



Advisory Council Members' Brief Guide to the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail Draft Comprehensive Plan

To guide long-term management of the [Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail](#) and fulfill the requirements of the [National Trails System Act](#), the Forest Service is preparing a comprehensive plan “for the acquisition, management, development, and use of the trail.” (16 U.S.C. 1244(e))

How can I access the draft comprehensive plan? The draft comprehensive plan is available on the [project website](#) and also in the [Pinyon Public folder](#) for this project. Select the folder labeled “Analysis.” Within the Analysis folder, the draft comprehensive plan is the PDF file named “20230316_PacificNorthwestNST_CP_PublicComment.pdf”. This is the version of the draft that was posted for public review and comment in March & April 2023.

What would the comprehensive plan do? The comprehensive plan would provide shared vision and high-level guidance to guide the actions of the Forest Service (as the lead federal agency responsible for administration and coordination across the trail), trail managers, and trail stewards regarding “the acquisition, management, development, and use of the trail.” (16 U.S.C. 1244(e)) The comprehensive plan would facilitate coordinated management across jurisdictions.

The comprehensive plan would not authorize on-the-ground actions. Local land managers or landowners retain authority for those project-level and land management planning-level decisions, which would be guided by the applicable laws, regulations, and policies of the local land manager, and may require separate environmental analysis by that land manager.

What must be in the comprehensive plan? The National Trails System Act says the comprehensive plan must include:

(1) specific objectives and practices to be observed in the management of the trail, including the identification of all significant natural, historical, and cultural resources to be preserved..., details of any anticipated cooperative agreements to be consummated with other entities, and an identified carrying capacity of the trail and a plan for its implementation;

(2) an acquisition or protection plan, by fiscal year for all lands to be acquired by fee title or lesser interest, along with detailed explanation of anticipated necessary cooperative agreements for any lands not to be acquired; and

(3) general and site-specific development plans including anticipated costs. (16 U.S.C. 1244(e))

Who would be bound by the comprehensive plan? The comprehensive plan is only binding on the Forest Service and other federal agencies that manage the trail, which include the National Park Service and Bureau of Land Management, and on federal lands.

It is not binding on non-federal entities such as tribes, state and local governments, private landowners, or non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Who will sign/approve the comprehensive plan? The Forest Service is the lead federal agency for administration of this trail, with responsibilities delegated to the agency by the Secretary of Agriculture. The Chief of the Forest Service is responsible for signing the comprehensive plan.

Most day-to-day administration is assigned to the Regional Forester of the Pacific Northwest Region (Region 6), including preparing the comprehensive plan and serves as the Responsible Official for environmental analysis associated with the comprehensive plan. Because part of the trail is in the Forest Service's Northern Region (Region 1), the Regional Forester of the Northern Region is engaged with and cooperates in these efforts. The Bureau of Land Management and National Park Service have also been engaged in development of the plan.

What is the relationship between the comprehensive plan for the trail and the land and resource management plans¹ (LRMPs) for federal lands? Where the trail is located on federal lands, the comprehensive plan must harmonize with the relevant LRMPs. (16 U.S.C. 1246(a)(2)) Both the comprehensive plan and LRMP would inform project-level planning along the trail. A decision on the comprehensive plan is not anticipated to amend existing LRMPs.

How would non-federal entities use the comprehensive plan? The comprehensive plan would provide shared vision for the entire trail by articulating its nature and purposes, the resources and values that are significant to the trail's nature and purposes, primary trail use(s), management objectives, and desired conditions, as well as best practices to achieve desired conditions. Tribes, state and local governments, private landowners, or NGOs may voluntarily adopt components of the comprehensive plan or look to the comprehensive plan to guide their decisions and actions. Additionally, the comprehensive plan would guide the Forest Service's coordination activities with other governments, private landowners, and NGOs.

Would condemnation be used for this trail? No. The National Trails System Act includes a clause that says: *The United States shall not acquire for the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail any land or interest in land outside the exterior boundary of any federally-managed area without the consent of the owner of the land or interest in land.* (16 U.S.C. 1244(a)(30))

What are nature and purposes? The nature and purposes² describe the character, characteristics, and congressional intent for a national scenic trail or national historic trail. The nature and purposes are unique to each trail. The nature and purposes are foundational to the management of the trail. The term "nature and purposes" is taken from the National Trails System Act, which says that national scenic trails "*may contain campsites, shelters, and related-public-use facilities other uses along the trail, which will not substantially interfere with the nature and purposes of the trail, may be permitted.*" (16 U.S.C. 1244(c))

What is a national trail planning corridor? The national trail planning corridor (NTPC)³ would be the area on and around the trail where the provisions and tools in Section 7 of the National Trails System Act could be used. These tools primarily include but are not limited to acquisition of land or easements from willing sellers or establishment of voluntary cooperative

¹ Examples of LRMPs are forest plans for national forests administered by the USDA Forest Service, resource management plans for public lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management, and general management plans and associated planning documents for National Park Service units.

