

Michigan Department of Natural Resources

# Trails Plan

2022–2032



## Explore. Connect. Sustain.





**PUBLIC SECTOR  
CONSULTANTS**

*Prepared by*

Public Sector Consultants  
publicsectorconsultants.com

*Prepared for*

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# Welcome

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources and Parks and Recreation Division are pleased to present the 2022-2032 Michigan DNR Trails Plan. This plan will guide the direction of more than 13,400 miles of Michigan's diverse trail opportunities and lays out key goals to ensure these valuable assets are sustained and remain relevant into the future.

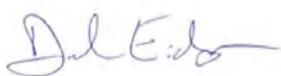
Historically, trails have been the means to connect people to places they want or need to go. Water trails and routes bordering the Great Lakes brought early explorers to the great waters of Michigan. Native American trails also became the routes for the state's first roads, moving the military, commerce, settlers and freedom-seeking enslaved people across the Lower Peninsula. Railroads later created connections and formed a network of railways across the state some of which have become today's rail-trails. Today, trails provide a backbone for many types of recreation through more than 13,400 miles of state-designated trails across Michigan. These trails connect people, communities and destinations of interest. Hunters and anglers use trails to access their secret spots. Trails provide opportunities for engaging in mental and physical fitness, connecting with all types of nature and socializing with friends and family. The DNR recognizes the positive impact these activities have on the state's residents, tourism and economy, which is why this plan was created in coordination with all DNR divisions.

Previous studies have shown 79% of Michiganders participate in some form of outdoor recreation, which drives approximately \$10 billion in consumer spending. The COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 further increased participation and introduced many first-time users to Michigan's trail, park, boating and recreation opportunities. Trail use supports small businesses which provide services and rentals for land and water trail users and supports jobs for those maintaining, building or servicing the trails across the state. Trail use is trending up and is often a top priority in surveys conducted for local park and recreation master plans.

This plan was developed with assistance from Public Sector Consultants and with full engagement of the DNR's trail advisory groups, clubs, stakeholders and DNR divisions, including a two-day summit with all the Michigan trail advisory groups to kick off the planning. There were also robust opportunities for the public to provide input into the plan to make it as relevant as possible. The Michigan Trails Advisory Council unanimously passed a resolution of support and were very appreciative of the process and the importance of the plan.

This plan examines the state-designated system comprehensively, which includes four seasons of motorized and nonmotorized trail opportunities on both land and water. The four main goals cover (1) sustainable maintenance and development; (2) funding; (3) planning and collaboration; and (4) marketing, promotion and education to lead to outcomes of quality trail experiences and resource management; public stewardship; and community and economic prosperity.

The DNR is fortunate to be able to provide a wide variety of experiences on all types of DNR-managed land and partnering with local agencies for connections and creating networks that benefit the state and its citizens. We are very pleased to have an updated strategic guide to ensure the system is sustained and evolves in a positive direction for bolstering tourism and promoting healthy outdoor recreation lifestyles.



**Daniel Eichinger**  
Director, Department of Natural Resources



**Ronald Olson**  
Chief, Parks and Recreation Division

# Executive summary

## Executive summary

Michigan is a national leader in offering four seasons of motorized and nonmotorized trail opportunities for residents and visitors to enjoy. In total, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources trails system has more than 13,400 miles of state-designated trails and pathways that connect communities, encourage health and wellness and provide outdoor recreation and transportation opportunities — all of which build Michigan’s reputation as the Trails State. The significance and complexity of managing the statewide trails system requires a comprehensive plan that helps balance the many priorities placed on public lands and waters.

The 2022 DNR Trails Plan provides an updated framework for the department’s management of state-designated trails over the next 10 years. The plan was developed through a facilitated two-year process focused on establishing shared priorities among the DNR; the public; the Michigan Trails Advisory Council, or MTAC; and the DNR’s four trail advisory groups representing specific trail user groups: off-roading, horseback riding, snowmobiling and nonmotorized activities, such as hiking, bicycling and paddling.

This process resulted in the development of the DNR’s vision for trail use and maintenance and provides a comprehensive set of goals for DNR trails staff to use in trail planning decisions. These goals are designed as overarching themes that support more detailed objectives and action steps the DNR and partners will need to take to achieve the plan’s goals. These efforts will help ensure Michigan remains a national leader in trail experiences.





## Vision for trails management in Michigan

Michigan will solidify its national recognition as the Trails State by providing diverse and sustainable trail experiences to encourage health and wellness and provide safe outdoor recreation and transportation opportunities for residents and visitors.

### DNR Trails Plan goals

To further elevate Michigan's national reputation as the Trails State, the DNR will pursue the following goals over the next 10 years.

- **Sustainable maintenance and development:** Manage Michigan's state-designated trails system to sustainably maintain and improve existing conditions while supporting the DNR's long-term natural and cultural resource management goals.
- **Funding:** Develop and refine funding structures to ensure state-designated trails provide quality recreation and transportation experiences.
- **Planning and collaboration:** Model trail planning best practices to maintain and improve strong relationships and partnerships with the public, stakeholders and other governmental agencies.
- **Marketing, promotion and education:** Promote Michigan's diverse trail opportunities to residents and visitors, accurately depicting experiences found throughout the state.

## Outcomes

Through implementation of the plan, Michigan will continue to be an exceptional public steward by developing quality trail experiences that support natural resource management and community and economic prosperity for the state.

- **Quality trail experiences and resource management:** With proper funding, coordination and planning, the state-designated trails system will be maintained and sustainably expanded, or contracted, to provide diverse motorized and nonmotorized opportunities for safe, quality trail experiences while managing Michigan's natural and cultural resources.
- **Public stewardship:** By developing and promoting the trails system, residents and visitors will become knowledgeable about trail opportunities as well as regulations, etiquette and use practices. Trails will serve as a pathway to engage with Michigan's cultural and natural resources, promote a stewardship mindset and improve understanding of how public lands are managed for multiple purposes.
- **Community and economic prosperity:** Through intentional planning, collaboration and promotions, Michigan's trails can be leveraged for the greatest benefit to support community and economic prosperity. Trail systems enhance Michiganders' quality of life by increasing their health and wellness and making the state and its communities great places to live while drawing visitors from other regions to participate in the tourism economy.

# Mission statements

## DNR mission

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources is committed to the conservation, protection, management, use and enjoyment of the state's natural and cultural resources for current and future generations.

## DNR diversity, equity and inclusion mission

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources will foster and promote an environment focused on inclusion and equity to expand and broaden the diversity of our beneficiaries and workforce.

## Parks and Recreation Division mission

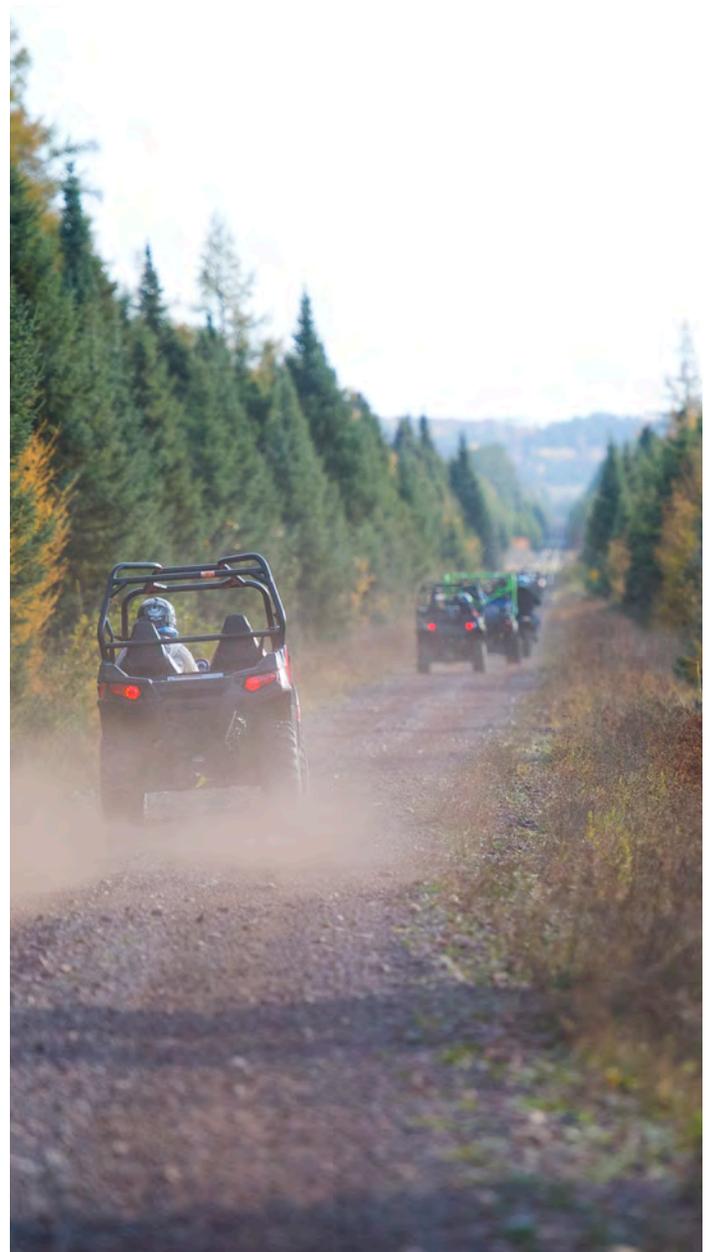
The Parks and Recreation Division's mission is to acquire, protect and preserve the natural and cultural features of Michigan's unique resources and to provide access to land- and water-based public recreation and educational opportunities.

## Forest Resources Division mission

To manage, protect and provide for the sustainable use of Michigan's forest resources.

## Wildlife Division mission

To enhance, restore and conserve the state's wildlife resources, natural communities and ecosystems for the benefit of Michigan's citizens, visitors and future generations.



