

**QUESTIONS & ANSWERS FOR [AMERICAN TRAILS](#) WEBINAR:  
Understanding the National Recreation Trails (NRT) Program  
June 10, 2021**

**Christina asks:** Where can we find the information about the trail signage program?

**Candace answered:** Here is a link to the recent webinar we did on the signage program that we can work with NRTs on. There are additional links on that webpage with more details on the program itself and our partnership with Smart Outdoor. <https://www.americantrails.org/training/creating-a-smart-sustainable-safety-sign-initiative-program>

**Candace asks:** In regards to the application process, is there a PDF or just the questions that will be asked in advance so those interested in applying for designation are able to see them and prepare as well as do they have to complete the application process and when it's sitting or are they able to come back to it?

**Peter answered:** When you go to the application page on American trails it gives you a view checklist or something like that. That gives you all the questions that are going to be asked in the application. And then, when you go to actually apply you will be given a user account and everything and you can log back in anytime and make changes. So you can start filling in information as you go, putting in resources kind of thing, but keep in mind that ever first deadline for bringing in new trails but even pass then if I reach out to you and say I did a better map , you can still could go in and upload those resources. It's not a sit down do it all kind of thing. Your application should be as thorough and complete by that November 1 deadline.

**Matt answered:** I will add in preparation for this webinar I realized that the Forest Service information is pretty lacking. It's available out there and on to work with American trails to update some of that information. And get our application form available on there and that will guide you to the whole process. I will add in my previous experience working with these it was a little bit of a back-and-forth process. They submitted a package and we provided feedback and said we need a better map work can be added to this information and then the organization that was helping pull that application together provided the information and we added it to the package. What we want is a complete application as we can get when you submit your application there is still an opportunity to improve things after the fact if we realize there are some gaps.

**Corey asks:** If you are designated a National Recreation Trail, do you need to go through the full application for National Water Trail designation?

**Peter answered:** No, its two different applications. I'm sorry I didn't get too much into the water application today. Most of it is the same questions is just a different form. So because the national water trail program came about in 2012, we had to go through the whole federal registrar to this process to establish an allocation process for that. So we had the opportunity to include some different questions or additional questions. But, no, you do not have to apply for both. It's either one or the other.

**Eli asks:** Are there any water trails that are also wild and scenic?

**FWS representative answered:** The Musconetcong Watershed National Water Trail and the Missouri National Recreational River Water Trail. Those are the only ones I know of. Please note that it's not a mile-for-mile overlap on the two designations. I will ask the other agencies, but I'm pretty sure that's it.

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**Julia asks:** If the trail is owned by a city parks department, would we still need the state trail admin letter?

**Peter answered:** Yes. Anything that is not on federal land needs that state trail administrator that's mostly for their awareness and approval. So, yes, anything under the federal state letter.

**Maybe I missed this, but what does the program fund? Construction and maintenance? Volunteer programs?**

**Mike answered:** The program does not actually, have any funds associated with it. When you apply and become an NRT you don't automatically get any funding with that. But I was talking about is using that designation, that stamp of approval, in RTP funding applications or really any foundations for future funding support that you try to go after. It adds the legitimacy to your trail to make you more successful and going after funds. I think the most direct opportunity is the recreational trails program. In many states, you have extra points or emphasis if you designate that your part of the national trail system which is what NRT's are. And then I had mentioned that American trails is working on starting up a trail fund. I'm not sure if that is where the question is oriented. That is something that is coming down the road. I hope we don't know what it will look like exactly but we hope to provide NRT findings through that as well as additional funding and a be focused on maintenance and construction of trails. Mostly, looking at solving the trail maintenance backlog. City, state, county and federal lands. I think that is where is going to focus most of his energy. Again, that does not exist quite yet but we are working hard on making that happen.

**Laura asks:** Water trails can be National Rec Trails as well as National Water Trails, yes? They could be designated as either? I believe Lake Michigan in Chicago and Indiana is designated as a national recreational trail not a national water trail even though it is a water trail

**Peter answered:** They are one and the same. So there's national recreation trail program and a subset of that is a cold and national water trails. So if designated there is a different signage for that so I'm not sure we have a picture on any of the slides but it has the same review criteria with the additional of some other ones like best manager practices. National water trails are still part of the national recreation trail system. So that 1300 trail count that we acknowledge, that includes water trails, as well.

