

Chapter 9: Trail and Shelter Maintenance

Many GMC sections have been founded “to maintain and establish trails and shelters in the Green Mountains which the Corporation [GMC] assigns to the section and/or for which the section accepts responsibility.” Trail and shelter maintenance is a very important aspect of every section’s activities.

Set-up and Responsibilities

The Long Trail, the Appalachian Trail in Vermont, and “blue-blaze” side trails are built on land owned by the state of Vermont (managed by the Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation), the federal government (managed by the Green Mountain/Finger Lakes National Forest or National Park Service), the Green Mountain Club, and private individuals. Some parcels are encumbered by easements. The ultimate control over the land is in the hands of the property owner. Although property owners are generally quite pleased that the GMC and its sections volunteer to maintain the trail, they do impose restrictions on how we operate. These restrictions are most often related to safety.

Policy for trail maintenance is the responsibility of the GMC directors. The Trail Management Committee (TMC) is appointed by the GMC President with the directors' concurrence. The TMC can make policy recommendations for the directors to adopt, but most of its effort goes towards general oversight of the field program. The TMC membership varies from year to year but are drawn from all sections.

Each section maintains a trail segment assigned by TMC. These assignments have evolved over decades and may or may not be documented as formal agreements.

The bylaws of each section designate an officer responsible for trail maintenance. The trails and shelters chair is officially bound by the restrictions imposed by TMC, GMC, and landowners, although in day-to-day practice these should be considered resources to help the chair.

The section trails and shelters chair is responsible for organizing the maintenance of the section’s assigned shelters and trails, in addition to coordinating activities with GMC staff and, if necessary, the landowners.

Most sections maintain their trail using volunteers. Some sections schedule work outings for major projects but have adopters perform general trail maintenance. Most adopters are assigned, if the section so desires, by the adopter coordinator at GMC headquarters. Adopter reports are forwarded from the GMC office to section trail and shelter chairs so they have the latest

Who is involved with Maintaining the Long Trail System?

GMC sections
GMC Trail and Shelter Adopters
GMC Field Programs Staff
GMC Trail Management Committee
Appalachian Trail Conservancy
Vermont Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation (FPR)
U.S. Forest Service
Private Landowners

information regarding work on their section of the trail. Trail and shelter chairs report volunteer hours back to GMC.

Shelters and trail sections should be visited at least twice a year, during the spring and fall, to assess conditions and perform necessary maintenance. This is a minimum, and chairs are encouraged to conduct maintenance outings more frequently. Maintenance or resource problems that need further attention should be noted in the course of these trips and reported to the section's trail and shelter chair and the GMC director of field programs. Policy issues should be brought to the attention of the GMC Trail Management Committee.

Dave Hardy, the GMC director of field programs is available for consultation and can be reached at 4711 Waterbury Stowe Road, Waterbury Center, Vermont 05677-9904; phone: (802) 244-7037 ext. 20; e-mail: dhardy@greenmountainclub.org. Consultation is necessary for all trail relocations and modifications of overnight sites.

Coordination with the U.S. Forest Service and Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation should be arranged through the GMC Field Programs office.

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy's New England Regional Office is located in South Egremont Massachusetts and can be reached at 413-528-6333, e-mail atc-nero@appalachiantrail.org, or see www.appalachiantrail.org.

Job Basics

While section trails and shelters chairs are experienced maintainers, it is important to state here the three precepts that determine trail maintenance priorities:

- hiker and maintainer safety
- natural resource protection
- quality of hiker experience

Safety is the most important consideration while working on the trail. There is always the potential for accidents while using trail maintenance tools in the woods. Maintainers need to be aware of the following safety guidelines:

- Wear personal protection gear.
- Use safety equipment.
- Use the right tool for the job.
- Avoid fatigue or dehydration.
- Do not work alone.
- Communicate.

Encourage your trail workers to enroll in some of the first aid courses offered by GMC; perhaps the section can cover enrollment costs.