# Trails plan vision



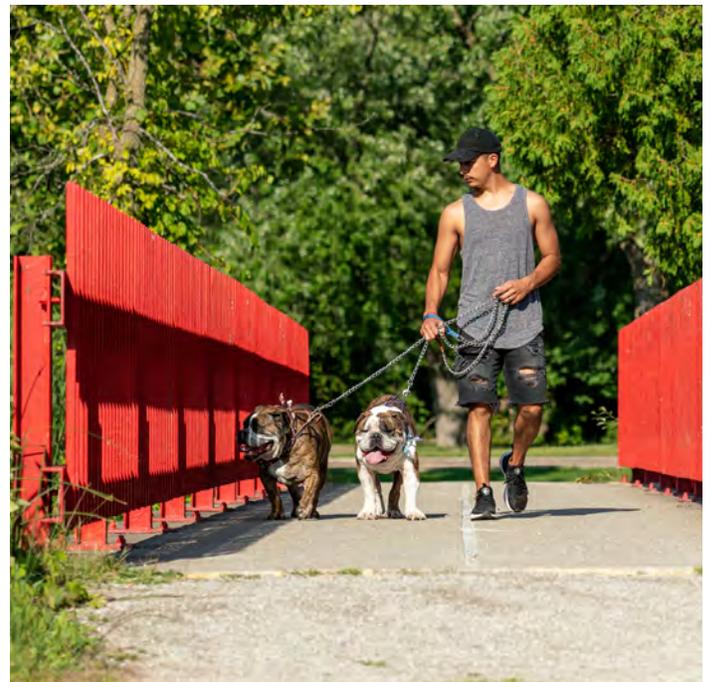
## Trails plan vision

Michigan will solidify its national recognition as the Trails State by providing diverse and sustainable trail experiences to encourage health and wellness and provide safe outdoor recreation and transportation opportunities for residents and visitors.

### Michigan: The Trails State

Michigan strives to provide a leading-edge trails system for the state's diverse trail users. In the Trails State:

- Well-planned trails will connect people, communities and destinations of interest. They support health and wellness, enhance economies and contribute to a region's unique character and sense of place.
- Trail users will be able to easily find information about trail experiences and become knowledgeable about trail use best practices and safe, responsible trail use.
- Trails will be sustainably designed, developed and maintained to meet evolving use patterns while balancing cultural and natural resource management priorities.



# Purpose and implementation

## Purpose and implementation

The 2022 DNR Trails Plan updates the DNR's strategy to comprehensively manage the state trails system to accommodate the variety of uses and improve user experiences while balancing priorities for cultural and natural resource management. Unlike the 2013 Comprehensive Trails Plan, this plan does not include specific sections for each of the advisory groups — MTAC, Equine Trails Subcommittee, Off-Road Vehicle Advisory Workgroup, Nonmotorized Advisory Workgroup and the Snowmobile Advisory Workgroup. Instead, the DNR is approaching the next decade of trails management through a more holistic approach that considers the needs of all trail users and supports collaboration to address their unique trail needs.

To achieve this, the 2022 DNR Trails Plan approaches trail planning, development and maintenance at the regional level. By moving from managing trails for individual user groups to managing at the regional level, the DNR will be able to better leverage resources, such as funding, staff and collaborations, and be more responsive to each region's unique opportunities and needs. As discussed in greater detail in the goals and objectives section, the DNR plans to pilot a regional trail needs assessment to examine user groups, funding opportunities, existing trail assets and resource constraints that need to be aligned and supported in the region. It also is working to enhance opportunities for DNR divisions to participate in the trail development process when appropriate.

Trails can provide an important resource to all Michigan communities. As such an invaluable element of outdoor recreation and transportation, it is paramount that access to trails statewide should be equitable for all Michiganders, regardless of background, race/ethnicity, ability, means and geographic location. The DNR is committed to developing and implementing strategies for authentic community engagement, using inclusive practices and communications to ensure diverse perspectives and experiences are heard and equitable outcomes are achieved.

## Implementation

Successful implementation of the 2022 DNR Trails Plan requires coordination and collaboration with DNR divisions, trail advisory groups and other partners and stakeholders. It is vital to prioritize action items and document progress toward achieving these important tasks for Michigan's trails system. The plan assists in this effort by identifying launch steps in bold for the DNR to focus its resources on first. Key staff will be assigned to each action item, and some may take multiple years to accomplish.

The Parks and Recreation Division Trail Section will serve as the plan coordinators and will lead a review every six months. This review will take into consideration department resources, ongoing initiatives and current trends which may affect how objectives and action items are addressed. After five years, in 2027, DNR staff will present progress to MTAC and engage the council regarding the relevance and continued progress toward the stated goals, objectives and action items. At that time, any needed adjustments will be made to keep the plan, and the department's progress, relevant to the needs of Michigan's trail users.



# Trails program regional planning map



# The DNR trails system

## The DNR trails system

Michigan has world-class natural and cultural resources that provide a foundation to support trail use. Natural resources help shape Michigan's identity and are a critical component to the quality of life and culture of those who call the state home. A 2017 statewide recreation survey demonstrated that 80% of Michigan residents feel outdoor recreation is important to their household.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, the state has seen high demand for outdoor recreation opportunities and trail use. Between 2016 and 2020:

- ORV license sales increased 30%.
- ORV trail permit purchases increased 37%.
- Approximately 130,000 snowmobile permits were purchased each year.
- Approximately 1 million nights were reserved at DNR campgrounds and harbors each year.
- The number of Resident Recreation Passports purchased increased 10%, totaling more than 2.8 million in 2020.

There are more than 13,400 miles of state-designated trails and pathways in the state, making Michigan's interconnected trails system one of the largest in the country.<sup>2</sup> This inviting network — and the associated recreation, transportation, health, wellness and

economic benefits it offers — is developed and maintained by an extensive collaboration of federal, state and local governments, nonprofits, foundations and volunteers and contributes to Michigan being known nationally as the Trails State. The trails system offers year-round opportunities for hikers, bicyclists, equestrians, off-roaders, snowmobilers, hunters, anglers, paddlers, cross-country skiers, foragers and more.

This DNR system includes approximately:<sup>3</sup>

- 4,020 miles of hiking trails
- 1,375 miles of rail trails
- 4,090 miles of designated ORV and motorcycle trails and routes
- 6,165 miles of designated snowmobile trails
- 845 miles of equestrian trails
- 2,085 miles of biking trails
- 635 miles of water trails
- 365 miles of groomed cross-country skiing and snowshoeing trails

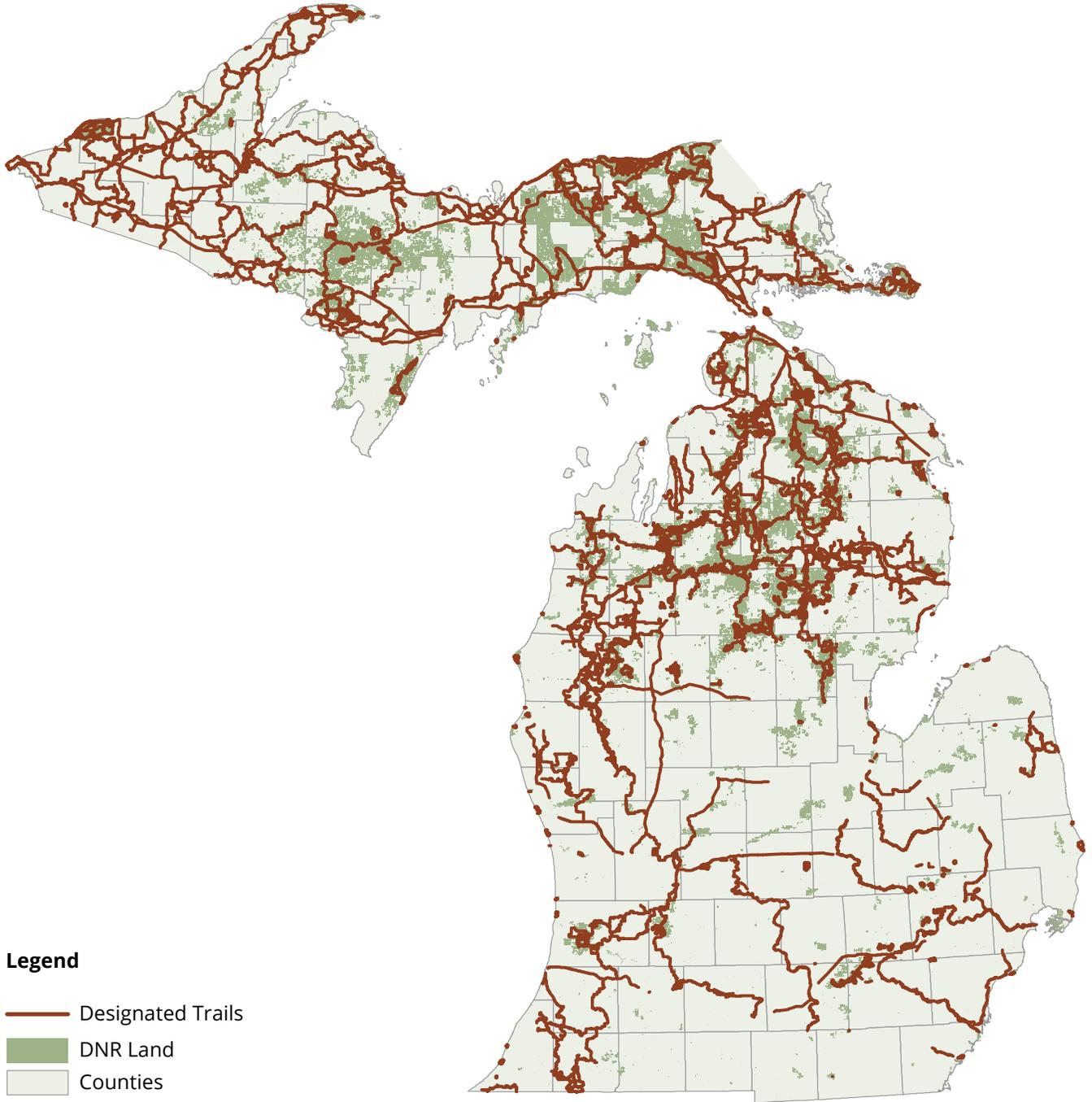
<sup>1</sup> This survey was completed as part of the 2018-2022 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan

<sup>2</sup> Nonmotorized trails in state forests are referred to as pathways.