**To clarify it sounds like if the trail is a water trail you can no longer apply for NRT status you must apply for National Water Trail status. Is this the case?**

**Peter answered:** It depends on how you want your trail to be recognized. It is a true national water trail it would make sense to apply for national water trail but if you want to apply to just be national recreation trail that's fine. It's the same benefits. You get the same recognition. You get access to trail signage, use the logo, all that kind of stuff. And if you there can be just a water trail that wants to be a national recreation trail that's fine. We had that happened a couple years ago. They just wanted to be a regular national recreation trail, fine. If you want to be recognized as a national water trail then you should do that application process but it's really just a naming difference. Different signage that you get along with your trail. Same benefits, pretty much the same process, same review process, same

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engagement kind of thing. Same criteria. If your trail is all in water I would suggest national water trail and if your trail is all on land I would suggest national recreation trail

**Laurence asks:** How do folks obtain the NRT signs?

**Candace answered:** You can go to [www.americantrails.org/store](http://www.americantrails.org/store) and click on the NRT signs and from there choose the plastic or metal signs.

**Lawrence asks:** What role(s) can 501c3 nonprofits play in applying for or supporting applications in this program?

**Peter answered:** You are just as eligible to apply as anyone else. A lot of these applications sometimes they come from land management agencies, we had one in Fort Laramie national historic site that was applied for by someone at the park. But a lot of times, it is a trail nonprofit that does the application. They are the main, they will put the trail manager contact in their but they are eligible. Nonprofit are just as eligible to apply as anyone else. As long as they meet all the criteria and then also a lot of times nonprofits can supply that supporting material. So say, for example, park service unit applies for designation but there is a friends group of the Park service unit that supports it as well. So, there is really just because 501(c)(3) nonprofit there is nothing stopping from you from applying or supporting anyone is applying.

**Matt answered:** And my experience I've seen a lot of these applications driven by more of the support groups in the 501(c) (3) type organizations more than the agency.

**Peter answered:** Trail applications that you come in art from nonprofits, a decent amount. It's really a mixed bag but every year we get probably at least and a half are coming from nonprofits.

**Is there an application fee?**

**Peter answered:** No

**Matt answered:** No

**Mike answered:** No

**Lisa asks:** What are some ways we (as a NRT) can maximize this hugely important designation?

**Mike answered:** I could have been there. I think to some degree utilizing those benefits I think are the best way to do it. Contacting American trails or the Park service or the Forest Service and working with them to make that information as robust as possible. We would be happy to join in on any press releases that you do locally. We will provide support and comments" and do everything we can to really highlight that this is a nationally recognized trail that your community should be incredibly proud of. If you do that effectively and we try to do that to the degree we can at the national organization but really it's the local people that can get this done effectively. Reaching out to your local paper, reaching out to local magazines or TV stations or interviews or things like that. We were involved a recent designation from two years ago, not this last one, the Chippewa Valley trail in Wisconsin and they did a really great

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job of reaching out and getting articles in magazines and really developing that community pride in the trail. By putting up those NRT signs, they are free, which you can get off the American trails website. Just put those all over. Every time the public has an opportunity to drive by or see that trail connection they, put in NRT sign and let it know it's a high-value asset that they should be proud of.

**Peter answered:** Is something in addition to that. Mike mentioned signage. If you are a designated national recreation trail you do have the rights to use the national recreation trail logo on any educational or promotional materials as long as it is not for sale. So any noncommercial product. That little on the top right of your screen, that JPEG or that image of the logo, you can use that. At your trailhead if you have you can use that there or if you have a brochure or anything like that. So if you have permission to use that just for your trail as long as it is on promotional, educational, noncommercial materials. And you can contact Candace Gallagher at American trails if you need that.

**Michael asks:** You said the trail needs to be open for 10 years. Are trails that are closed seasonally still eligible?

**Peter answered:** Yes

**Mike asks:** Since trail construction destroys habitat, how can you say that they contribute to "conservation"?

**Brenda answered:** Great question. First of all, as I mentioned during the presentation, the National Trails System Act is rooted in the values of conservation and stemmed from the environmental era of the 1960s (see Lyndon Johnson's Speech on Conservation and Natural Beauty which was the precursor to development of the National Trails System Act:

[https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/special-message-the-congress-conservation-and-restoration-natural-beauty.](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/special-message-the-congress-conservation-and-restoration-natural-beauty))

