

A MONTANA TRAILS COALITION REPORT



**MONTANA
TRAILS
IN CRISIS**



OCTOBER 9, 2018



KEY TAKEAWAYS

In Montana, the funding for our public land trails isn't keeping up with the growing demand.

Since 2014, the Recreational Trails Program (RTP) has generated over \$24 million for 267 motorized, non-motorized, and diverse (motorized and non-motorized) trail projects that preserve Montana's legacy of accessible public lands for hunting, hiking, motorized use, and biking. Even so, it has left 128 projects unfunded, leaving millions of dollars on the table¹ as the demand for public trails continues to grow.

Grants Requested: 395

Grants Awarded: 267 (67.59%)

Grants Unfunded: 128 (32.41%)

Total Grant Dollars Awarded: \$7,994,441

Total Matching Amount (in-kind and monetary): \$16,566,658

Average Match Value as a Percentage of Grant: 200%

Total Impact: \$24,561,099

Gap Between Grant Money Requested and Awarded: \$6,830,816

Total Value of Unfunded Grants: \$4,623,210

Potential Value of Unfunded Applications: \$13,800,000²

Counties Applied for Grants: 34 of 56 (60.7%)

Counties Awarded Grants: 19 of 56 (33.9%)

The public land access that we enjoy now isn't an accident. The generations that preceded us took care to preserve our public lands and build the trails that we depend on, and it's now up to us to do the same.

As pressure on Montana's public land infrastructure increases, it is essential that we invest in our trails to preserve our way of life.

¹ At least \$9 million as a conservative estimate. The average 200% match would provide \$13.8 million.

² \$4.6 million in unsuccessful grants + 200% average match

MONTANA TRAILS

A Way of Life and a Way to Live

Big Sky Country is growing. Demand for trails is increasing in Montana, while the primary sources of trail funding are decreasing. Our trails, an essential part of our Montana way of life, are the arteries that connect us to the wild public lands we love, and they're in danger.

Criss-crossing 30 million acres of public land, our trails lead us to what's best about Montana: the outdoor traditions we pass down from one generation to the next. Your favorite fishing hole or hunting ground. Your grandfather's secret camping spot. The wild public land your family has used for generations, right out the back door. More than likely, a trail takes you to these treasured places with people you love.

Our outdoor way of life and, increasingly, the vital economic benefit that our public land trails provide, are not guaranteed for our children and grandchildren. Consider that Congress has cut trail funding by 32% since 1980, leaving our national forests with a \$296 million maintenance backlog. We've all noticed the missing signage, collapsed corrals, and eroded trails that are the symptoms of this funding crisis.

This failure to keep up with demand is a national problem, but waiting on Congress to fix it would be like counting on the cable guy to show up on time. Fortunately, when Montanans uncover a problem, we prefer to fix it ourselves or troubleshoot with our neighbors rather than hire outside help. We would do well to tackle our current trail crisis with the same attitude.

This report examines existing challenges and opportunities for trail construction and maintenance in Montana through the Recreational Trails Program (RTP). A close review of this program reveals a sterling track record of teamwork between Montanans who consistently provide the American taxpayer an exceptional return on investment.

Unfortunately, an audit of the program also confirms a huge missed opportunity: **more than 30% of projects that apply for RTP grants go unfunded** leaving hikers, snowmobilers, OHV riders, bikers, and equestrians long on outdoor traditions and short on trails. It's a literal and figurative dead end, and it's up to Montanans to close the gap between the trails that we depend on for our way of life and the funding shortfall that's letting them slip away.

OUR LIVES, OUR LIVELIHOODS

More than ever, our trails allow more Montanans to make a living in the place we call home. Whether it's a well-groomed snowmobile track, a rocky pack-and-saddle route, or an artfully banked mountain bike path, people will pay to get to the trailhead and beyond.

Over the last five years, outdoor recreation spending in Montana has increased 22 percent, from \$5.8 billion in 2013 to \$7.1 billion today. That spending generates \$2.2 billion in wages and 71,000 jobs.³

³ <https://outdoorindustry.org/state/montana/>

RECREATIONAL TRAILS PROGRAM

A Terrific Deal for the American Taxpayer

Created by Congress in 1991, the Recreational Trails Program directs U.S. Department of Transportation funding to states to build and maintain trails for hiking, off-road motorcycling, bicycling, equestrian, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, all-terrain vehicle, and four-wheel drive use. Over the last 25 years, states have received over \$1.3 billion in funding for local projects.