<sup>3</sup> Some trails host multiple uses, so these numbers add up to more than 13,400.



# Michigan State-designated Trails



## Current state of trails

Since the release of the 2013-2018 Comprehensive Trails Plan, the DNR, in partnership with local units of government and nonprofits, has promoted, acquired and developed new trail experiences for Michiganders and visitors alike. Over the past eight years, some significant developments include:

- **Significant expansion of the state trails system.** Approximately 1,400 miles of new state-designated trails have been established.
- **Investment in quality trail experiences.** Utilizing investments from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund, motorized trail user fees and other funding sources managed by the Trails Section, the DNR has invested more than \$293 million.
- **Progress toward completion of the Iron Belle Trail.** Proposed in 2012, the Iron Belle Trail extends more than 2,000 miles from the far western tip of the Upper Peninsula to Belle Isle in Detroit on two separate routes for hiking and bicycling. The biking route travels up the east side of the state, utilizing many of the state's existing bike paths; on-road bike lanes; and signed, designated bike routes. The hiking route traverses the west side, utilizing sidewalks, trails and more than 1,000 miles of the 4,600-mile North Country National Scenic Trail. The DNR continues to work with local partners to enhance the user experience along the trail and fill critical gaps. Since 2012, the DNR has identified \$10 million in internal and external Iron Belle grants to support these efforts.
- **Progress toward completion of Great Lake-to-Lake Trail routes.** Michigan is in the process of developing five Great Lake-to-Lake Trail Routes that cross the state, intersecting the Iron Belle routes, creating a network of interconnected trails. Routes 1, 2 and 3 are located in the Lower Peninsula and Routes 4 and 5 are located in the Upper Peninsula. At this time, Route 3 is complete, Route 2 is nearly complete and the inaugural ride on Route 1 was held in 2019. Preliminary planning for Routes 4 and 5 has started.
- **Implementation of the Pure Michigan Trails and Pure Michigan Trail Towns Program.** In partnership with Pure Michigan® and the Michigan Economic Development Corporation, the DNR highlights some of the state's well-developed trails, water trails and trail towns through the Pure Michigan® Trail and Trail

Town Designation Program. This program is designed to acknowledge Michigan's position as the Trails State, and these designated trails represent some of the best in the state. Trails and towns chosen provide users with clear information and a quality trail experience. They also have broad community support and sustainable maintenance and marketing plans.

- **Support for the expansion of Michigan's inland water trails.** Water trails feature well-developed access points; are often located near significant historical, environmental or cultural points of interest; and often have nearby amenities like restaurants, hotels and campgrounds. Nine waterways, totaling more than 635 miles, that flow through more than a dozen counties are state-designated water trails in Michigan:
  - Central River Raisin Water Trail, Monroe County
  - Chain of Lakes Water Trail, Antrim and Kalkaska counties
  - Clinton River Water Trail, Oakland and Macomb counties
  - Huron River Water Trail, Livingston, Oakland, Washtenaw and Wayne counties
  - Island Loop Route, St. Clair County
  - Flint River Trail, Genesee and Lapeer counties
  - Middle Grand River Water Trail, Clinton, Eaton, Ingham and Ionia counties
  - Shiawassee River Trail, Genesee, Oakland, Saginaw and Shiawassee counties
  - Upper Grand River Water Trail, Eaton, Ingham and Jackson counties



- **Support for Great Lakes Water Trails.** Michigan hosts over 3,200 miles of Great Lakes shoreline that has been home to maritime travel by vessels of all types and sizes for centuries. Since the 1940s, Michigan has maintained a partnership with the federal government through the DNR Waterways Program harbor network, which will celebrate its 75th anniversary in 2022. In conjunction with the harbors, boat launches, marinas and public lands provide access to the state's longest water trail.
- **Expansion of opportunities for snowmobiling.** The DNR has acquired permanent rights to more than 70 miles of snowmobile trails using the Snowmobile Easement Fund in conjunction with other funds. In partnership with the Michigan Snowmobile and ORV Association, the department launched the Ride Right campaign to encourage snowmobilers to ride sober, on the right side of trail and at the right speed for conditions so they may enjoy their trail experience safely.
- **Expansion of opportunities for ORVs.** Holly Oaks ORV Park was created as a joint state-county project operated by Oakland County Parks and Recreation in partnership with the DNR. The park, consisting of 106 acres of former and active sand and gravel mines, is located off of I-75 and Dixie Highway. Holly Oaks is open to all types of ORVs, including full-size vehicles, side-by-sides, all-terrain vehicles and motorcycles.
- **Expansion of opportunities for equestrians.** The department has been working closely with equestrian trail users to identify ways to improve and provide quality trail experiences. This includes determining locations where equestrians can ride the Great Lakes shoreline and developing trails dedicated primarily for equestrian use, such as the Fort Custer Recreation Area Equestrian Trail and Campground. The DNR also dedicates funding to address equestrian infrastructure and improvement projects. Furthermore, the department is beginning the process of designating pack and saddle trails in the state trails system in accordance with Public Act 451 of 1994.

## Pure Michigan Trails

- Canada Lakes Pathway, Luce County
- Iron Ore Heritage Trail, Marquette County
- Leelanau Trail, Leelanau County
- Sleeping Bear Heritage Trail, Leelanau County
- William Field Memorial Hart-Montague Trail State Park, Muskegon and Oceana counties
- Haywire Grade Trail, Schoolcraft and Alger counties
- Kal-Haven Trail, Kalamazoo and Van Buren counties
- Polly Ann Trailway, Oakland County
- Trail 45 Charcoal Grade Trail, Chippewa and Luce counties





- **Expansion of opportunities for mountain biking.** The department supports efforts to expand trails dedicated for quality mountain biking experiences. For example, the DTE Energy Foundation Trail was developed at the Waterloo Recreation Area through financial support of the DTE Energy Foundation and countless volunteer hours. This single-track, natural-surface trail network provides more than 20 miles of mountain biking opportunities.
- **Launch of a cross-country ski trail inventory.** In 2018, a workgroup of DNR staff was established to identify the different ways grooming is completed and at what locations. This information will be used in an overall assessment to ensure the strategic application of resources across the trail system.
- **Enhancement of access to online trail information.** The DNR has enhanced the availability of information about state-designated trails by creating interactive mapping websites that provide information about trail types, allowable uses, available amenities and support-trip planning. Information is also available in the open-data portal to download for use in third-party applications.
- **Creation of the Heritage Trail Program.** The Michigan History Center developed the Heritage Trail Program to increase cultural and historic interpretation on the trails system. Two major projects were completed, and more are ongoing. The Kal-Haven Trail heritage project includes more than 30 interpretive panels, a multisensory display and a mobile app designed for increased accessibility. The Haywire Trail 50th anniversary project includes heritage-designed mile markers and 11 custom-built interpretive kiosks along Michigan’s first rail trail.
- **Critical response to the 2018 Father’s Day flood in Houghton County.** In June 2018, a historic flood severely damaged five DNR-managed rail trails in Houghton County. The flood washed out hundreds of culverts, destroyed trail surfacing and sent debris downstream into neighboring communities. The DNR mobilized staff from all divisions to mitigate hazards, fix trail segments and reopen two of the five rail trails. Work is ongoing to reopen the remaining three trails, with completion estimated by the end of 2022.



### Pure Michigan Trail Towns

- City of Charlevoix
- City of Cheboygan
- City of Houghton
- City of South Haven
- City of Trenton
- Orion Township
- Reed City
- Village of Newberry

# Planning process

## Planning process

The DNR Trails Plan was developed over the course of two years between fall 2019 and fall 2021. The DNR contracted with Public Sector Consultants, a Michigan-based public policy consulting firm, to facilitate plan development. The planning process established a series of activities to ensure trail user perspectives are reflected and the department's land and water management priorities underpin the plan's goals, objectives and action steps. This was accomplished through a review of existing plans that were used as guiding resources, robust engagement with the MTAC and advisory groups and participation opportunities through an online survey and a series of public and staff forums.

## Guiding resources

To guide the development of the DNR Trails Plan, resource management plans and division strategic plans that involve or intersect with management of the DNR trails system were reviewed at the beginning of the planning process to identify common priorities. Those plans included:

- Michigan Comprehensive Trails Plan 2013–2018
- DNR State Trails Implementation Plan January 2014

- DNR Parks and Recreation Division Strategic Plan 2017–2022
- Michigan Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan 2018–2022
- DNR Wildlife Division Strategic Plan 2016–2020
- DNR Forest Resources Division Strategic Plan 2019–2023
- DNR Fisheries Division Strategic Plan 2019–2022

## MTAC and advisory group engagement

The Michigan Trails Advisory Council and trail advisory groups were engaged throughout the planning process. One of the first steps in the plan development process involved MTAC and advisory group members completing an online questionnaire to share their views of Michigan's trails system as well as their priorities for the future.

In February 2019, the MTAC and all four trail advisory groups convened for the first-ever DNR trail advisory group summit. PSC facilitated a review of online questionnaire results and the trail priorities from the DNR's existing planning documents with each group. The feedback provided through these sessions served as the basis for priorities identified within the 2022 plan and served as preliminary goals and objectives.



Members of the MTAC and advisory groups participated in the planning process by providing feedback to refine the goals and objectives as well as serving on workgroups to inform action step development.

