

September 15, 2022

Regarding Agenda Item 4: Recreation Management Planning Update

Dear Watershed Committee,

On behalf of Access4Bikes and our more than 3,000 members, I want to take this opportunity to thank your Board and staff for initiating and devoting time and energy to the upcoming Recreation Management Plan process. This effort has been a long time coming, and we applaud your Board for taking this widely appreciated and necessary step towards addressing the recreation opportunities we have in the Mount Tamalpais watershed.

We are writing to provide information on what our constituency believes is most important for your Board and staff to consider when conducting this process. We have also developed detailed recommendations for your consideration that will address many of the concerns that have been expressed by other organizations such as the Marin Conservation League or Marin Audubon regarding mountain bike use on watershed lands. We believe that upon reviewing our proposal, you will agree that the actions we suggest would result in the best outcome for the Recreational Management Plan revision. To be clear, this process and its timing represent a historical moment on the watershed and a once in a generation opportunity to finally address the changing needs of our watershed lands and its stakeholders.

First and foremost, we must all acknowledge that the status quo is not working on the mountain. If the system was working, this management plan review would be a simple update unnoticed by your ratepayers. As we begin, we should all work to increase our understanding of how the watershed is being used today, discarding outdated hyperbole from the past. In these efforts, we will learn more about the current user groups, better understand the changing recreation trends, and recognize that there are modern management practices in use locally and across the country that can inform our work. It should be our shared goal to improve the recreational user experience while continuing to protect our precious water and natural resources. It is our belief that these two ideas contained within this goal are complementary in nature, and are worthy to aspire to in our work and in our partnerships.

Understanding the Mountain Bike User Experience

Access4Bikes represents one of the largest, if not largest recreational user groups on the mountain. It is important that we understand more about mountain bikers, what they

want and need as stakeholders, and plan for this group to continue to increase in size over time, as recent history has shown mountain biking to be one of the fastest growing recreational activities on parklands.

The modern mountain bike is indeed a revolutionary invention, and locally, there is a sense of pride in Marin County, as Mount Tamalpais and the watershed are viewed worldwide as the birthplace of mountain biking. With further advances over time including climbing gears and suspension, mountain bikes now allow the rider to cover long distances and climb thousands of feet in elevation, all in a day's time. The implications of this technology are that the rider is deeply immersed in nature more quickly and for longer periods of time. Because of their range, mountain bikers are the best eyes and ears in many parts of our watershed, and this can be of great benefit to local land management agencies. Here in Marin, mountain bikers are the first to attend trail work events and the first to take full stewardship of the trails where they are given access. Many of these trails also benefit other recreational user groups. Mountain bikers represent the largest untapped workforce for trail stewardship and maintenance in Marin County.

To illustrate how useful these bikes have become, note that land managers, including Marin Water rangers, are now using them in their day-to-day work duties. MMWD rangers are often seen riding mountain bikes to conduct their work and reach a far wider range than they would when just using field trucks. These bikes are quiet and low impact, allowing the rangers to cover great distances with decreased impact on the flora and fauna or the other users on the mountain. To illustrate this new use even further, Marin County Search and Rescue now has a fleet of mountain bikes that are regularly used in search efforts. These mountain bikes allow quick access to trails and greatly increase the chances of finding people in need of rescue while remaining low-impact on the environment.

There has been a long standing vigorous debate about mountain bike access to trails on the watershed. Marin Water does not currently allow bikes on any trails, only fire roads and paved roads. Meanwhile, in our advocacy work, we have learned through surveys and in-person meetings that just about every mountain biker we know and represent has requested access to the narrower 'singletrack' trails which are prevalent in the watershed. Why are these trails so important to mountain bikers? Simply put, just like for many hikers and horse riders, recreating on singletrack trails is more enjoyable for cyclists than it is to ride on fire roads or pavement. We know unequivocally that cyclists desire the same opportunities for recreational enjoyment as other user groups. Moreover, safety is another primary reason mountain bikers want to ride these trails. As a 7-year coach of high school mountain biking teams, the only serious injuries I saw were those that occurred on fire roads. By design, fire roads are steeper, wider, contain

looser soils and rocks, and allow bikes to go fast. They are often off camber, and rutted, and considered by many riders and coaches as less safe than singletrack trails. Most of these roads were designed for fire access, watershed maintenance, and emergency response. To our knowledge, none were made with recreation in mind, and it is no surprise to us that mountain bikers and other user groups would rather be on trails, where they will have a more enjoyable and safe experience. Trails by their very nature slow the rider down, force them to use their balance skills, and provide a deeper immersion into nature. This experience is what mountain bikers want and enjoy and is a primary reason that other land managers surrounding Marin Water's lands (and worldwide) have adapted their trail policies to provide opportunities for narrow trail riding to promote the enjoyment and safety of this established user group.

