



REGARDING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A NATIONALLY LICENSED OFF-HIGHWAY VEHICLE TRAILS RESOLUTION

BACKGROUND

In addition to those who already enjoyed them, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused many Americans to flock to states that offer adventure tourism, such as whitewater rafting, bungee jumping, and other outdoor activities, including off-road trail riding for Jeeps, trucks and SUVs. It is widely recognized that millions of Americans love the great outdoors. Unfortunately, in our national and state parks, as well as in our national and state forests, there is a significant lack of off-highway vehicle (OHV) opportunities. While many Americans may not be ready to start a 10-mile trail hike, many would consider taking their SUV on an OHV trail for that distance, or far greater.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented lawmakers and enthusiasts with opportunities to expand upon tourism opportunities in states like West Virginia that focus on adventure tourism. In order to appreciate the viability of a linked-up OHV trail system, consider that the hiking community has various trails on the east and west coast that are connected and cover several states. Now is time for the OHV industry, states and private landowners to get together and create some semi-contiguous trails around the nation.

In the 2021 session of the West Virginia Legislature passed two measures – House Resolution 22 by Delegate Gary Howell, Speaker Pro Tempore, and Senate Resolution 43 by Senator Mark Maynard – calling on West Virginia and the other states to examine what they already have in OHV trails and parks, and then come up with a plan to connect these trails and parks. The connections could create an OHV system spanning from Southern states such as Alabama and Georgia to as far as New York. Many viable areas already offer an opportunity to create such a system, such as the Top Trails OHV Park near Talladega, Alabama, the U.S. Forest Service’s Davenport Mountain OHV Trails at Blairsville, Georgia, and Brown Mountain OHV Trail System near Morganton, North Carolina, West Virginia’s state-owned extensive Hatfield and McCoy Trail System, and St. John’s Rock ORV Trail near Frostburg, Maryland. These are just a few of the OHV opportunities across the Appalachian Mountains that could become part of a greater trail system.

The linked trail system will create a bucket list effect. A family that starts a national trail in West Virginia will want to then complete the Virginia section, then moving on to North Carolina, and beyond. This bucket list effect will increase tourism across the entire trail system and benefit every participating state.

This linked-up trail system plan is not limited to the Appalachian Mountains; this could be replicated in many regions of the United States. The tourism industry is greatly benefited by increased opportunity for trail riders; the states and local economies are benefitted through increased tourism opportunities; however, most importantly, the people of the United States are benefitted by getting out and enjoying what all of America has to offer. We must encourage those in the industry, government, and the enthusiast to work together to make this happen.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments supports the creation of a multi-state trail network for existing and new off-road trail systems in West Virginia and across the entire East Coast. Legislators, industry leaders, and OHV enthusiasts should collaborate and come up with the best means to connect trail systems in ways that have already been done with nationwide hiking trails, RV highway paths and stop-offs, and horseback trails. Consideration of right of ways and private property holders must be accounted for. Studying the ways by which states have created bike and horseback trails on already existing railroad pathways should be considered. Currently, both West Virginia and Virginia have existing programs that work with both public and private landowners that could serve as a future model for this trail system. Neighboring states should determine border crossing points, and the respective Division of Highways Departments for the states should erect signs that indicate when a person has entered the state.

The Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments encourages its member states to work together to establish a plan of action for cooperation between the various states to ensure a smooth process for establishing the trail systems, such as the creation of an interstate compact, the possibility of multi-state meetings to discuss logistics or specific ways to collaborate, and monthly calls or video conferences to monitor the progress of the trail system.