Basic trail maintenance includes:

- Cleaning out leaves and debris in existing drainage structures (waterbars, dips, and ditches) and draining areas of standing water.
- Keeping the trail clear of blowdowns, brush and annual vegetation. Think of carrying an upright 4 by 8 plywood sheet along the trail (but trim the path a little narrower below your waist to prevent excessive trail widening).
- A step-over blowdown across the trail less than a foot high is a good deterrent to wheeled vehicles, especially near the trailhead. Consider leaving those in place. And in a federal wilderness area, the trail should only be brushed wide enough to permit the clear passage of a fully laden linebacker sized backpacker, which is more like 2.5 feet wide.
- Maintaining well-defined paint blazes.
- Blocking in unofficial trails and campsites with brush, and piling brush along trails that are too wide.
- Making an assessment of the condition of the trail and repairing or reporting problems that need additional attention. This includes reviewing and sharing information obtained from trail and shelter registers.
- Reporting on signs that are missing, inaccurate, or damaged.
- Report any potential proposals to relocate treadway directly to GMC director of field programs for TMC and agency consideration.

Basic shelter maintenance includes:

- Inspecting, cleaning, and performing minor repairs on the shelter and outhouse.
- Cleaning and maintaining the shelter water supply and wash pit.
- Inspecting the outhouse or composteer.
- Removing trash from the shelter and surrounding area.
- Keeping paths clear of vegetation.
- Making an assessment of the condition of the structures and repairing or reporting problems that need additional attention.
- Reporting on signs that are missing, inaccurate, or damaged.
- Look overhead for hazard trees and potential deadfalls above the campsite. Report them to GMC as soon as possible, if you cannot safely remove them.

Assessments of trail and shelter conditions should not be limited to maintenance outings. Reports of trail and shelter problems observed during a hike are always welcome and should be sent to the GMC director of field programs. Section members should always be encouraged to look for and report maintenance needs to the trail and shelter chair.

Planning and Running a Work Outing

The trail and shelter chair is responsible for planning and running a trails and shelter work day. The process includes the following major elements:

- Scope out the work site. Know what type of work needs to be done and at which location. Estimate how much time the job takes and how many people. Use the assessment of trails and shelter conditions developed during prior walk-throughs.
- Schedule work outings. This needs to be done in coordination with the outings chair and the section newsletter editor/communication chair to ensure publicity.
- Recruit and retain volunteers. Try to estimate how many helpers are likely to turn up at the meeting place. Always err on the side of getting volunteers to return, rather than completing a particular job; as one volunteer states: "I'm a volunteer; I can quit anytime."
- Lead a hike on the section's maintenance section of the LT/AT during the summer or fall. This lets you both check out the trail and talk to participants about the spring and fall maintenance hikes.
- Run the work outing in an efficient and safe manner.

The most critical role of the section trails and shelters chair is to decide what maintenance projects to address immediately, what to defer, and what to refer to the Long Trail Patrol. It is helpful to maintain a photographic record of trouble spots. (Observers' reports may overstate the seriousness of a problem.) It is important to understand which conditions are transient (such as springtime bogs) and which lead to trail widening or destruction.

Also, the chair must determine the least-intensive remediation.

Below is a logistics checklist that can and should be expanded as needed:

- Identify a meeting place and a time.
- Provide clear directions to the meeting place.
- Recruit enough section members and other volunteers to do the job.
- Be sure participants bring food, water, clothing, gloves, and bug dope.
- See that the appropriate tools are available in sufficient numbers.
- Provide a first aid kit or make sure a first aid kit is available for each work crew.
- Run a short tailgate safety session at the meeting place or trailhead. Making participants aware of safe practices and potential job hazards is an important step for a well run and safe outing.
- Divide your volunteers into groups of 3 or 4 to work on assigned trail sections. A crew of 4 can usually work ½ mile per hour but expect variations to this guideline. An assignment that takes more than 4 hours to complete can be overwhelming to some volunteers.
- Allow for time to walk to the work site(s) and back to the meeting place or where cars are parked.