Access4Bikes Recommendation: MMWD can and should actively plan for singletrack trail use by mountain bikes to help ensure that there are sustainable trails, either existing or new, that can be used safely by this expanding user group.

Collaborative and Innovative Approaches to Trail Planning

We encourage Marin Water to learn and innovate from what other land managers are doing locally and around the country. Recently, the Marin County Parks and Open Space developed a new roads and trails plan. Similar to Marin Water's efforts, there were consultants assisting in the process, and a significant amount of public involvement with meetings and field visits that were utilized to engage all user groups. The result was an updated set of policies that allowed for many innovative and exciting new opportunities for all users including: (1) Change in use of trails to allow bikes, (2) time sharing of trails to allow bikes on trails during certain times/days of the weeks, (3) directional trails to facilitate the movement of bikes and allow hikers to anticipate bikes, and most importantly (4) user specific trails. We are here to say that the efforts these other land managers have taken with regard to mountain bikes have been very successful. Through the assistance of well-trained and dedicated mountain bike trail stewards, existing hiking trails were opened to bikes with improvements that stabilized trails and reduced existing erosion. Of equal importance, this new mountain bike use on formerly hiking-only trails has not resulted in increased impacts or user conflict, but has instead created a place for all trail users to safely recreate.

CA State Parks is currently addressing the need to allow mountain biking on trails. In addition to many State Parks lands already accessible to mountain bikes, State Parks recently opened Bill's Trail to bikes in Samuel P. Taylor State Park and are working to permit bikes on Easy Grade trail in Mount Tamalpais State Park. In addition, China Camp State Park recognized the need to study E-mountain bikes, and has initiated a multi-year pilot study to allow E-mountain bikes on all trails open to conventional bikes.

The first survey results are now in which show clearly that mountain bikes, both conventional and E-bikes, are safely using the trails at China Camp while continuing to protect the natural resources and other user groups' trail experience.

Moreover, the National Park Service allows both E-mountain and conventional bikes on many trails in the GGNRA. Indeed, E-mountain bikes are also critically important for our aging Marin population to access our parklands which is a local equity issue that deserves consideration. We would like to see Marin Water follow suit with these other land managers and adapt to the changing needs of its constituency to create a more equitable recreational experience for mountain bikes, including E-mountain bikes.

Access4Bikes Recommendation: Work to complement surrounding land management agencies with compatible and consistent trail rules so that mountain bikes, including E-mountain bikes, traveling from one jurisdiction to the other have similar accessibility, rules, and expectations.

Recreational and Environmental Sustainability

Our organization and members work towards creation of environmentally sustainable trails that can be enjoyed by cyclists and all user groups. [Numerous studies](#) have shown that cycling does not cause any more soil impacts or erosion than other recreational activities, such as hiking and horseback riding. Water in the form of rainfall is the major source of erosion on trails, exacerbated by poor trail design, lack of maintenance, and areas of highly concentrated use. The mountain bike community has actively worked to help solve these problems, leading by example by providing planning and design, funds, and physical labor to help improve and maintain trails to make them more environmentally sustainable for everyone. To my knowledge, no other user group in Marin County contributes the amount of time and effort to trail maintenance than the mountain bike community does. Mountain bikers in Marin have proven to be engaged stewards by leading and supporting trail building, trail maintenance, and clean up efforts throughout the county. Furthermore, mountain bikers and other cyclists arriving to the watershed on their bikes results in reduced automobile traffic and emissions to and in the watershed, furthering regional and local environmental goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs).

Numerous members and advisors of Access4Bikes are also environmental professionals and advocates who have significant knowledge to contribute to trail and recreation planning work. Our members are eager to find ways to create more sustainable recreation and reduce human impact on climate and natural habitat. We know this can be done, and must be done, to account for the historically inadequate planning, design, and maintenance in our watershed, and to address the challenges posed by climate change.