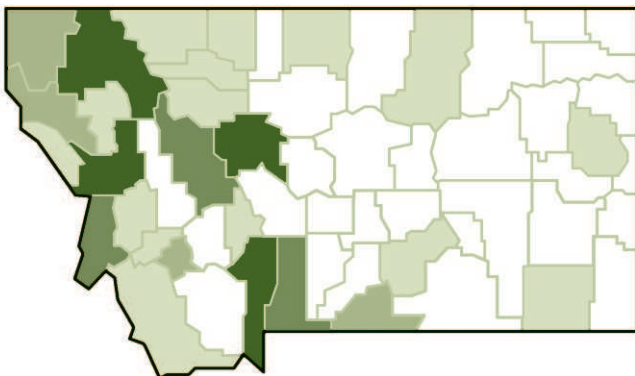
In Montana, these projects are identified through a competitive grant application process managed by the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks. Each project is proposed by local individuals and organizations across Montana. Funding is then dispersed equitably to motorized (30%), non-motorized (30%) and diversified (40%) projects.

OVERVIEW OF GRANTS AWARDED 2013–2018			
Use Type	Number of grants awarded	Number of grants not awarded	Share of grants awarded, by activity
Trail Motorcycle	82	13	86%
Snowmobile	101	17	86%
ATV	74	14	84%
X-Country Skiing	201	47	81%
Four Wheel Vehicles	37	9	80%
Equestrian	81	50	78%
Water Trail	35	14	71%
Hiking/Jogging	239	113	68%
Bicycle	195	96	67%

Over the last five years, projects have been funded in 19 different counties, from Richland and Powder River counties in eastern Montana to Sanders and Mineral counties on the Idaho border.

The diversity of project type and location is impressive, and every single project is required to deliver at least a 20% match in private funding, volunteer labor, and other in-kind contributions.

GRANTS AWARDED BY COUNTY 1 30



That's good, but here's the best part: **In Montana, we have blown past the 20% match requirement and been able to triple the RTP investment.** Since 2013, \$8 million in federal funding has flowed into the Treasure State. Montanans have leveraged those dollars to secure a total of \$24 million in volunteer labor, borrowed equipment, donated food and supplies, and private monetary contributions. That's a great outcome for the American taxpayer, but we're still leaving money on the table.

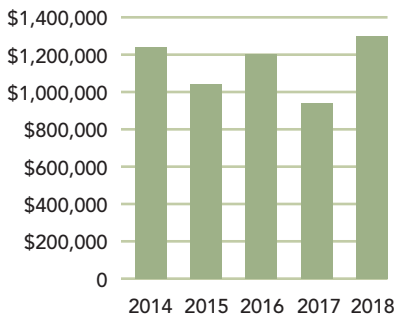
MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

Too Many Projects Left on the Table

Today, more than 30% of RTP proposals never receive funding.

In just the last five years, single- and diverse-use grants for 113 hiking and jogging, 96 bicycle, 53 motorized (four-wheel, ATV, snowmobile, or motorcycle), 50 equestrian, 47 cross-country skiing, and 14 water trail projects have been lined up on the starting block but never received dollars to move forward. In many communities across Montana, that means fewer trails, fewer trail users, and fewer trail users spending money on main street.

GAP BETWEEN AWARDED AND REQUESTED



To place this missed opportunity in perspective, imagine if Montana had received approximately \$4.6 million – the total amount requested in unapproved grants – in additional funding over the last five years to support all unfunded projects. In the best-case scenario, Montanans would match this funding with more than \$9 million, and **we could have generated nearly \$14 million in new or improved trail infrastructure.** Additionally, the counties would benefit from the associated dividends of this economy activity, including salaries, wages, and workforce training.

There's no question that trails are immensely important to Montanans. For example, a study conducted by the University Montana found that among visitors to Montana state parks, roughly 89% identified trails as the single most important amenity provided by the park. When looking at visitors between the ages of 18 and 35, that number increases to 95%.⁴ In the words of the study, this trail-hungry demographic represents "not just (the) current, but also tomorrow's visitor."