### **DNR engagement**

The DNR Parks and Recreation Division led the planning process in coordination with representatives from each of the other DNR divisions. Division liaisons were engaged throughout the planning process, providing background resources, such as existing planning documents, and serving on the workgroups that reviewed the goals, objectives and action steps. The liaisons coordinated the reviews within their respective divisions to ensure that this plan aligns with the management plan of each DNR division. Additional review was completed by the Forest Resources Division chief and management team since the division partners closely with the Parks and Recreation Division to manage portions of the trails system. Finally, all DNR staff were given the opportunity to review and comment on the plan through a series of eight virtual forums in fall 2020. In total, 221 staff members attended these meetings.

### **Michigan Department of Transportation engagement**

Linear and rail trails function as both recreation and nonmotorized transportation corridors, and MDOT is a vital partner in planning, funding and providing access to these trails. Liaisons from MDOT were invited to the DNR engagement sessions in fall 2020. MDOT representatives reviewed a draft of the final plan in June of 2021 and provided feedback that strengthened transportation components of the plan.

### **Public engagement**

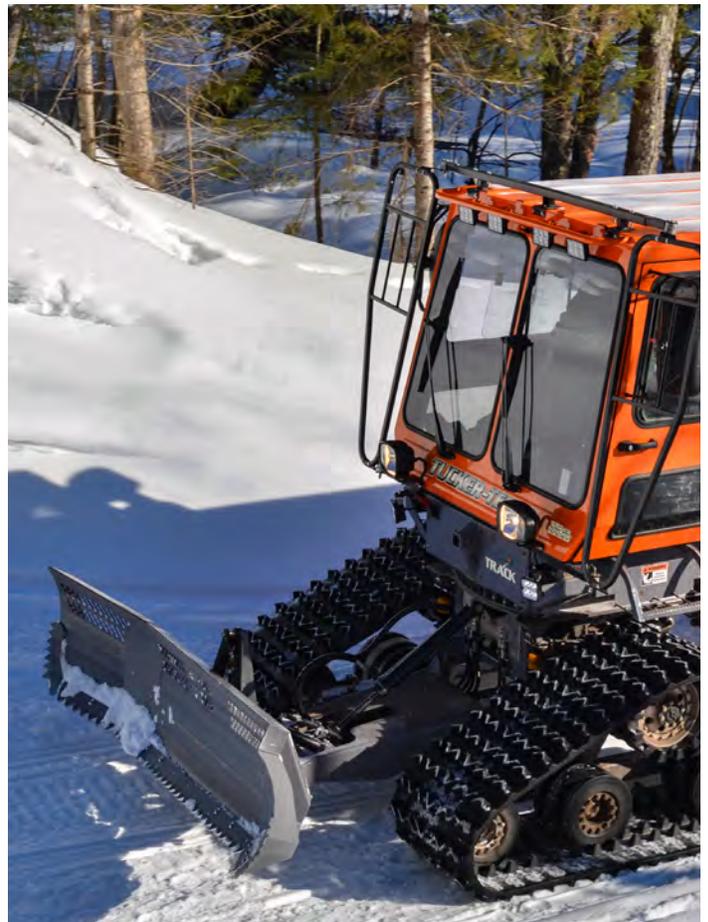
The planning process included opportunities to gather public input through seven public forums and an online survey. In-person public forums were originally scheduled throughout the state but were held virtually in fall 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic. Each meeting provided the public with an opportunity to offer input on the vision, goals and objectives as well as to voice additional concerns and comments regarding the DNR's trail planning efforts. In total, 178 participants attended the meetings to provide their input on the updated trails plan.

As part of the public engagement process, the DNR reached out to many stakeholders. An invitation was

sent to U.S. Forest Service staff to participate in public input sessions. Additionally, a letter was sent to tribal leaders in Michigan with information on the plan and public input sessions. The Bay Mills Indian Community asked for additional information, so a separate meeting was held with their representatives and DNR staff. Direct emails were also sent to timber and wildlife groups, with a specific meeting held for their input. Three people attended that meeting from wildlife groups.

### **Trail user survey**

A web-based survey of Michigan trail users was offered to better understand their preferences, use of and satisfaction with state trails. It was open for public participation for two months in fall 2020 and yielded 3,857 responses. Respondents were asked a series of demographic questions to determine if trail satisfaction and priorities differ by gender, age, race or geographic region. An analysis of the demographic data determined that the survey results are not representative of Michigan's population as a whole, but the data provide valuable information about Michigan's trail users and their priorities.



## Survey results

Of the respondents, 96% agreed that trails are important to them, and over 60% noted that they would drive more than four hours for their favorite trail activity. It is not surprising the majority of respondents noted that trails are important to them, but the willingness to travel long distances to experience Michigan's trails demonstrates the significance of trails to users throughout the state.

Respondents recreate in all 83 Michigan counties on all types of managed land, including state parks and recreation areas, state forests, local government-managed land and federally managed and nongovernmental recreation areas. Furthermore, respondents are generally satisfied with the amount and quality of trails statewide — 66% and 71% of respondents, respectively. However, satisfaction rates decline when respondents were asked about trails within 30 minutes of their home. Just under half, or 47%, of respondents were satisfied with the amount of trails close to home and 49% were satisfied with the quality of trails close to home.

As recreation trends continue to change, the importance of connecting communities with trails will continue to grow. For example, 93% of respondents stated that they would prefer to live in a community with a robust trail network. When asked what the limiting factors for trail use were, respondents selected "The trails around my home don't provide the recreation opportunities I want" as the top limiting factor.

The survey also included a series of questions that asked respondents to rank their priorities for future trail investments. The top four areas respondents identified are: 1) the condition of trails/trail surface, 2) longer trails/connecting existing trails, 3) signs and maps that help people find their way and 4) having trails closer to home or work. Furthermore, 48% of respondents agreed that the DNR should prioritize maintaining existing trails before developing new ones, compared to 21% of respondents that disagreed with this statement. The remaining 31% were neutral.

This input received through the public forums and online survey helped shape the 2022 DNR Trails Plan and is reflected in the goals, objectives and action steps.



# DNR Trails Plan goals



## DNR Trails Plan goals

To achieve the long-term trails vision, the DNR will pursue the following goals over the next 10 years:

- **Sustainable maintenance and development:** Manage Michigan's state-designated trails system to sustainably maintain and improve existing conditions while supporting the DNR's long-term natural and cultural resource management goals.
- **Funding:** Develop and refine funding structures to ensure state-designated trails provide quality recreation and transportation experiences.
- **Planning and collaboration:** Model trail planning best practices to maintain and improve strong relationships and partnerships with the public, stakeholders and other governmental agencies.
- **Marketing, promotion and education:** Promote Michigan's diverse trail opportunities to residents and visitors, accurately depicting experiences found throughout the state.

Each goal includes a series of objectives and action steps the DNR can take to advance trail-related priorities and further reinforce Michigan as the Trails State. Though they are not presented in priority order, some actions must be taken sequentially to advance long-term goals and objectives. Within each objective, a launch step is identified in bold as the first step the DNR will focus its resources on to make progress to advance the objective the action step falls within. In many instances, individual action steps may support many goals and objectives and build on each other to maximize outcomes.

## Goal one: Sustainable maintenance and development

Manage Michigan's state-designated trails system to sustainably maintain and improve existing conditions while supporting the DNR's long-term natural and cultural resource management goals.

### Objectives

1. Design and locate trails to meet current and future needs.

a. **Adopt trail development and maintenance standards by trail and/or use type that reflect existing best practices for trail design.**

b. Pilot one comprehensive regional trail inventory that documents the location and condition of trails relative to design and maintenance standards.

c. Pilot one comprehensive regional trail user study that documents current use patterns and assesses trail users' future needs.

d. Pilot the creation of a regional trail development and maintenance strategy that prioritizes the allocation of department resources based on findings from actions 1.1.a through 1.1.c.

e. Evaluate the effectiveness of the regional planning approach for potential expansion to additional regions statewide.

2. Prioritize quality trail experiences over the quantity of trails.

a. **Engage advisory groups to develop guiding principles that document what a "quality trail experience" is for each user group and integrate these principles into trail development and maintenance standards as well as regional trail plans.**

b. Create criteria to identify DNR-managed trails that no longer meet the needs of the trails system, clarify the process to decommission these trails and share the process with trail partners.

c. Develop guidelines to determine when single-use trails are the appropriate management approach and communicate those guidelines to trail partners.

d. Develop guidelines that explain the allowable

uses of different types of land and the rationale for these determinations utilizing resources such as the Trail Assessment Tool being developed with MSU to support internal and external communications.

e. Update management practices based upon established resource protection policies.

f. Develop a plan in collaboration with advisory groups to expand opportunities for volunteer trail maintenance activities, such as Adopt a Trail, trail ambassador programs, volunteer days, volunteer recognition awards, etc.

3. Elevate maintenance of existing trails in comparison to the development of new trails.

a. **Establish criteria for when a new trail should be developed, considering the location and condition of existing trails, connection to existing trail systems and communities, user demand, long-term maintenance funding and unique opportunities where timing is key.**

b. Require the development of a long-term maintenance and funding plan when establishing new DNR trails.

c. Develop maintenance and funding plans across divisions for existing DNR-managed trails in conjunction with trail partners.

4. Connect trail users and adjoining communities to form a network of interconnected trails and users.

a. **Pilot a regional gap analysis in the trails network to identify and prioritize connections between existing trails and communities.**

b. When conducting regional plans, identify opportunities to leverage existing trail infrastructure for strategic use, such as creating connections between land and water trails, codeveloping trails for year-round use or providing transportation opportunities.

## Goal two: Funding

Develop and refine funding structures to ensure state-designated trails provide quality recreation and transportation experiences.