The stated purposes of the Act are to "promote the preservation of, public access to, travel within, and enjoyment and appreciation of the open-air, outdoor areas and historic resources of the Nation" (16USC 1241). This is grounded in the philosophy that people won't care about and work to protect the places they don't know about, so it is important to provide people with access to the places we want to conserve. The purpose of National Scenic Trails in particular is to "provide for maximum outdoor recreation potential and for the conservation and enjoyment of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural or cultural qualities of the areas through which such trails may pass" (16 USC 1242). Part 16 USC 1247(k) of the Act specifically references the importance of the "conservation purpose of preserving or enhancing the recreational, scenic, natural or historic values of components of the national trails system." Consequently, the National Trails System provides a great leverage point for promoting conservation of the lands through which the trails pass. The agencies are charged with avoiding activities that would "substantially interfere" with the purposes of the trails, so this often results in management actions that result in more naturally-appearing and undeveloped landscapes along these trails in order to promote high quality recreation experiences, protect viewsheds (or the scenery from the trail) and preserve historic features. Undeveloped or minimally developed, highly scenic landscapes are often very compatible with wildlife management goals. Additionally, national scenic and historic trails and NRTs are often a catalyst for enabling agencies to purchase conservation easements or fee title in order to protect

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viewsheds and historic features along NSHTs. Again, protecting viewsheds means keeping or promoting lands in a more natural and less developed state, which is then good for wildlife.

It is true that new trail construction may lead to disruptions to wildlife, but we strive to minimize or mitigate impacts with various management actions, such as seasonal closures (for example, to close an area that functions as winter elk habitat), proper trail design (for example, to avoid routing near known bird nesting sites), and other requirements (such as to keep dogs on a leash so as not to chase wildlife). Additionally, trails serve a key role in focusing user impacts on a narrow tread. People will go into the woods and carve a path or multiple paths to places they want to go, even if we don't build trails. If no trails exist they will spread out their impact in a web of user created tracks. By building a trail through sensitive habitat, we are able to confine and guide user impacts in a way that best minimizes resource damage and meets wildlife management goals.

Here's a great resource on this topic from American Trails:

<https://www.americantrails.org/resources/planning-trails-with-wildlife-in-mind-introduction>

I also encourage you to check out the Continental Divide Trail Coalition's website which helps to illustrate my point that the National Trails System is a catalyst for conservation: <https://continentaldividetrail.org/>. Be sure to check out their atlas of the trail, which highlights wildlife along the trail and associated migration corridors.

**Why are vehicles allowed on trails, since they are able to use existing roads, and they degrade the experience of the pedestrian users?**

**Brenda answered:** As mentioned above, the intent of the National Trails System Act was to promote access to the outdoors, which will enable people to derive the physical and mental health benefits from outdoor recreation and lead people to feel connected to public lands and thus be more likely to support conservation of those lands.

People choose to recreate in different ways, and not everyone chooses to hike. Consequently, Congress specifically included a range of uses that may be allowed on National Recreation Trails in the Act in order to enable all Americans to derive the benefits from engagement in outdoor recreation activities. For hikers who dislike being on the same trails as motorized users there are a number of non-motorized trail miles across federal and state lands nationwide.

**Peter asks:** In USFS, authority to designate new NRTs has been delegated and re-delegated from SecOfAg to USFS Chief to Regional Foresters (and possibly even further in some cases). Doesn't this risk diluting or lessening the perceived value or "standing" of NRTs and the entire National Trails System?

**Matt answered:** I'm aware the authority has been delegated down. I'm not sure and necessarily dilutes the NRT program or the designation so much. It's not as if we are designating hundreds of them, I still think there is a lot of thought that goes into these designations and as I mentioned before even though the designation has gone down to regional Forster's I'm not personally aware of any designations going beyond that. Even in the last one I was involved in they make sure that the Washington office was on board before they wanted to move forward. There was a full review by the department not just the trail team but the higher ups of the department at agriculture above the trail team to make sure they

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reported it before the regional forest supported it. I understand the thought process behind the question but if I felt like every forest supervisor and district ranger was going around designating every trail as a NRT I could see that happening but at this point it is not that case at all. I think Peter might be able, he probably knows better than I do. The Forest Service is not designating a lot of these. The extension to the Palmetto trail that was completed last year was one of the first Forest Service trails to get an NRT designation in quite some time. Possible but I don't think that is really the case at this time.

**Once established, how can an NRT be un-established?**

I know of several that are in disrepair, are managed-by-neglect, are ignored, are not particularly worthy or valued by current public or agency managers, or exist "only on paper".

**Peter answered:** That's a simple process. Pretty much just right to myself or American trails acknowledging that this trail is a torn apart, we don't have the means to fix it up, we want to be de-designated. If you're the land owner or trail manager and you make that decision you let us know and we will pretty much undesignated. We take it off the database so no one can find it, we archive it, put RN on the does it administered of site and then asked that we take your signage down.

**Rodger asks:** Can a local citizen initiate the application?

**Peter answered:** Yes

**Mike answered:** They are obviously going to have to work at their local land management in the process but they can definitely initiate.