At the same time, more and more people are using Montana's public lands. Visitation to State Parks alone has grown 33% since 2012 and shows no sign of slowing.⁵ To manage and maintain our public land resources, our trail system must accommodate not only our current use but our future growth.

As demand for trails continues to grow, it's essential that the funding available to build and maintain them increases as well. While the RTP program has been a success, the amount of grant money awarded over the past five years has remained virtually stagnant. Maximizing the returns on the RTP program is important, but funding from the program alone will not match the growing demand for trails on our public lands.

MONTANA'S MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

There have been 128 grant requests of all types denied since 2014. The requests encompass motorized, non-motorized, and diverse use, and criss-cross the state from Troy to Cut Bank to Billings to Glendive. These three examples typify the kinds of projects that have not been approved and highlight the missed opportunities for Montana communities.

- **The town of Darby** requested \$42,000 to continue development of a diverse year-round non-motorized trail to connect schools, ball fields, and town parks.
- **The Ten Lakes Snowmobile Club** requested \$15,000 to renovate and improve the Birch Creek Trailhead to make it compliant with the Americans With Disabilities (ADA) Act.
- **The town of Belt** requested \$19,000 to establish a walking path along historic Belt Creek to provide a safe and sustainable way for residents of all ages to enjoy an already-popular scenic area.

⁴<https://bloximages.chicago2.vip.townnews.com/helenair.com/content/tncms/assets/v3/editorial/9/4b/94bca22f-a81b-5207-b7df-8a9979864596/5b8729a0d07f4.pdf.pdf>

⁵<https://leg.mt.gov/content/Committees/Interim/2017-2018/EQC/Meetings/Sept-2017/program-eval-parks.pdf>

OUR TRAILS, OUR SOLUTION

A Proposal for Trail Funding in the Treasure State

It's time for Montanans to take matters into our own hands and create a focused, fiscally responsible state-level program to fund trails on our public lands.

Many states have already established a state program to build and maintain trails, yet few states stand to gain more than Montana from such a program. Our public lands are abundant and our outdoor recreation economy is growing rapidly. We can't afford to be left behind.

A made-in-Montana trail program could take advantage of all the human potential currently not being harnessed by federal administration of RTP. For example:

- **A made-in-Montana trail program** could alleviate the burdensome grant process currently associated with RTP,

cutting red tape and allowing applications to be prepared and processed more efficiently.

- **A made-in-Montana trail program** could exercise greater flexibility in project funding. Right now, decision makers on RTP grants are bound by the strict 30/30/40 split between motorized, non-motorized, and diversified projects. So, even if there are enough strong motorized projects to justify spending 35% of funding pool, decision makers still have to observe the arbitrary 30% limit. Here in Montana, our State Trails Advisory Committee could score projects on their merits instead of penalizing good projects based on an federally imposed formula.

- **A made-in-Montana trail program** could improve funding flexibility and

THE JOCKO ROAD TRAIL, ARLEE

Grant: \$17,000 • Match: \$166,000
Total Impact: \$183,000

In 2014, the town of Arlee on the Flathead Indian Reservation in Lake County received a grant to help construct a 0.8-mile multi-use trail along the Jocko Road. Constructed as part of the town's plan to increase walking and biking to combat high rates of diabetes and heart disease, the initial \$17,000 grant was supplemented by over \$160,000 of monetary and in-kind donations. The new path allows children to safely walk and bike to school, and plans are being developed to add more trails to encourage outdoor recreation, raise property values, and provide safe commuting options for children.

SNOW SAFETY/TRAIL REPAIR, COOKE CITY

Grant: \$44,000 • Match: \$167,500
Total Impact: \$211,500

Combining winter avalanche education and summer trail maintenance, this grant improved the year-round experience for motorized and non-motorized users near Cooke City on the Gardiner Ranger District. The \$211,500 grant and match paid for a full-time winter ranger to assist with avalanche education, safety, and rescue, as well as with trail and warming hut maintenance. In the summer, it funded a crew of four seasonal workers who performed extensive maintenance of several mainline hoof-and-boot trails in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness including clearing blowdowns, installing new turnpikes, and adding and repairing signage.

streamline the grant process, making it easier for smaller communities to apply for and receive trails funding. The RTP grant process is arduous and complicated, which places it out of reach for many smaller communities. An easy-to-navigate Montana trail program could fund smaller projects across the state, ensuring trails funding is available to all communities that need it.

