

MCL Road and Trail Policy for Marin Public Lands and Open Space

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Preamble:

Marin County contains a wealth of public open spaces and parklands. Roughly half the county consists of federal or state parkland, public watershed lands, county open space, and community-owned open space. Some of the lands are former ranches; many are relatively pristine. In either case, they include a rich diversity of plant communities and fish and wildlife habitats as well as cultural and scenic values, and they are managed for the most part in a “natural” state.

More than 600 miles of old ranch roads, fire roads, and trails provide recreational access to these public lands, many of them continuous across jurisdictional boundaries. As a consequence, Marin attracts millions of visitors annually, both local and from elsewhere, who relish the opportunity to experience nature safely and in a variety of ways. Visitors walk, study the natural world, hike, ride horse-back, jog, bicycle, and exercise their dogs. Even with diligent park management, heavy recreational use and trends toward increased and more active use threaten the health of the resources that we treasure and the quality of the experience we seek. The challenge is how to allow for different recreational activities on Marin’s roads and trails without compromising vegetation and wildlife habitats, other natural and cultural resources, or the quality of experience sought by visitors.

Definitions. The term “trails” in this policy comprises natural surface roads that serve as fire and emergency access, multi-use recreational trails, and narrow foot paths. A narrow trail or foot path (also called single-track) can vary in width from 12 to 24 inches and in most cases is not safe for shared use by bicycles and people on foot or horseback. A multi-use trail should be either wide enough (minimum 5 to 6 feet) or, if narrower, with adequate sight-lines and low gradient, to accommodate safe shared use by pedestrians, bicyclists, and equestrians with adequate room for passing. Recently built dual-use (hiker-biker) trails are constructed with an approximate 48-inch bench. A fire road is by definition wide enough to safely accommodate emergency vehicles as well as all recreational visitors.

Roads and trails serve many recreational functions on public open space: traveling from one place to another (connectivity), recreation and socializing, exercise and stimulation, access to sites of ecological, cultural, or scenic interest, and opportunity to experience aesthetic values, solitude, and connection with nature. Visitors use different modes to carry out these activities: slow walk, often with a dog, vigorous hike, jog, run, walk or trot (horse), and ride (mountain bike) at varying speeds from slow/moderate to fast, consistent with speed regulations.

Goals and Recommendations.

MCL’s primary goals in supporting the management of Marin’s road and trail networks are to avoid adverse impacts to natural resources due to recreation, ensure that the natural environment and the plants and wildlife it sustains will persist into the future, and assure users of their safety and well-being on all roads and trails. To achieve these goals, MCL recommends the following:

1. New trails, including substantial renovation of existing trails. Illegally-built trails are by definition prohibited. MCL discourages the construction of new trails in Marin's public and open space lands because of the existing high density of roads and trails. Construction of a new trail or realignment of an existing road or trail into previously undisturbed land can have adverse impacts, such as damaging plants and fish and wildlife habitats, including sensitive resources, and promoting invasion of non-native plants. These impacts are difficult to fully mitigate. Under limited circumstances, decommissioning an existing degraded non-system trail could partially mitigate the impacts of new construction. If a new trail is proposed, or an existing trail undergoes substantial renovation and/or realignment, the alignment, design and construction should minimize impacts, as follows:

- Use existing ranch roads or fire roads wherever possible, modifying for steepness through gradient reduction or other design mechanisms to control speed, and, if narrowing to multi-use trail width to reduce erosion, maintaining adequate sight lines and ensuring that slower moving visitors have room to step out of the path of faster travel;
- Avoid riparian corridors, stream crossings, wetlands, known wildlife corridors, and habitats of endangered and other sensitive species, such as woodlands harboring Northern spotted owl, serpentine areas with rare plants, native grasslands, etc; establish adequate buffers between the trail and adjacent habitats, make an effort to consolidate rather than fragment wildlife habitats, design trail margins to prevent off-trail activity, and employ best management practices;
- Minimize the need to remove native trees, other major woody vegetation, and sensitive perennials;
- Design roads and trails to prevent erosion, sedimentation, and other impacts to wetlands and water courses;
- Note locations of source populations of invasive plants, take measures to avoid spread into new areas, and monitor post-construction for such species at frequent time intervals and take remedial action as necessary;
- Provide for public input well in advance of proposed projects and appropriate environmental review under CEQA of land management decisions, with opportunity for public comment.

