

February 12, 2021

The Honourable John Horgan, M.L.A.
Premier of British Columbia
Email: premier@gov.bc.ca

cc: Minister Selina Robinson, Minister Katrine Conroy, Parliamentary Secretary Roly Russell, Minister of State Nathan Cullen, Minister George Heyman, Parliamentary Secretary Kelly Greene and Minister Melanie Mark.

Dear Premier,

COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on most aspects of our society over the last year, but it has reminded us of the tremendous value of our trails, parks, wilderness and outdoor recreation areas. As the pandemic has increased society-wide anxiety and forced us to socially-distance, nature has helped sustain our physical and mental well-being.

BC has an extensive network of trails and recreation sites on Crown land outside of the provincial park system that is managed by Recreation Sites and Trails BC (RSTBC) in partnership with hundreds of community trail groups, First Nations and local governments. More than 20,000 kilometres of mountain biking, off-road motorcycling, hiking, equestrian, ATVing, cross country skiing, snowmobiling and rail trails bring direct benefits to local communities in terms of physical health and mental wellness, social relationships, environmental awareness, climate resilience, rural economic development and Indigenous reconciliation. These trails and recreation areas also provide world-class visitor experiences as premier trail destinations and are drivers of our important tourism economy. For example,

- The 2016 Sea to Sky Mountain Bike Tourism Economic Impact Study found that visitor expenditures generated by this particular user group amounted to over \$70M annually, with over \$16M going to taxes.
- The 2019 Outdoor Recreation Economic Impact Analysis in the Fraser Valley Regional District (FVRD) established that the 7.4 million recreation days in the FVRD in 2019 produced more than \$948M in annual direct spending by residents and visitors combined, with nearly 70% of this spending originating from FVRD residents.
- A 2019 socio-economic study by the BC Snowmobile Federation showed that snowmobiling generated \$299.2M in the winter of 2018, with local clubs representing \$4.4M of this.

Visitation to trails and recreation sites in BC has grown consistently over the past several years and spiked this past year. In the Sea-to-Sky Corridor, for example, trail use increased between 40-142% from summer 2019 to summer 2020, with even more dramatic increases in individual months or on specific weekends. With the increase in visitation, this vital outdoor recreation system faces identical issues to those observed in BC's provincial parks, including degradation of recreation infrastructure, lack of facilities such as outhouses and wildlife-proof garbage containers, serious environmental and cultural impacts, and insufficient staff and budgets to plan and to maintain BC's outdoor recreation assets, including critical road access to trailhead and recreation sites.

The Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services noted in its report on the Budget 2021 Consultation ([volume 1](#)) that outdoor recreation and nature organizations had observed increased use of parks and trails during the pandemic and that this activity has increased pressure on Recreation Sites and Trails BC. The committee recommended an increase in operational funding for the agency to "support staffing, monitoring and enforcement, maintenance, land management planning, oversight of public health and safety, and recreational infrastructure and services, including promoting and supporting volunteer efforts".

With continued growth in outdoor recreation and trail usage likely in the new post-pandemic 'normal', a modest \$4M boost in RSTBC's annual operating budget to \$12.5M would permit RSTBC to increase its capacity to plan, develop, manage and maintain BC's trail network and recreation areas outside of provincial parks in partnership with communities and volunteers, and to restore critical road access to trailheads lost over the past two decades of neglect. This would expand the diversity and quality of activities available to residents and visitors alike, disperse recreation users, and capitalize on many community benefits. Increased capacity would also enable RSTBC to play a more active role in supporting true and lasting reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and to help facilitate strong partnerships between recreation groups and First Nations.

As part of BC's Community Economic Recovery Infrastructure Program, the province has announced it will invest \$90M over the next year as one-time grants to support community economic resilience, destination development, unique heritage infrastructure, and rural economic development, many of which relate to outdoor recreation infrastructure. While well-intentioned and appreciated, the expediency of these projects and the employment and economic recovery benefits they offer to communities across the province could be jeopardized without more operational resources for RSTBC, which is responsible for engaging with stakeholders and managing these projects into the future.

The 2013 [Trails Strategy for British Columbia](#) identified inconsistent and insufficient funding as an important issue in the sustainable development and maintenance of BC's trails and outdoor recreation infrastructure. In other jurisdictions such as the United States, recreation infrastructure on government land (outside of parks) is funded and maintained based on visitor use levels. In BC, RSTBC relies hugely on volunteers and community organizations. For many practical intents and purposes, RSTBC has shifted from being an agency with the resources to fulfill its mandate to become a coordinator of community groups. This has had a particularly devastating impact on recreation trails and sites not directly adjacent to heavily populated areas. For example, although Pemberton has remarkable local volunteers, they can not keep up with the volume of maintenance required to handle the influx of visitors from the Vancouver area.

A [recent report](#) by the Outdoor Recreation Council of BC confirms that funding opportunities for volunteer groups who partner with RSTBC on trail infrastructure maintenance remain very inadequate and that BC's heavy reliance on volunteers to maintain trail infrastructure without sound support systems in place leads to volunteer burnout. It is not in the province's best interest for RSTBC to continue to rely so heavily on volunteers to perform essential maintenance.

Funding must be increased to ensure that RSTBC, with support from volunteers and community groups, can tackle the significant backlog of deferred maintenance, provide essential facilities such as outhouses and wildlife-proof garbage containers, and restore neglected road access to trailheads and recreation sites to disperse visitors and broaden outdoor recreational opportunities.

We ask for a commitment to increase the annual operating budget for Recreation Sites and Trails BC to \$12.5 million as part of Budget 2021 to help stimulate BC's economic recovery and to support reconciliation, environmental stewardship, rural economic development and the physical and mental health of British Columbians.

Sincerely,

Brad Harrison, Adventure Tourism Coalition and Backcountry Lodges of BC Association
Scott Walker, Back Country Horsemen of BC
Rod Clapton, BC Federation of Drift Fishers
Georgina Selinger, BC Lapidary Society
Paul Grey, BC Marine Trails
Peter Sprague, BC Off-Road Motorcycle Association
Donegal Wilson, BC Snowmobile Federation
Joss Penny, British Columbia Lodging and Campgrounds Association
Wannes Luppens, Cross Country BC
Barry Janyk, Federation of Mountain Clubs of BC
Kim Reeves, Four Wheel Drive Association of BC
Sarah Allison, Horse Council BC
Ingrid Jarrett, Hotel Association of BC
Tewanee Joseph, Indigenous Tourism Association of BC
AJ Strawson, International Mountain Biking Association
Mike Riediger, Kootenay Adaptive Sport Association
Martin Littlejohn, Mountain Bike Tourism Association
Louise Pedersen, Outdoor Recreation Council of BC
Phil Rankin, Recreational Canoeing Association of BC
Ciel Sander, Trails Society of BC
Walt Judas, Tourism Industry Association of BC
Scott Benton, Wilderness Tourism Association and BC River Outfitters Association
Kim Smith, Quad Riders ATV Association of BC

These 25 organizations represent together more than 2,000 organizations and businesses in BC.

