

# **Efforts to Improve Management and Public Enjoyment of the Santa Barbara Front Country Trail System**

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **Background**

The Santa Barbara Front Country trail system, encompassing several routes within Los Padres National Forest and on adjacent city property, provides wonderful hiking, horseback riding and mountain biking opportunities. Over the past decade, public use of the trails, particularly downhill mountain biking, has grown significantly. This increase in use, combined with a decline in trail maintenance budgets and workforce, has resulted in growing conflicts among trail uses and a general decline in trail conditions. The Forest Service, and city and county of Santa Barbara are working with trail stakeholders to devise solutions to the problems.

### **Q1. What is the basis of the conflict between mountain bikes and other trails uses such as hiking and horseback riding on the frontcountry trails?**

**A1.** The Front Country trails were historically traveled from the bottom up by hikers and equestrians. With the evolution of mountain bike technology to allow faster downhill speeds, and easy vehicle access to trailheads along East Camino Cielo, the front country trails have become a choice destination for “downhill” bike enthusiasts from all over southern California and beyond. Large groups of bike riders are easily transported by vehicle from Santa Barbara to the trailheads. Riders are able to coast downhill very quickly, sometimes reaching speeds up to 20 miles an hour or more. It has been this change in trail use, the top down travel and the accelerated downhill speeds, that has caused public alarm, generated complaints, and created animosity with hikers, horseback riders and more traditional mountain bike enthusiasts.

### **Q2. What trails constitute the Santa Barbara Front Country Trail System?**

**A2.** A group of eight trails make up what is commonly referred to as the Santa Barbara Front Country Trails: **Jesusita, Tunnel, Cold Springs, West Fork of the Cold Springs, San Ysidro, Rattlesnake, McMenemy and Romero.** These trails commonly begin in the urban interface of the City of Santa Barbara and in the neighboring unincorporated community of Montecito. They traverse the canyons and steep slopes of the coastal range of the Santa Ynez Mountains winding their way up into Los Padres National Forest. Four of the trails intersect at the ridgeline, connecting with the well-traveled paved road know as East Camino Cielo. All the above listed trails have recorded public rights-of-way that provides for free and open public access.

### **Q3. Who manages the front country trail system?**

**A3.** There is a complicated “patchwork” of land ownership and trail rights-of-way. About half of the trails are on National Forest land and the rest are primarily on Santa Barbara City land with some short segments on county and private property. The Forest Service has rights-of-way on most of the segments and has been the primary custodian of the trail system for the past 40 years, responsible for most of the trail maintenance and signage. In 1961 a rights-of-way easement was put in place between Santa Barbara City and the Forest Service on all trails across Water Resources Land (City) property within the Los Padres National Forest. The said right-of-way gives the Forest Service and the public rights for the construction, reconstruction,

maintenance and full, free and quiet use and enjoyment of the these trails. Sections of these trails as described in the 1961 rights-of-way easement would include portions on: **Tunnel, Jesusita, Cold Springs, Rattlesnake, and the West Fork of the Cold Springs trails.**

**Q4. What is being done to address the conflicts and safety problems on the front country trail system?**

**A4.** The Forest Service and City and County of Santa Barbara over the past several years have worked with volunteers and other stakeholders to address the problems associated the trail system and improve public safety. Efforts have included enhanced user information and volunteer patrols, trail design modification and other approaches. Most of this work has been spearheaded and accomplished by volunteers working cooperatively with the agencies.

In early 1990, a partnership began between the Forest Service and a group of local mountain bicycle riders, organized as the Santa Barbara Mountain Bike Trail Volunteers (SBMTV). Originally the group addressed trail maintenance issues but then their focus shifted to include user education and conflict resolution. SBMTV has been instrumental in devising solutions to trail conflicts including organizing trail patrols and a trailhead host program, and improving educational signage and handouts. They instituted a “bike bell” program, which provides bells for downhill mountain bicycle riders to announce their presence to other trail users.

**Q. What is the Trails Working Group?**

**A5.** The Trails Working Group (TWG), established in 2004, is a coalition of hikers, mountain bikers, equestrians, private property owners and others with an interest in the frontcountry trail system. The goal of TWG was to explore in a respectful collaborative fashion the options for improving public safety and enjoyment of the trail system. Participants included representatives of the local chapter of the Sierra Club, Los Padres Trail Riders, SBMTV, Montecito Trails Foundation, the County Hiking and Riding Trails Advisory Committee (CRAHTAC). Other participants included representatives from the City and County of Santa Barbara and the Forest Service. TWG over a two-year period invested tremendous time and creative energy into developing consensus among the different trail user groups. In August 2004, TWG issued their findings and recommendations to the Forest Service, and City and County of Santa Barbara.

**Q6. What are TWG’s recommendations? Will they be implemented?**

**A6.** TWG’s recommendations are contained in a report called the Front Country Trail Working Group Collaborative Management Proposal. There are two key proposals. The first proposal is to implement on a 2-year trial basis a voluntary “odd-even” schedule that would limit mountain bike use on some trails to alternating days. The concept is to provide separation of conflicting uses while allowing all user groups to have access to the trails. The proposal includes a monitoring program to ensure that the odd-even schedule is producing positive results.

The second major proposal is to establish a community Trail Alliance (TA) to assist the agencies in implementing the odd-even schedule and/or other innovative solutions, take the lead in public education, provide leadership and resources for trail maintenance, and help identify priorities for new trail construction. The establishment of a viable alliance is essential to the future management of the trail system as all three government agencies lack the fiscal and workforce resources needed to implement change.

**Q7. What is practice of Adaptive Management?**

**A7.** The principals of adaptive management will be used to manage Front Country Trails into the future. Adaptive management is a process for implementing management decisions that requires monitoring of management actions and adjustments of decisions based on past and present knowledge. Adaptive management practices uses data collected over time and periodic evaluation to determine if changes in management are needed to achieve the desired conditions. Management decisions are improved incrementally as experience is gained in response to new findings and societal changes. The topic of trail user conflict on Santa Barbara Front Country Trails has been evolving for the past 30 years and will continue to evolve. None of the meetings on this topic are expected to be the last opportunity for people to have input. In an adaptive management approach there will be some things that will be tried, and evaluated, then the process will be repeated. It is expected that there will be a series of interim decisions. These decisions may last a short time one to two years during the testing phase; and if they work, they could be extended. Public input will always be an on going part of the process. It is anticipated that the three agencies will look for a solution that provides for all the users in some way, for the next interim period.