- Arrange for car pooling to the starting point of each work section.
- Assign a leader for each working crew. Ask the leader to make notes and provide a report on the work done and special observations.
- Keep a list of attendees and know whom to contact in case of injury or delay.

More advice:

- Have fun. When the weather turns bad, do not hesitate to call off the outing and get your volunteers home safely.
- Thank your volunteers! Remember, you may need their help again some time soon.
- Use the *GMC Trip Leaders Handbook* and the *GMC Trail and Shelter Maintenance Manual* as references for running trail work outings. Useful guides are published from time to time by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy and the Appalachian Mountain Club.
- When all is done, write a work report. Include the number of volunteers, the total hours worked, and the part of your section's trail responsibility covered. That report (or part of it) will be needed by the GMC Field Office and at the section's annual meeting. Submit each report to the GMC Volunteer Coordinator; you can do so on the GMC web site using https://www.greenmountainclub.org/maintenance_report.php

Identify Trail Ownership and Understand Regulations

The trails maintained by the GMC are located on a variety of properties. Be sure you know on whose land your sections are located. Each landowner or manager has different regulations and you should be aware of them. Within the Green Mountain National Forest, you should know the appropriate district office of the U.S. Forest Service. In designated wilderness areas there are special regulations that prohibit the use of power tools; please contact the GMC director of field programs to discuss local regulations. On state land the regional office of the Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation is the contact. On private land and for any other clarification the GMC director of field programs can help you. It is a good idea to invite your contacts from government agencies, GMC staff, and members of GMC Trail Management Committee to your section annual meeting.

If you have any question about land ownership, start with the Long Trail Guide and then ask GMC for help. In general, most of the private land is in northern Vermont and most of the National Forest land is in southern Vermont, while the Ethan Allen Firing Range in Bolton is federal but not National Forest. State owned land includes the Mount Mansfield and the Long Trail state forests.

Ensure a Safe Working Environment

Safety is an important aspect of field work. Each year, the GMC and the U.S. Forest Service run safety workshops on the operation of chain saws and recommended personal protection such as

gloves, safety chaps, safety goggles, hard hats, and hearing protection. According to GMC policy, chain saws should be operated only by persons who have attended a chain saw safety workshop offered by the U.S. Forest Service or other accredited entities.

Know your volunteers. Choose a trusted person for a crew leader. Be sure your volunteers can handle the job assigned to them. If in doubt, try to do a specific task at some other time and have it done by the right person. Send your volunteers to one of the safety and trail maintenance workshops that the GMC offers.

Track Project and Volunteer Information

Record keeping is an important task for the trails and shelters chair. Record each volunteer's name, their work completed, and their travel hours. This information significantly helps the GMC Field Programs office meet matching requirements for various grants as well as documenting public support for the Long Trail and backcountry recreation in general.

As with any committee chair, attending executive and outings committee meetings is part of the job, as is reporting to the section at the annual meeting.

Documents That Can Help You Do Your Job

The following references can be obtained through the GMC office by phone at (802) 244-7037 or by e-mail at gmc@greenmountainclub.org.

GMC Trails and Shelter Maintenance Manual (2001) is a must-read. It fits in a pocket and provides trail standards and fieldwork guidance. Soon to be available online, at www.greenmountainclub.org.

Long Trail System Management Plan contains specific policies on trail management, developed by the GMC Trail Management Committee and adopted by the GMC Board of Directors.

GMC Trip Leaders' Handbook gives tips on how to organize trips, including trail maintenance outings.

The GMC's Manual for Bin Composting and Waste Management in Remote Recreation Areas (1995) is available for shelter adopters who maintain bin composters.

Appalachian Trail Design, Construction, and Maintenance (2000), by William Birchard, Jr. and Robert D. Proudman. This book, which can be purchased from the GMC, is an excellent reference on trail maintenance and construction.

Appalachian Trail Fieldbook – Maintenance and Rehabilitation Guidelines for Volunteers, Second Edition, (revised by Morgan Somerville) The Appalachian Trail Conservancy. This is the field text that all adopters and section T & S chairs should have. Contact the GMC director of field programs or the volunteer coordinator for your copy.