- **A made-in-Montana trail program** would be insulated from congressional dysfunction. Right now, RTP funding is consistently in doubt due to political gridlock in Washington, D.C. and the program is due to expire if it's not reauthorized by 2020.

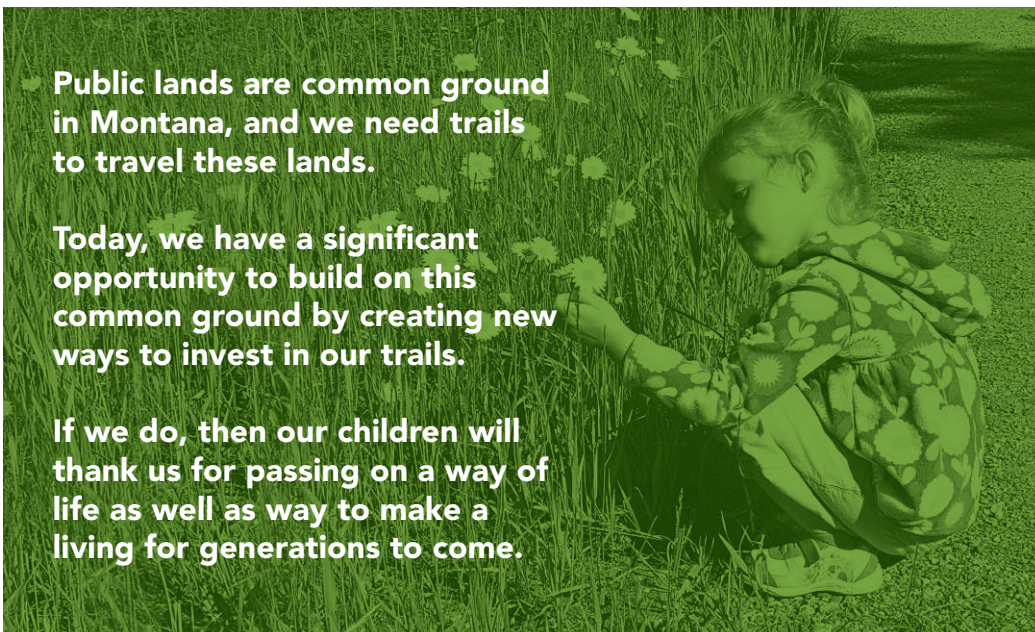
Perhaps most importantly, Montanans are ready and willing to work together to create this program.

According to the Outdoor Industry Association, 81% of Montanans participate in outdoor recreation each year and are more likely to participate in hiking and wildlife viewing than the average American.⁶

Even better, a recent Colorado College poll reports that 82% of Montanans consider themselves conservationists and a whopping 96% think outdoor recreation is important to the economic future of this state.⁷

OUR VISION

Trails for Future Generations



Public lands are common ground in Montana, and we need trails to travel these lands.

Today, we have a significant opportunity to build on this common ground by creating new ways to invest in our trails.

If we do, then our children will thank us for passing on a way of life as well as way to make a living for generations to come.

⁶https://outdoorindustry.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/OIA_RecEcoState_MT.pdf

⁷https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/stateoftherockies/conservationinthewest/2018/reports/ConservationintheWest_2018_StateFactSheet_Montana.pdf

The Montana Trails Coalition's mission is to work with individuals, organizations, and communities to support trails and outdoor recreation opportunities on public and private lands open for public use in Montana.

The Montana Trails Coalition

unites a diverse group of users around a singular mission, to support trail and outdoor recreation opportunities for the public.

Partners:

Bike Walk Montana

Montana Wilderness Association

MTB Missoula

Montana Trail Vehicle Riders Association

Montana Snowmobile Association

Backcountry Horsemen of Montana



montanatrailscoalition.org