² See Chapter 3 of the draft comprehensive plan.

³ See Chapter 4 and Appendix D of the draft comprehensive plan.

agreements with landowners and land managers. (16 U.S.C. 1246) While the National Trails System Act calls this area the trail “right-of-way,” we instead propose to call it the “national trail planning corridor,” because in the context of the National Trails System Act it is not a right-of-way as that term is typically used and understood. It does not grant rights to the federal government or the public across non-federal lands.

The comprehensive plan includes recommendations for the NTPC. Selection of the NTPC is a separate administrative decision that requires additional consultation and coordination per the National Trails System Act.

What is a *national trail management corridor*? The national trail management corridor (NTMC)⁴ for the trail would be established by local land managers through LRMPs¹, not through this comprehensive plan. The NTMC is an area on and around the trail where that federal land management agency establishes and applies plan components to manage the trail in a way that provides for its nature and purposes and other trail values.

Selection of the NTMC for any given federal area is a separate decision by the agency that administers that area as part of its land management planning process, under its agency regulations and policies⁵.

Would the plan change the location of the trail? No. The comprehensive plan would not change [the route Congress designated in 2009](#). However, the draft comprehensive plan includes processes and guidance for considering future changes to the trail’s location.⁶ Per the National Trails System Act, substantial relocations would require an Act of Congress. (16 U.S.C. 1246(b))

What is *realignment versus relocation*? The draft comprehensive plan proposes to distinguish between changes to the location of the trail that would be entirely within the NTPC (“realignment”) and changes that would move part of the trail outside the NTPC (“relocation”). It proposes that relocation would require review by the Regional Forester of the Pacific Northwest Region (in that official’s trail administration role) to ensure compliance with the National Trails System Act and the comprehensive plan. In contrast, realignment could be undertaken by the local land manager without Regional Forester review. Any substantial relocations must be by Act of Congress. (16 U.S.C. 1246(b))

Would the plan build new trail or facilities? No. The comprehensive plan would not authorize on-the-ground activities to construct trails or facilities. The local land manager or landowner retains responsibility for those project-level decisions. However, the draft comprehensive plan includes desired conditions and management practices⁷ to facilitate consistency so that local decisions provide for the trail’s nature and purposes and other trail values.

Would the plan establish a permit to use the trail? No. The comprehensive plan would not establish a permit for use of the trail. A permit, or permits, could be established in the future. One of the proposed priority actions is for the Forest Service to coordinate with the National

⁴ See Chapter 4 of the draft comprehensive plan.

⁵ For example, for the Forest Service see [Forest Service Handbook 1909.12](#), Chapter 20, 24.42.

⁶ See Chapter 4, Chapter 5, and Appendix D of the draft comprehensive plan.

⁷ See Chapter 5 of the draft comprehensive plan.

Park Service and other managing agencies and partner organizations regarding potential development of a coordinated long-distance permit.⁸

Local land managers and landowners retain authority for any decisions about permits and other aspects of visitor use management on the lands they manage. The draft comprehensive plan includes identification of the carrying capacity of the trail and plan for its implementation, as required by the National Trails System Act. (16 U.S.C. 1244(e)) The draft plan identifies carrying capacity in regard to both (1) number of thru-hikers per high-use season and (2) desired conditions zones that account for all types of trail users. The carrying capacity of the trail would be just one of the resource considerations a local land manager may consider when managing visitor use for an area; there may be other, potentially more limiting resource considerations that would also factor in.

The draft comprehensive plan contains a monitoring and adaptive management plan to implement the carrying capacity.⁹ Trail use monitoring has been carried out each year since at least 2017 and would continue.

When will the plan be completed? By December 31, 2023, per a court order.

What is the next milestone in the planning process? To meet the December 31, 2023, court-ordered deadline to complete the plan, the Forest Service expects to post a Draft Decision Notice, Environmental Assessment (EA), and Comprehensive Plan in July. An objection period will follow, in accordance with the agency's [project-level predecisional administrative review process](#). The public will be notified through legal notice placed in the newspaper of record (*The Seattle Times*) and will be able to view the documents on the [project website](#).

Where can I view the comments that were submitted during the scoping comment period in fall 2022 and public comment period on the EA in spring 2023? Comments received during both these comment periods are available to view in the [Public Comment Reading Room section of the project website](#).

⁸ See Appendix G of the draft comprehensive plan.

⁹ See Chapter 5, Appendix E, and Appendix F of the draft comprehensive plan.