### Objectives

1. Generate additional sources of sustainable funding for nonmotorized trail maintenance.
  - a. **Pilot a regional study to estimate the maintenance funding gap by assessing current maintenance allocations and long-term needs.**
  - b. Prepare a report that summarizes nonmotorized trail maintenance funding approaches used in other states or regions.
  - c. Coordinate with the trail advisory groups to evaluate alternative models for nonmotorized funding sources, including estimates of how much funding could be generated through various models.
2. Strategically coordinate current funding sources for maintenance, development and acquisition to leverage investments.
  - a. **Document strategies to coordinate funding sources between and among trail types for both nonmotorized and motorized trails.**
  - b. Develop key performance indicators to measure the effectiveness of existing DNR Trails Section-administered funding sources in collaboration with trail advisory groups.
  - c. Develop or acquire grant tracking and project management software for motorized and nonmotorized trails to assist the Trails Section in coordinating projects more efficiently.
  - d. Network with grant coordinators from the Michigan Department of Transportation, DNR and other funding sources to align trail and funding initiatives.
  - e. Review the current ORV funding legislation, PA 451 of 1994, Section 324.8116, before it sunsets in 2023 and engage stakeholders, partners and advisory groups.
  - f. Develop processes and increased program efficiencies to implement Recreational Trails Program, or RTP, grant projects.

3. Seek funding opportunities to leverage investments.
  - a. **Explore partnering with philanthropic organizations or businesses for trail funding needs, including sponsorship opportunities.**
  - b. Explore nontraditional funding sources for trail maintenance, engineering and development with advisory groups and partners.
  - c. Create a process for coordinating funding opportunities within the DNR and identify outside entities that can act as a fiduciary and/or a philanthropic partner.
  - d. Develop and implement mechanisms to quantify volunteer work and other in-kind partner investments in trails so these investments can be leveraged for additional funding.



## Goal three: Planning and collaboration

Model trail planning best practices to maintain and improve strong relationships and partnerships with the public, stakeholders and other governmental agencies.

### Objectives

1. Coordinate planning with partners, including residents, user groups, government, businesses, nonprofit entities, cultural organizations and volunteers, using inclusive practices to ensure diverse perspectives are included and equitable outcomes are achieved.
  - a. **Develop and implement strategies for authentic community engagement for planning, development and maintenance with user groups, local government and residents when planning trail systems to ensure compatibility with community and user priorities.** Strategies should consider:
    - Developing a proposed project summary that includes funding source restrictions, such as grant and purchase funds; proposed use types; and information about neighboring communities.
    - Developing strategies to engage a wider range of people in planning.
    - Developing methods of reaching traditionally underrepresented communities to ensure diverse perspectives are included.
  - b. Collaborate with MDOT when trails can provide active transportation opportunities.
  - c. Proactively use the DNR's trails email listserv — Gov Delivery — to provide stakeholders and user groups up-to-date information on new trails proposals, volunteer opportunities, information on friends groups and other pertinent information.
  - d. Develop guidelines for how to address requests for assistance on trails outside the state-designated trails system.
2. Foster collaborative partnerships across user groups, resource managers and partners.
  - a. **Coordinate with the MTAC and trail groups to host an annual advisory group summit to support relationship building and communication on accomplishments and priorities for the upcoming year.**
  - b. Formalize a procedure to fill vacancies on advisory groups.
  - c. Evaluate the administrative structure of the MTAC and other trail advisory groups to enhance their effectiveness and communication.
  - d. Refine the process for the DNR to work cohesively across divisions on trail development and maintenance.
  - e. Develop and implement strategies to share maintenance responsibilities and resources where possible among trail agencies and partners to generate cost savings.
3. Secure the ownership or access rights the state trails system is built upon.
  - a. **Inventory the lands, access points and corridors to determine which do not currently have permanent access rights.**
  - b. Develop a land acquisition strategy with the DNR, trail agencies and partners to efficiently negotiate with private-property owners, utility companies and other governmental agencies to secure access rights.
  - c. Identify funding sources to purchase or establish easements for trails and access points.
4. Analyze community and economic significance of trail-based recreation to the state and its communities in conjunction with the user study in 1.1.c.
  - a. **Develop a trail user count program.**
    - Utilize the data to focus funds and improvements as well as identify trails that may not be meeting objectives for use/ connectivity, see 1.2.b.
    - Determine how data from counters is used, displayed and shared with partners and the public.
    - Utilize data to inform marketing strategies based on trail usership, see 4.2.a.
  - b. Evaluate resources needed to collect trail user economic and demographic data.
  - c. Develop a mechanism to periodically conduct an economic impact analysis of trail activities.

## Goal four: Marketing, promotion and education

Promote Michigan's diverse trail opportunities to residents and visitors, accurately depicting experiences found throughout the state.

### Objectives

1. Develop and implement an education strategy to minimize user conflict, promote trail safety and general use practices, enhance understanding of public land management and connect users to Michigan's natural resources and cultural heritage.
  - a. **Develop a signage plan for state trails that includes wayfinding, trail etiquette, educational and interpretive information.**
  - b. Create a strategy to promote trail safety, etiquette, general use practices and understanding of public land management through online resources and other DNR channels.
  - c. Develop resources to support natural and cultural heritage interpretation on trails in conjunction with the Michigan History Center, local museums and partners.
2. Promote Michigan's diverse trail opportunities to encourage use from residents and visitors.
  - a. **Document and update the DNR's marketing strategy to promote trail use.** Updates should include strategies to reach various demographics, including underrepresented communities and new, existing and potential users within and outside Michigan.
  - b. Meet annually with the Michigan Department of Economic Development's Pure Michigan® campaign representatives to plan communications and promote trails.
  - c. Create a program to collaborate with local and regional volunteer groups to promote volunteerism and trail usage in their communities.
  - d. Collect imagery that accurately depicts Michigan trails, seasons, uses and diverse users, including footage from a first-person perspective, for the DNR website and in promotional materials.
  - e. Develop and implement a plan to establish trails programming to engage new and existing trail users.
  - f. Develop a strategy to promote, update and maintain the DNR trails email listserv — Gov Delivery.
3. Coordinate with community, business, advisory groups and government partners to promote trail systems and initiatives.
  - a. **Develop and implement a plan to further cultivate relationships with chambers of commerce, downtown development authorities and convention and visitor bureaus to grow their understanding of the value of trails in their community and develop partnerships to promote trails and trail towns. Activities may include:**
    - Communicating key initiatives to partners
    - Developing regular communication of trail accomplishments, priorities and needs to user groups
    - Cultivating relationships with policymakers and local government officials
    - Helping community leaders understand and enhance the value of trails in their area
  - b. Work with the advisory groups to develop a plan to create more opportunities for trail showcases for local government officials/CVBs.
  - c. Work with the Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry to connect with outfitters and trails advisory groups to develop opportunities to promote trail systems.
  - d. Connect environmental education programs with trails.
4. Utilize available and emerging technology and promotional practices to make trail information easily accessible to engage and educate new and existing audiences.
  - a. **Develop an interactive, web-enabled platform to provide information about trail locations, trailheads and amenities, allowable uses, trail etiquette, cultural connections, closures, reroutes and construction information that draws on the existing inventory of trails within the DNR's geographic information system.**
  - b. Increase awareness of and access to geo-referenced trail data to support third-party development of mapping platforms.

# Outcomes



## Outcomes

Implementation of the DNR Trails Plan supports many positive outcomes for the state, residents and visitors.

- **Quality trail experiences and resource management:** With proper funding, coordination and planning, the state-designated trails system will be maintained and sustainably expanded, or contracted, to provide diverse motorized and nonmotorized opportunities for safe, quality trail experiences while managing Michigan's natural and cultural resources.
- **Public stewardship:** By developing and promoting the trails system, residents and visitors will become knowledgeable about trail opportunities as well as regulations, etiquette and use practices. Trails will serve as a pathway to engage with Michigan's cultural and natural resources, promote a stewardship mindset and improve understanding of how public lands are managed for multiple purposes.
- **Community and economic prosperity:** Through intentional planning, collaboration and promotions, Michigan's trails can be leveraged for the greatest benefit to support community and economic prosperity. Trail systems enhance Michiganders' quality of life by increasing their health and wellness and making the state and its communities great places to live while drawing visitors from other regions to participate in the tourism economy.

## Appendix one: Plan approvals

Michigan Trails Advisory Council

Date: 7-29-21

DNR – Resource Management Bureau

Date: 8-20-21

PRD – Section Chiefs

Date: 10-18-21



11-2-2021

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Chief, Parks and Recreation Division

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Date



11-29-2021

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Shannon Lott, Natural Resources Deputy

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Date



11-29-2021

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Mark Hoffman, Chief Administrative Officer

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Date



11-30-2021

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Director, Department of Natural Resources

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Date

## Michigan Trails Advisory Council Resolution 2021 — #6 2022-2032 DNR Trails Plan

The Michigan Trails Advisory Council (MTAC) acknowledges and is grateful for the significant effort of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources working with the people of Michigan to prepare and present the 2022-2032 DNR Trails Plan. This plan is the result of a transparent and well-developed process involving hours of preparation and public meetings to determine the best long-term management plan for the state’s holistic trail system. The essence of the plan is embodied within the vision established in this trail plan:

**“Trails plan vision: Michigan will solidify its national recognition as the Trails State by providing diverse and sustainable trail experiences to encourage health and wellness and provide safe outdoor recreation and transportation opportunities for residents and visitors.**

### Michigan: The Trails State

**As the Trails State, Michigan strives to provide a leading-edge trails system for Michigan’s diverse trail users. Trails connect people, communities and places of interest, while supporting local and state vibrancy and prosperity. Trail users will be able to readily find information about trail experiences, will become knowledgeable about trail use practices and will use trails safely. Trails will be designed, developed and maintained sustainably to meet evolving use patterns while balancing cultural and natural resource management priorities.”**

The Michigan Trails Advisory Council hereby endorses and supports the 2022-2023 DNR Trails Plan and urges to department to take the steps necessary to fully implement this plan. In implementation of this plan the department should continue to work collaboratively with the people of Michigan, the trail users and all interested parties to ensure that Michigan remains the national leader in both miles of trails and the quality of the trail experience.