**Sandra asks:** Can NRT trails cross roads?

**Peter answered:** Yes, they can. We can assess if it crosses the road it can be on the shoulder but that road crossing if it is safe and accessible like there's a crosswalk, some kind of rumble strips that are placed on the side so that people know, as long as that is recognized as part of the trail. It is probably part of the trail best management practices and part of the management planning that is just across the road then yes, that is possible. As long as it's incredibly safe, there is good signage saying the trail is that way.

**Is it difficult to get NRT designation? Once an application has been submitted, how long does it take to get a designation determination?**

**Peter answered:** I can speak for the Department of Interior side. New evocations come in November 1 and then our team gets together from about November to February to do our due diligence review. So the program management side I will make sure the criteria's are met if there's anything else I need I will work with whoever the applicant is and then we usually have a review thing where local, someone in the general local area that has knowledge of the trail talks through us more and gives recommendations on how to improve the application and how to move forward. That occurs from about November to February. And then, start doing administrative process with the intention that recognition is done by national trails day which is always the first Friday in June. So that's why I alluded to the new 10 trails that we got last week. So very long story short November 2 ideally June. Were at the mercy of the administrations. So keep that in mind. November to June. I'm not sure the timeline for forest service.

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**Matt answered:** Our process is not quite as formalized. We don't have a set cycle that applications must be in by this date. On the Forest Service side is driven by the local level. So it's when that gets put into the district level and works its way up. I was part of the Palmetto trail that just got NRT designation last fall and that process took quite a while because there's a lot of back-and-forth to get our maps and information and everything up to the standard we wanted it before we sent it up for final approval. So it really depends on how high quality of a product or application you start with. I would say, in theory, 4 to 6 months is probably what it takes from beginning to end but again with administrative things that go on and sometimes it can take a little longer. I think Palmetto took a little while because we really wanted to make sure we were telling the story and all the details how the divalent before we set it up for final approval. Even the process we actually set it up for approval, for review before the regional Forster wanted to (Word?).

**Is there a place we can see applications that have been approved in the past?**

**Tatiana asks:** 10 years for the trails to be open before designation or after the designation?

**Peter answered:** That is what Matt kind of alluded to say your trail needs to be maintained and open for public access. Tenant years is a little arbitrary, we prefer to be open and existing forever but since your trail has been designated NRT it's already existing, there's no gaps, has been used and maintained so is just reassuring that that trail is going to be open and maintained that you don't just get NRT designation and let it fall by the wayside. We want to keep that status as a high-caliber trail ongoing and ideally into perpetuity but we have to list as 10 years.

**Walter asks:** What if part of proposed trail is on a public road?

**Peter answered:** If there is a sidewalk its fine, if there's a bike lane there's fine but nothing on the shoulder. It's all part of that continuity of a trail. It technically that would be a trail gap if there's no safe accessible way to continue. Any non-pedestrian or official bicycle lane or something like that is not going to be considered but that does alluded to something that maybe this is a question that's worth pointing out. Say you have 100 mile trail in a perfect world that would be awesome if the trail was in perfect condition but say it's a scenario like Mike described, 50 miles into it there's a break in the trail where you would have to walk on a road, which would make the entire 100 mile trail not eligible. But you can do segment of your trail. That is totally fine. That first 50 miles is a great trail and then it just kind of ends at the trailhead along the road you can designate that part. It does not have to be the entire trailer trail system. It can be just one little, or any length trail as long as it meets the criteria's. If it's worthy of designation. It can also be a trail system. We just had one designated two years ago, a state park in Colorado that the entire state park trail system it is all continuous connected looping trail. That NRT was designated as the state park trail loop kind of thing. So all the trails met the criteria, they all connect, there's no gaps, good for all trail users so that the scenario where the entire trail system was designated and then there has been other examples where they just want to do this little two mile segment because that's what was important.

**Matt answered:** That what was going through my mind on this discussion. I know some of the NRT's I've dealt with have a road blocks but they are shorter distance and they are gravel roads or logging roads or even Forest Service system roads but low traffic. I know from some of the ones I've dealt with, our goal

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annually is to try to give as much off the gravel roads as we can. I know from the first service review side of things if having a section on one of those roads would necessarily kick it out. I agree with Peter, if you're trying to walk on the shoulder of a road, paved road, high-traffic road, you have to go down U.S. 80 for like half a mile, that's a trail break. But I think if you are on a Forest Service land on Forest Service roads, gravel roads, slow traffic situations, I don't think they would necessarily kick you out. I don't know for a fact that and think about all the examples in NRT's I've dealt with on the forest side they were like short road sections they were low traffic roads.