2. Managing conditions on existing trails. Roads and trails undergo wear and tear with use over time and can expose adjacent lands and habitats to damage. Maintenance of existing trails should include the following:

- Correcting drainage, slope, and tread (trail surface) conditions that can lead to erosion and sedimentation;
- Maintaining as-built tread widths by regular brushing and dressing;

- Repairing off-trail damage, including gradual widening of tread into adjacent vegetation due to side-stepping wet or muddy trails, creating “eye-brows” (bike-riding up the sides of adjacent slopes and road cuts), wearing down side-slopes and bench cuts to create banked turns, and cutting across switchbacks;
 - Closing vulnerable trails and roads during wet weather to avoid both rutting and trail side-stepping;
 - Decommissioning steep, erodible, non-sustainable “social” trails;
 - Restricting access to nesting or breeding areas during appropriate seasons;
 - Monitoring for new occurrences of invasive plant species and responding rapidly (“early detection/rapid response”), with removal and control, and where appropriate, revegetation with native species and regular follow-up to prevent spread of invasives;
 - Monitoring for dog waste and litter, and removing it.
3. Use Guidelines. Under all conditions, the protection of habitats and safety and well-being of all visitors must be paramount. All visitors share in the responsibility to protect vegetation and wildlife, maintain safe and sustainable trails, and be courteous to other visitors. Trails should be designed and their use managed according to the following guidelines:
- All visitors should stay on established trails, should not go cross-country or cut corners, and should not walk or ride on the shoulders of trails unless clearly designated for use;
 - Visitors should be strongly discouraged from night-time activity in open space, including use of bright lights, which, as demonstrated by published research, is disruptive to natural foraging and breeding habits of nocturnal and twilight-active wildlife;
 - Visitors should respect the natural sound-scape of open space and wild lands, for the benefit of wildlife and other visitors;
 - All visitors should pack out litter and dog waste;
 - All visitors should follow suggested YIELD protocols and be mindful of other users; and
 - All visitors should obey safety rules as prescribed by various land management agencies and observe “trail etiquette.” At a minimum . . .
 - Bicycles should be allowed only on ranch/fire roads and on trails specifically designed for safe shared hiker-biker or multi-use, which includes equestrians;
 - Bike-racing and technical and downhill riding are not acceptable on public lands roads and trails;

- Bicycle riders should obey speed limits of 15 mph maximum, slow to 5 mph or less when going around blind curves or approaching pedestrians, and in all cases ride no faster than conditions warrant;
 - When approaching equestrians, bicyclists and hikers should slow, alert the rider in advance by using a voice or bell, stop and ask the rider for direction to pass safely; the voice request will assure the horse that the biker or hiker is “human” and therefore not a predator;
 - When approaching people on foot, bicycle riders should slow and signal their approach by use of voice or a bell, and proceed at low speed;
 - Equestrians should familiarize their horses and themselves with multi-use trail riding, know how to direct others to pass, and be prepared for the possibility of surprise encounters that may frighten their horses (e.g., cyclists, dogs, back-pack wearing hikers);
 - Walkers with dogs should stay off prohibited trails where posted and keep dogs on six-foot leash wherever a leash is required;
 - Horse-back riders should stay off prohibited trails where posted and minimize vegetation disturbance when going off-trail to rest or water their horse;
 - In the interest of personal safety, all visitors, regardless of mode, should avoid wearing ear-buds in both ears while traveling on open space roads and trails; and
 - Only bicycles that are entirely human-powered should be permitted on natural surface roads and trails in public lands – i.e., electric-assist bikes should be permitted only on facilities that permit motorized vehicles, except when employed as Other Power-driven Mobility Devices (OPDMDs) by visitors with legally recognized mobility disabilities and operated according to Disabled Access regulations under the ADA.
4. Enforcement of visitor regulations. Compliance with rules and guidelines depends heavily on cooperation and mutual respect of all users as well as respect for the natural environment. MCL supports funding land management agencies at levels which provide adequate personnel to educate visitors on appropriate use of open space. In addition, agencies should monitor trail usage and rigorously enforce regulations by strategic use of LiDar or cameras, patrol areas of high incident or trail abuse reports, impose meaningful sanctions on violators, record public incident reports submitted by phone, e-mail, or website, and maintain a readily accessible database of both ranger reported violations and other incidents.