Motion to adopt: Bob Wilson

Seconded by: Jessi Adler

Yeas: 9

Nays: 0

Abstained: 0

Absent: 1

## Appendix two: Trail plan project team

### Parks and Recreation Division

- Nikki Van Bloem, Southeast Trails Specialist
- Dakota Hewlett, Nonmotorized Trails Grant Coordinator
- Paige Perry, Northcentral Trails Specialist
- Anna Lee, Student Employee
- Bob Wilson, Michigan Trails Advisory Council, Chair
- John Matonich, Michigan Trails Advisory Council, Former Chair

### DNR division liaisons

- Brian Bury, Natural Rivers Administrator, Fisheries Division
- Christine Hanaburgh, Federal Aid Coordinator, Wildlife Division
- Steve Milford, Eastern LP District Supervisor, Forest Resources Division
- Dan Spegel, Heritage Trails Coordinator, Michigan History Center
- Roger Storm, Trailway Acquisition Specialist, Finance and Operations Division
- Ami Van Antwerp, Communications Specialist, Marketing and Outreach Division
- Peter Wright, Captain, Law Enforcement Division

### Public Sector Consultants

- Jon Beard, Director
- Maggie Pallone, Vice President
- Cody Proudfoot, Consultant

### Trail advisory groups

- Michigan Trails Advisory Council
- Equine Trails Subcommittee
- Nonmotorized Advisory Workgroup
- ORV Advisory Workgroup
- Snowmobile Advisory Workgroup

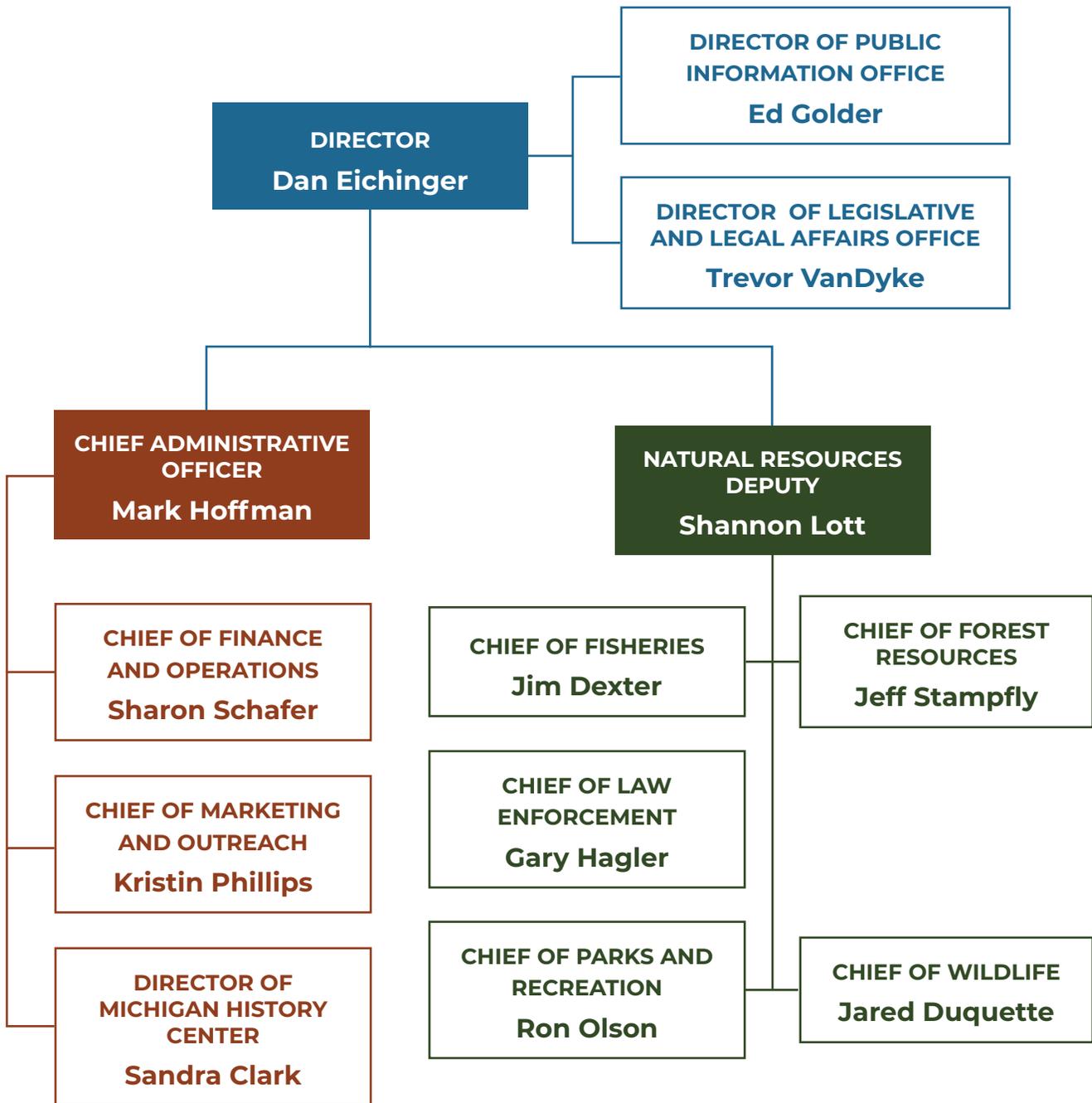
### MDOT liaisons

- Bryan Armstrong, Safe Routes to School Program Manager
- Joshua DeBruyn, Pedestrian and Bicycle Coordinator/Specialist
- Michael Smith, Transportation Alternatives Program Manager

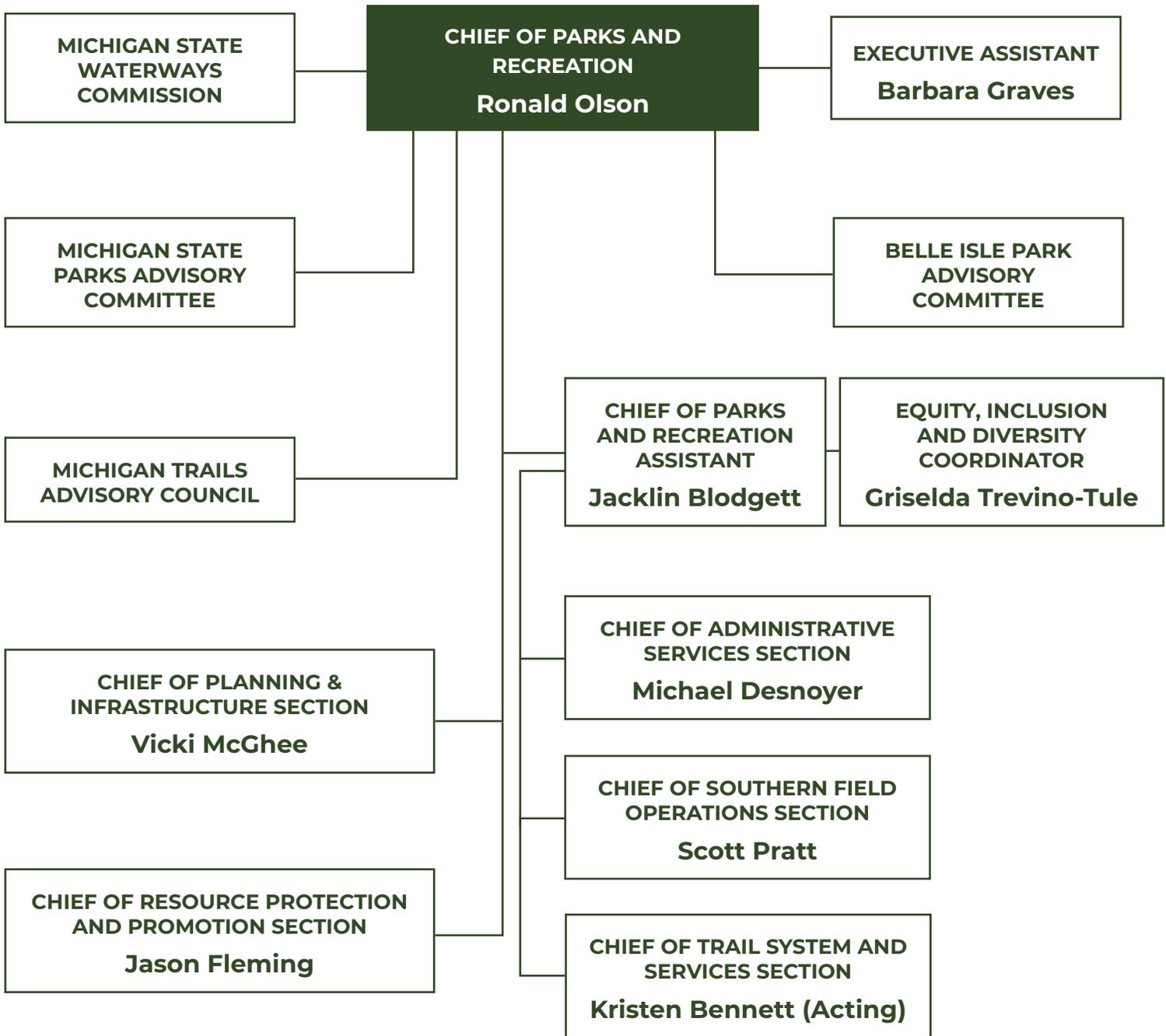
# Appendix three: DNR organizational chart

## Michigan Department of Natural Resources organizational chart

February 2021



**Department Of Natural Resources  
Parks and Recreation Division**



## Appendix four: Trails funding

Michigan is a national leader in developing innovative funding mechanisms to support outdoor recreation, including trails. There are a variety of different funding sources available for motorized and nonmotorized trail acquisition, development and maintenance. Motorized trail users pay into the acquisition, development, enforcement and maintenance of their trail corridors, while nonmotorized trail users rely on local, state and federal resources, as well as the support of volunteers, friends groups and philanthropic organizations. As Michigan continues to expand the network of state-designated trails, greater emphasis is needed to ensure there is funding to complete the necessary upkeep to continue to provide quality experiences.

