space District (MCOSD) has launched its science-based Road and Trails Management Plan, to guide the maintenance and use of roads and trails in six regions of the 34 MCOSD Preserves. The first step has been to identify trails that will be maintained by MCOSD and shown on official road and trail maps. These are called system trails. MCOSD also identifies the appropriate uses for each trail, region by region.

The Corte Madera Creek Watershed encompasses part of six preserves and all of three preserves (bold):

- Baltimore Canyon, Blithedale Summit, Camino Alto, and **King Mountain** (Region 1)
- **Cascade Canyon, Loma Alta**, and White Hill (Region 2)
- Terra Linda - Sleepy Hollow Divide (Region 5)
- Ring Mountain (Region 6)

MCOSD has identified the system trails in Region 1 and Region 2. For Cascade Canyon OSP in Region 2, Friends submitted requests that Creekside Fire Road and Connector Fire Road, Cut Trail, Happersberger Trail, and High Water Trail be excluded from the system. These trails are redundant and heavily eroded in parts. In addition, Creekside Fire Road and Cut Trail pass through legacy zones, defined as areas with vegetation types or species with the highest biological value. These requested changes were accepted by MCOSD. We will be submitting proposals to MCOSD for specific changes to the system to reduce the impacts of use. The biggest issue in Cascade Canyon is to keep people out of creeks (there are four fords on San Anselmo Creek) during the rainy season.

Conflict among user groups on trails remains a contentious issue. The long-held tradition in Marin County of limiting use of single-track trails to hikers and equestrians continues to be challenged by bikers. They propose expansion of the trail network as a solution to the perceived problems of social conflict and access. However, new trails cause damage. Each new trail brings sediment into the creeks, damages vegetation, and displaces wildlife, in an area explicitly designated for resource preservation.

One question that comes up frequently is the comparison of impacts of bikes, hikers, and horses. Some scientific studies have focused on the physical impacts of each group, with an emphasis on potential erosion. These studies suggest that hikers and equestrians may create more damage than bikes when going downhill, but that the impact of bikes increases when ridden fast, on steeper slopes and in wetter conditions.

Studies comparing wheels, boots, and hooves ignore the bigger question of cumulative effects on the watershed as a whole. More research is needed to establish the specifics of erosion impacts and intensity of use. However, bicycle tires may not cause more erosion than boots or hooves, but their impact is increased because they travel much longer distances in the same amount of time. Simply put, a two-hour bike ride will cause more damage than a two-hour hike. Increased traffic on single-track trails, which is likely to occur if they are opened to bicycle use, will add to erosion, introduction of invasive species, and disturbance to



Protecting the creek in Cascade Canyon in Fairfax presents a challenge, as a trail zigzags across it. Photo by Gary Leo

wildlife. Increased use—whether more hikers use the trails or bikers start using the trails—will compromise the integrity of the preserve, impairing the resources it is intended to protect.

Arguments will certainly continue, but Friends' remains focused on limiting erosion, reducing habitat damage, and maintaining trails in good condition. The continued conflict between user groups within our community serves none of us. Our focus is the sustainability of our watershed. For this reason, we encourage MCOSD to limit the creation of new trails, retire failing trails, and restrict use of single-track trails to hikers. We urge all users of our preserves to stay on system trails, to refrain from riding through creeks, and to keep pets on leash in designated areas.

Maintaining our preserves in good condition will never be easy, but is feasible if all users do their part.

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