Access4Bikes Recommendation: Include community groups like ours as partners in development and maintenance of trails. This work could be volunteer-based or funded by grants or other sources. Leverage the mountain bike community to create and maintain trails that get cyclists off roads to promote safer recreation in our communities, improve environmental stewardship in the watershed, and reduce our local GHG emissions.

Source: Environmental Impacts of Mountain Biking: Science Review and Best Practices, Marion and Wimpey.

<https://www.anacorteswa.gov/DocumentCenter/View/16528/EIS-mountain-bikes-and-Best-Practices>

Access and Inclusivity for All

Access4Bikes supports inclusive opportunities and access to recreation from diverse cultural, racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds, differing physical abilities, varied ages, and by different methods (bike, hike, horse, chair, etc). We specifically advocate for mountain biking because our constituents are excluded from a vast majority of the County's singletrack trails. However, we recognize that people from many backgrounds have similarly had limited access to Marin's public land due to long-standing exclusionary practices in the County which have historically targeted underserved and underrepresented communities. We have even heard suggestions of the idea of a registration program for bikes which would undoubtedly make our undocumented population stop using the watershed, which is antithetical to what we believe your Board should be encouraging and advocating.

We also wholeheartedly believe that the Board and staff must recognize that no one user group or individual can dictate how others should experience or enjoy the watershed, and that land and trails do not solely belong to an elite or vocal few. Those enjoying and defending the status quo are doing so at the expense of all other stakeholders. Even though the trail system may have been originally built with hiking and equestrians in mind, we now need to expand and open ourselves to our changing world which includes bikes. Mountain bikes have replaced horses as the preferred method of assisted wilderness travel, and we believe this will be borne out in user surveys that will be conducted later this year. Public policy must constantly evolve and move forward to address our changing cultural and physical landscape. As a nation, if we had not updated our laws and practices over time, only white males with property would be able to vote today. Just as our nation expanded the right to vote to all adults, we should be expanding and evolving our trail use policies with our changing times and demographics, and look at ways to allow all user groups on singletrack trails. We

believe that Marin Water must create more equitable opportunities for everyone to meaningfully experience nature by the mode that is most enjoyable/available to them. Equitable access to recreation is essential to our community health, and to our appreciation and understanding of the environment.

Access4Bikes Recommendation: The Recreation Management Plan must provide specific and accountable mechanisms to include underserved, underrepresented, and diverse groups of people and the forms of recreation they desire, including access for mountain bikes on single track trails.

Access4Bikes Proposal

Watershed Staff, in consultation with stakeholder groups, should identify current trails (system and/or non-system trails) that could accommodate mountain bikes. Staff should also look at congested areas where current policy and infrastructure force all users onto limited corridors, and work to identify alternate opportunities to disperse users. Staff should work with stakeholders to identify potential gaps in the trail network and consider adding new trails to facilitate the safe and appropriate movement of watershed users.

Access4Bikes Board, staff, and members have years of experience in trail development; from design and alignment, construction, and ongoing maintenance. We would like the opportunity to work with your staff to identify and develop a trail network that better serves the needs of today's trail users. Access4Bikes does not want access to all trails, only those trails that can safely allow mountain bikes, and rather than excluding other user groups, we are committed to historic trail users such as hikers and equestrians continuing to have exclusive use to some trails. Access4Bikes is confident that by working together we can identify trail opportunities for mountain bikers that are both environmentally and socially acceptable. There is one thing that we can promise that no other user group has effectively done, and that is we will enter into a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with MMWD to provide stewardship to any trail (current or new) that we are given access to for use. This includes construction, ongoing maintenance, and the removal of invasive species such as French and Scotch Broom, all at no cost to Marin Water ratepayers.

Access4Bikes has a proven track record in the work proposed above. We are prepared to provide referrals from property owners such as Marin County Parks, Marin Council of the Boy Scouts of America, and San Domenico School. Field tours of our work may be helpful and can be arranged. Please let us know if you would like more information about how we can help you manage the watershed to the benefit of all users. We look forward to working with the Board and staff to make the Recreation Management Plan a true success for our county.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

Chris Borjian, President, Access4Bikes Foundation

Vernon Huffman, Executive Director, Access4Bikes Foundation