Snowmobilers pay to register their machine and to purchase a trail permit if they intend on riding on public trails. Off-roaders are also required to purchase a trail permit and license their vehicle. Most of the development and maintenance of snowmobile and ORV trails is accomplished by local clubs through grant agreements with the DNR, which provides funding for these activities through the revenue received from the permit and license fees.

While motorized trails currently have dedicated funding sources to support operations, no similar structure exists for nonmotorized trails. The Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund and federal highway transportation funds have been critical for the acquisition and development of nonmotorized trails. Local government, philanthropic and private contributions have also been critical for the acquisition, development and maintenance of many of the nonmotorized trails. Most other nonmotorized trails, such as cross-country skiing, hiking, mountain biking and equestrian trails, have been developed on state-owned lands with assistance from various state funds. These trails are also often developed and maintained by user groups.

### Private funds

#### Donations

Many trails are supported through large and small donations received by partners and the DNR that are a vital part of trail development and maintenance. This includes small amounts from individual donors, fundraising from events, organized giving campaigns, philanthropic investments and other forms of charitable giving.

#### Volunteer hours

Volunteer hours performed by friends groups, local organizations and individuals are the backbone of the trails system. The time and dedication provided by volunteers to maintain trails speaks to how integrated trails are into communities and their importance to trail users.

### State funds

The following funds have been used for the development and/or maintenance of trails and will continue to be important funding sources. Many of the DNR-managed funds are included in the Michigan Constitution, most commonly in the Michigan Conservation and Recreation Legacy Fund. These funds are also commonly referred to as “restricted funds” since the use of the funds is outlined in the Constitution.

#### **Michigan Conservation and Recreation Legacy Fund: Article IX, section 40 of the Michigan Constitution**

##### *Off-road Vehicle Trail Improvement and Safety Education Funds*

Revenues collected from the sale of ORV licenses can be used for signage, maintenance, construction and leasing of lands to provide recreational opportunities for ORVs, ORV law enforcement, restoration of environmental damage caused by ORVs and required ORV safety education. An annual ORV license is currently \$26.25, and an annual ORV trail permit is \$10.

##### *Recreation Improvement Fund*

Dedicated revenues from the state gas tax are used for maintenance and development of recreation trails.

### *Snowmobile Trail Improvement Fund*

Revenues collected from the sale of snowmobile trail permits and snowmobile registrations can be used for signage, maintenance, construction, equipment, law enforcement and purchasing or leasing of land to provide recreational opportunities for snowmobiles. The current snowmobile trail permit fee is \$52 annually and the snowmobile registration fee is \$32 every three years. Each registration provides \$8 that is deposited into the trail easement subaccount for the acquisition of easements for snowmobile trails across non-DNR land.

### *State Forest Recreation Account*

The State Forest Recreation Account can be used for the development, operation, maintenance and promotion of an integrated recreation system that provides opportunities for hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, snowmobiling, off-roading, boating, trail-related activities and other forms of recreation within each state forest while maintaining the integrity of the forest.

### *State Park Improvement Fund*

The State Park Improvement Fund is used for the operation, maintenance and improvement of state parks and recreation areas. The fund receives state park revenue from camping fees, Recreation Passport fees, nonresident motor vehicle permit fees, concession fees, leases, donations, gifts and other sources.

### *Waterways Fund*

The revenue from boat registrations and the sale of fuel deposited into the Waterways Fund can be used to develop, maintain and operate boating access sites.

## **Article IX, section 35 of the Michigan Constitution**

### *Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund: Article IX, section 35 of the Michigan Constitution*

The Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund is available for the acquisition of land and development for natural resource protection and outdoor recreation. Since its inception in 1976, the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund has funded \$272 million in state and local trail-related projects.

### *State Park Endowment Fund: Article IX, section 35a of the Michigan Constitution*

The State Park Endowment Fund collects the bulk of royalties from oil, gas and mineral extraction on public land. The fund can be used for operations, maintenance and capital improvements at state parks and for the acquisition of land, or rights in land, for state parks.

## **Other state funds**

### *Recreation Passport Grant Program: PA 451 of 1994, part 741*

This program provides funding to local units of government for the development of public recreation facilities using a portion of the Recreation Passport sales. This includes the development of new facilities and the renovation of old facilities.

### *Michigan Transportation Fund: PA 51 of 1951, section 10k funds*

The Michigan Transportation Fund is the primary source of transportation funding in Michigan. Section 10k of Public Act 51 of 1951 specifies that all agencies receiving funds from Act 51 shall spend a minimum of 1% of their transportation funds, averaged over 10 years, on nonmotorized transportation facilities and services. This money is used predominately for construction of sidewalks, shared-use paths, bike lanes and signage and pavement marking specifically to support the safety and mobility of pedestrians and bicyclists. These funds may not be used for operations or routine maintenance activities.

## **Federal funds**

### **Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Program: CMAQ FAST Act § 1114; 23 U.S.C. 149**

The CMAQ program funds transportation projects or programs that contribute to the attainment or maintenance of the National Ambient Air Quality Standards, including nonmotorized trails and pathways if they contribute to better air quality.

### **Land and Water Conservation Fund: Public Law 116-152**

The Land and Water Conservation Fund provides matching grants to state and local governments for the acquisition and development of public outdoor recreation areas and facilities.

### **National Coastal Zone Management Program: Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972**

The partnership administered by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration between the federal government and U.S. coastal and Great Lakes states and territories addresses national coastal issues. The act provides the basis for protecting, restoring and responsibly developing the nation's diverse coastal communities and resources, which may include providing public access for recreation, such as water trails.

### **Recreational Trails Program: Title 23 of the U.S. Code, section 206**

The program dedicates revenues from federal gas tax for maintenance and development of recreation trails. Funds must be distributed to project types that meet an allocation formula identified in the legislation: 30% motorized, 30% nonmotorized and 40% diversified use. Additionally, the program requires an advisory board made up of trail users to meet every fiscal year to provide program guidance.

### **Transportation Alternatives Program: TAP FAST Ac, § 1109; 23 U.S.C. 133(h)**

TAP is a competitive grant program that uses federal transportation funds designated by Congress for projects such as multi-use pathways, pedestrian and bicycle safety improvements and preservation of historic transportation facilities that enhance the intermodal transportation system and provide safe alternative transportation options. These investments support place-based economic development by offering transportation choices, promoting walkability and improving quality of life.

## Appendix five: Maps



### State-designated trails

- 35** Biking trails
- 36** Cross-country ski and snowshoe trails
- 37** Equine trails
- 38** Hiking trails
- 39** Iron Belle routes and Great Lake-to-Lake routes
- 40** Off-road vehicle and motorcycle trails
- 41** Rail trails
- 42** Snowmobile trails
- 43** Water trails

