

Funding for Colorado's Trails

Goal: Seek financial sustainability for the Trails Program.

- Publicize the funding challenges faced by all trail providers and managers across Colorado.
- Highlight the success and benefits to trail recreation stemming from the user-funded model used for motorized trail recreation.
- Explore how to improve funding levels and reliability for non-motorized trail recreation.

Background

Unquestionably, GOCO has provided the huge benefits to the recreation providers and the citizens of Colorado. However, the continuing increase in both population and the popularity of outdoor recreation (due to various reasons, not the least of which is the Colorado Lifestyle and quality of life), more trails are needed, albeit with appropriate balance to protect and manage wildlife, habitat and other environmental considerations.

Existing funding sources, with wise, thoughtful and careful expenditures (such as the Trails Program and GOCO seek to accomplish with the trail grant award process), likely can cover new construction needs as well as maintenance on many of the most important trail networks in Colorado, for the next several years. This is especially true due to the strong, municipal and regional level programs in many Colorado counties. Together, the State Trails Program, GOCO, and the local government agencies leverage available funds very effectively, have done so for literally decades and likely will continue to accomplish that level of service to the citizens in the future.

Despite this strong possibility, maintenance of trails, especially non-motorized trails, already includes a very large and significant maintenance backlog. Taking the position that the trail management agencies should prioritize a "maintain what we have, first" approach to the exclusion of building new trails to accommodate the increase in population, will only serve to increase the wear and tear on existing trail systems, increasing the maintenance needs there, without decreasing the existing maintenance backlog.

Trail managers across Colorado already leverage their budgets to address increasing needs and priority maintenance needs. Simply put, the available budgets do not now, and likely have not in the past several decades ever been adequate enough to keep up with increasing demand, highest priority maintenance needs and address that maintenance left unaddressed in the past, which is the multi-million dollar backlog identified by recreation managers.

Critically, when factoring in the challenges facing wildlife due to increased population, increased human-wildlife interaction, decreasing habitat, climate change and related factors, the importance of well-designed trails that can simultaneously protect wildlife and habitat while expanding people's understanding of wildlife and habitat so that more citizens become not only stewards but advocates as well. For most Coloradans and visitors to Colorado, trails are the nexus to wildlife and the best available opportunity to educate and strengthen conservation efforts.

Specifics on Scope of Problem

Local and Regional Government Needs

Colorado's previous SCORP plans demonstrate that walking, hiking and jogging represent the most popular outdoor recreational activities in Colorado. In the 2012 Local Government Survey, CPW included specific questions related to trails as well as all other types of recreation (SCORP also includes citizen participation in hunting, fishing, and other wildlife related activities). Key points from the Local Government Survey included:

Top five most significant investment needs:

1. Community trail systems
2. Regional trail systems
3. Additional trail corridors, conservation easements, and/or rights of way
4. Team sports facilities
5. Additional opportunities/access for water-based recreation

Additional investment needs (Question 25) noted one or more times include:

- Off-leash dog areas
- Additional parking access to federal public land
- Motorized trail uses and road access. Existing roads should be open to motorized travel

Funding for trails is and likely will continue to be a high priority among local and regional providers for the next decade and beyond.

This report does not consider funding for trails for the federal agencies such as the US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service or other federal agencies. These agencies face significant challenges, and those challenges translate into issues and concerns for recreationists using federal trails and lands.

Federal Funding for State, Local and Regional Agencies

Federal funds, more specifically Land Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and Recreation Trails Program (RTP), are often not reliable, as Congressional allocations can fluctuate substantially year to year. Yet, along with Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), these are the principal funding streams available to non-motorized trail maintenance and construction. Fortunately, motorized trail recreation in Colorado relies on self-generated revenues from registration of motorized trail vehicles, such as OHVs and snowmobiles. There is a portion of RTP funding specifically dedicated to motorized trail recreation.

The fluctuations in federal funding and the lack of a dedicated funding source for non-motorized trails, means that the most popular type of recreation in Colorado does not have a reliable funding stream. The table below shows the recent levels of funding for non-motorized trails.

Table E.1 Non-motorized Trail Grant Funding

Fiscal Year Allocations	Great Outdoors Colorado (Parks Share)	Recreational Trails Program (Federal)	Land and Water Conservation Fund
FY 02-03	\$546,763	\$594,682	\$1,243,700
FY 03-04	\$300,000	\$460,820	\$1,568,336
FY 04-05	\$500,000	\$425,561	\$1,540,396
FY 05-06	\$504,500	\$525,903	\$478,347
FY 06-07	\$624,650	\$200,417	\$471,697
FY 07-08	\$500,000	\$404,240	\$394,719
FY 08-09	\$499,999	\$669,542	\$585,257
FY 09-10	\$500,000	\$359,132	\$1,002,171
FY 10-11	\$500,000	\$59,736	\$646,702
FY 11-12	\$552,632	\$1,144,541	\$734,450
FY 12-13	\$500,000	\$243,192	\$600,000
FY 13-14	\$550,000	\$802,076	\$477,379
FY 14-15	\$550,000	\$695,432	\$790,538
FY 15-16	\$500,000	\$717,688	\$759,963
FY 16-17	\$500,000	\$773,035	\$750,000