# State-designated biking trails

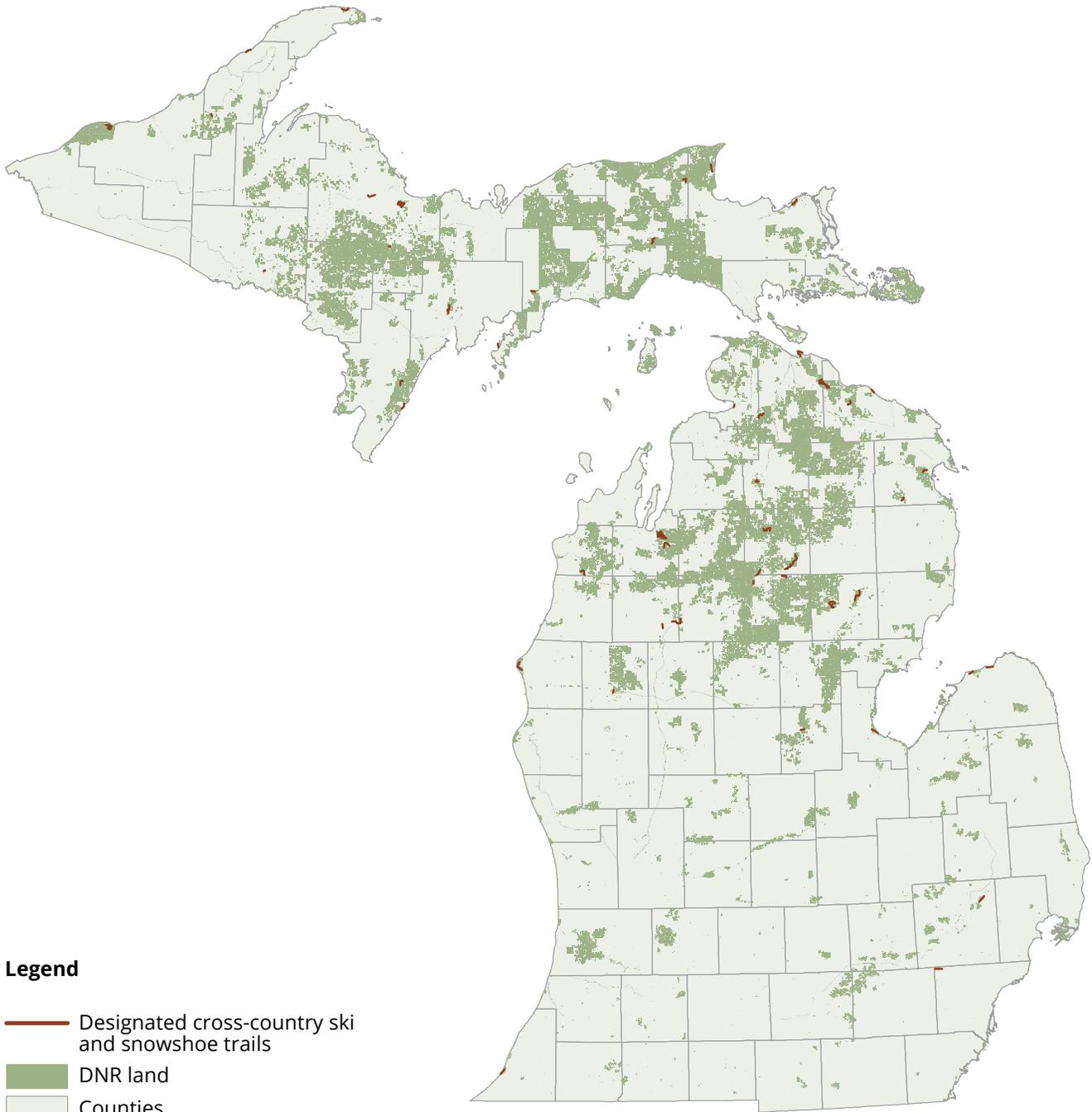


## Legend

- Designated biking trails
- DNR land
- Counties



# State-designated cross-country ski and snowshoe trails



## Legend

- Designated cross-country ski and snowshoe trails
- DNR land
- Counties



# State-designated equine trails



## Legend

- Designated equine trails
- DNR land
- Counties

0 25 50 100 miles

# State-designated hiking trails

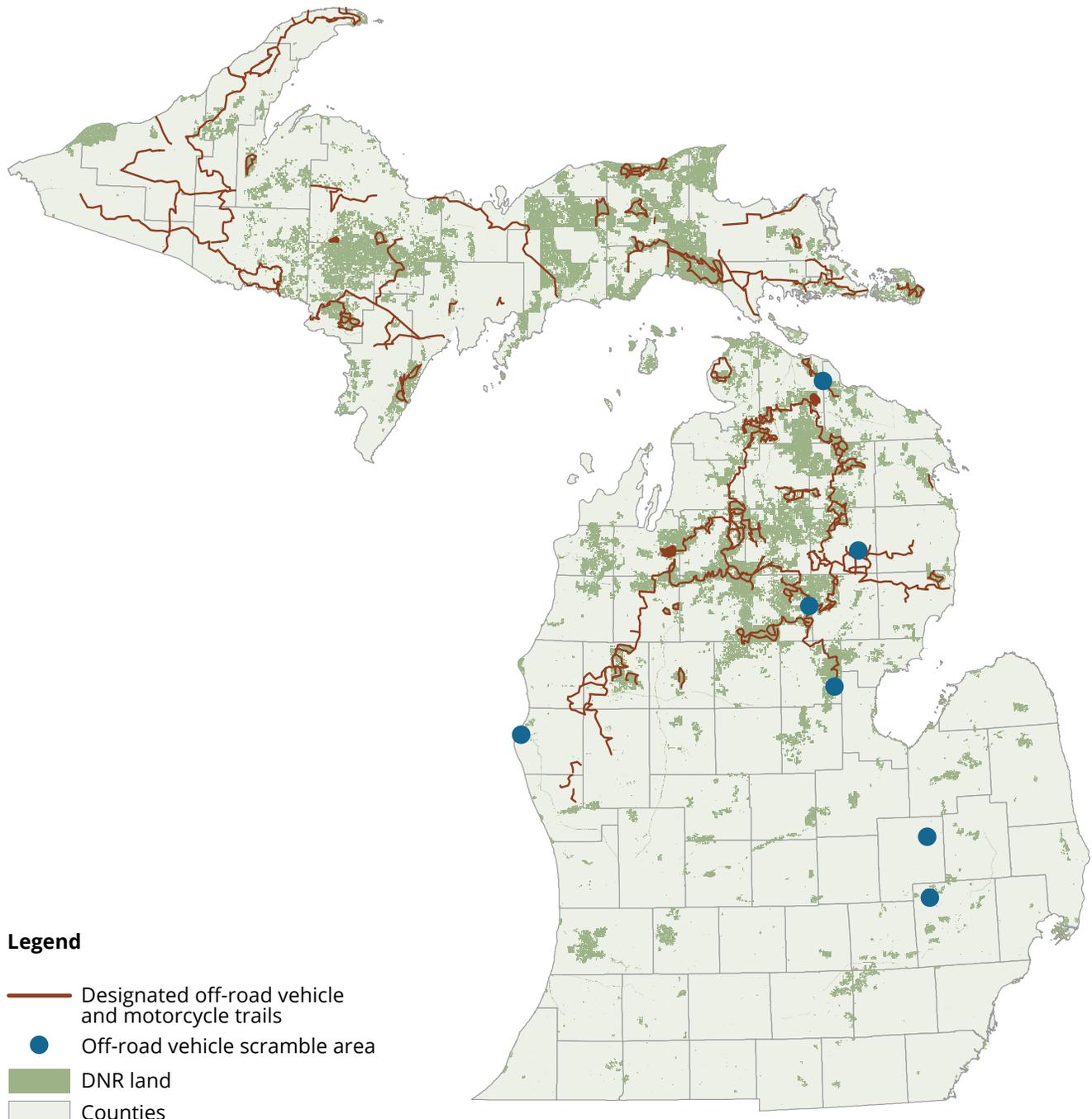


# Michigan state-designated trails

Iron Belle routes and Great Lake-to-Lake routes



# State-designated off-road vehicle and motorcycle trails



## Legend

- Designated off-road vehicle and motorcycle trails
- Off-road vehicle scramble area
- DNR land
- Counties

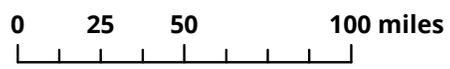


# State-designated rail trails

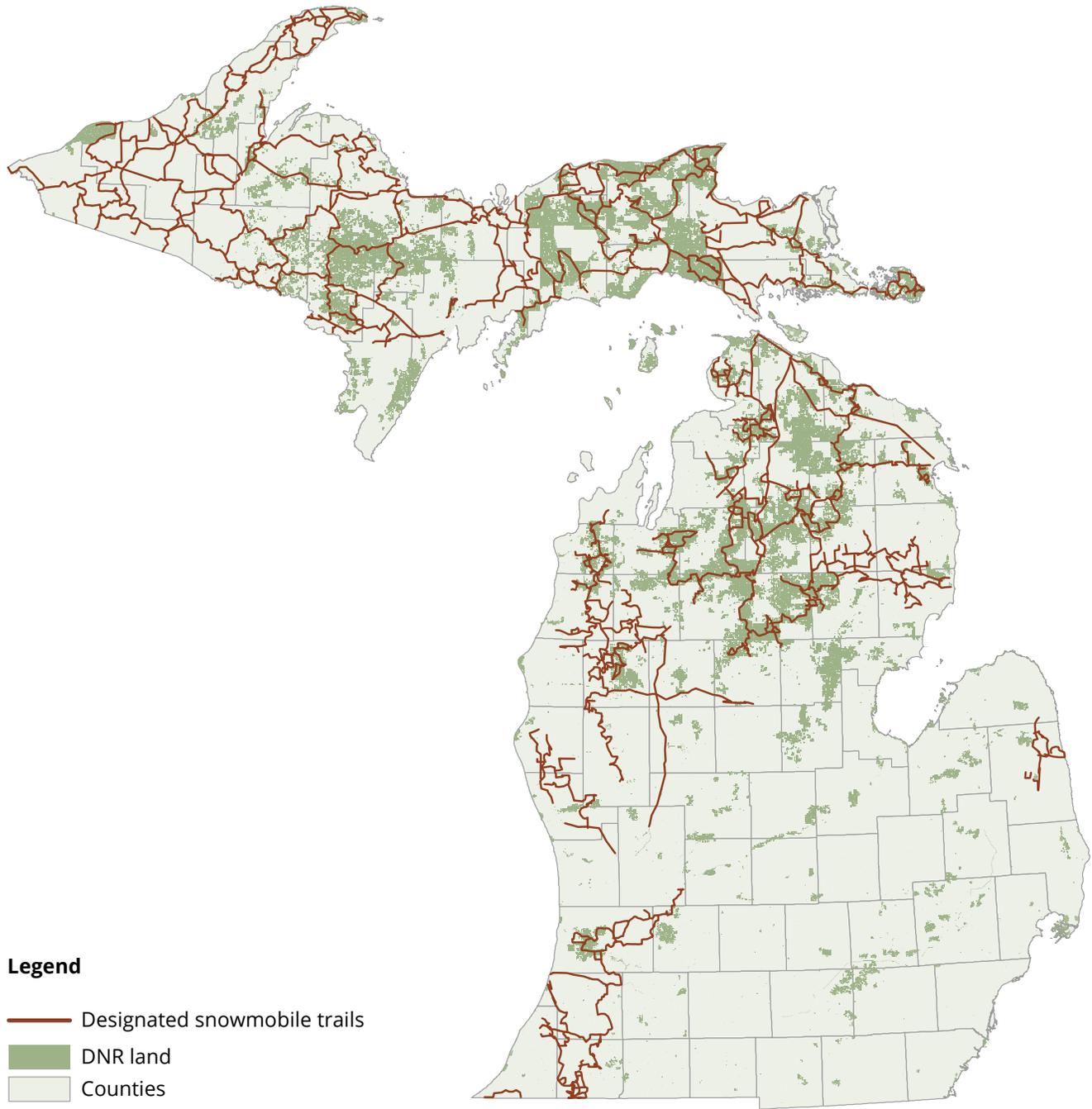


## Legend

- Designated rail trails
- DNR land
- Counties



# State-designated snowmobile trails



## Legend

- Designated snowmobile trails
- DNR land
- Counties



# State-designated water trails



## Legend

-  Designated water trails
-  DNR land
-  Counties