Whereas GOCO funding for trails has been largely consistent, and is expected to remain so, funding from federal sources fluctuates. What the table does not show is the frequency of concerns as to whether these federal funds will be available whenever Congressional committees hold up the allocations for political reasons. At such times, the Trails Program staff may provisionally approve some grants, pending Congressional action at some point during the fiscal year. Generally, this translates into grants farther down the list getting an award if the grant

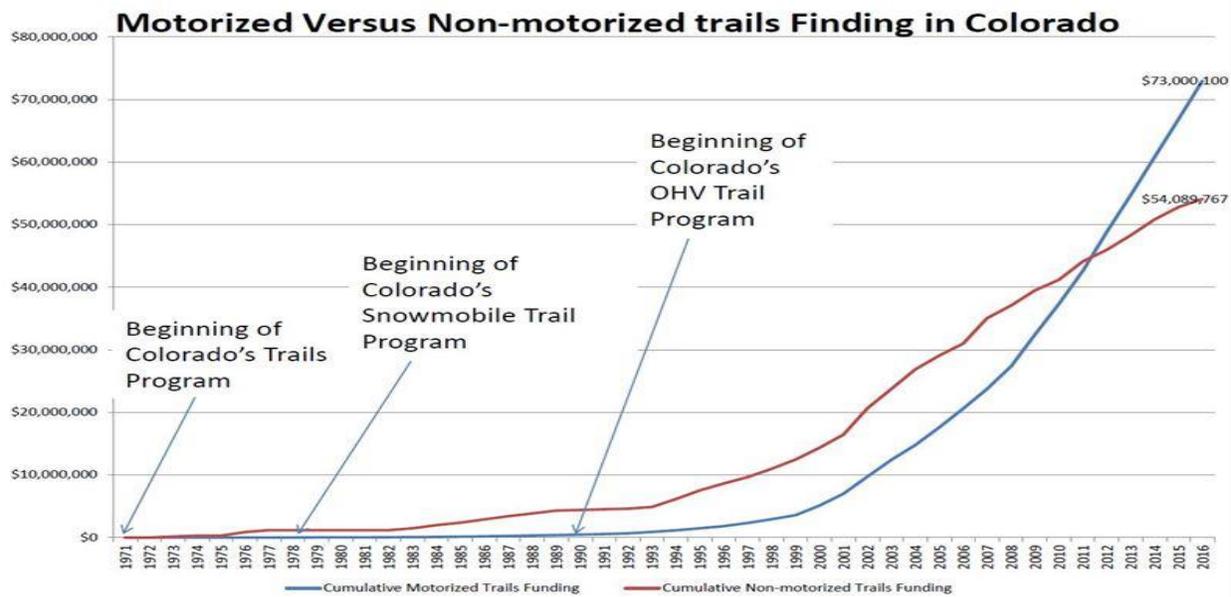
meets the specific criteria and requirements of the federal programs. The cycle is not conducive to effective grant management.

The average funding over the past decade for non-motorized trail grants is about \$2.5 million annually. Comparatively, the average funding during that period for OHV trail grants is about \$3.5 million annually and roughly \$1 million annually for snowmobiles. Although the number hikers, bikers, equestrian and other non-motorized trail users is much larger, funding for motorized trails is more consistent and greater, due to the dedicated funding sources for OHVs and snowmobiles.

As Colorado’s population increases, especially along the Front Range and in already populated areas such as Summit and Mesa counties, demand for trails will increase. This will include both urban area trails and backcountry trails. Funding challenges are likely to increase.

Motorized and Non-motorized Grants

Over time, the cumulative effect of reliable funding for motorized grants is apparent. The graph below shows that despite the “head start” in funding for non-motorized trails



Considerations

The Parks and Wildlife Commission are already discussing how to address this and other funding challenges. Participants at a recent State Trails Committee meeting¹ discussed five likely categories to consider. These are:

1. Sales tax on recreation equipment, i.e., “boot tax”
2. User fees – bike registration, etc.
3. Severance tax or other reallocation of existing tax revenues
4. Voluntary tax or donation
5. Habitat Stamp type permit or fee or vehicle fee

Additionally, the Governor’s Trails Council has discussed the problem of finding additional funding for non-motorized trails. At this writing, there is no consensus on how to address this issue.

¹ July 2016 State Trails Committee meeting.