



# METHOW TRAILS



## MASTER PLAN

### January 17th, 2022

Methow Trails is a 501(c)(3) organization

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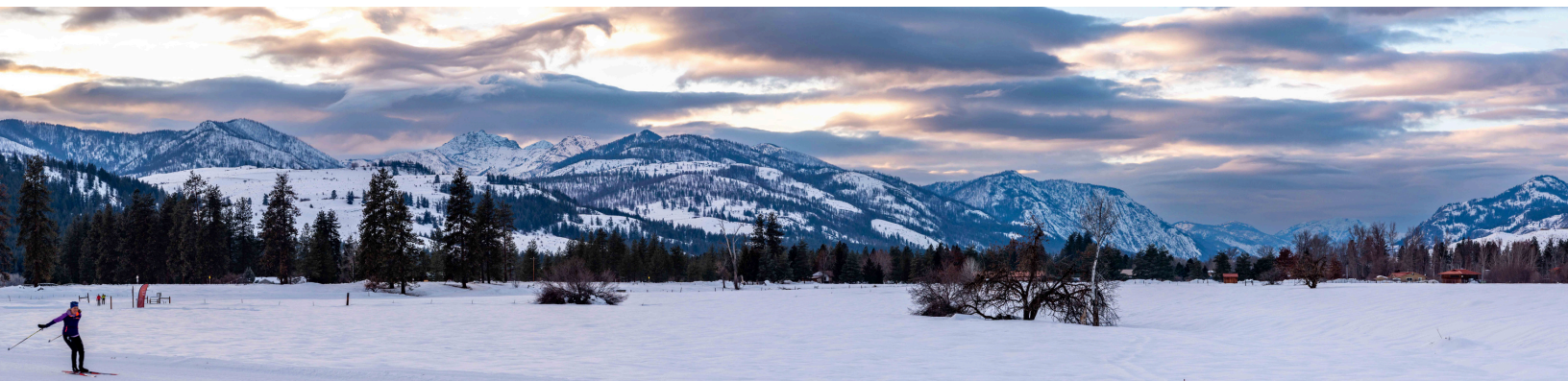
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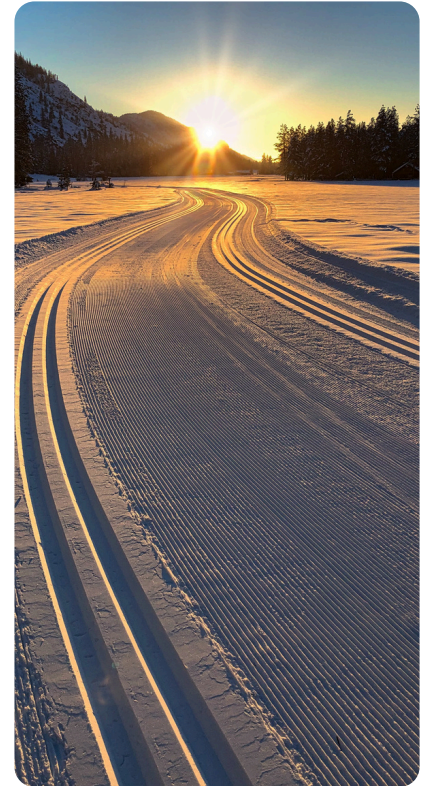


# INTRODUCTION

## 1.0 Introduction

Methow Trails is dedicated to accomplishing its core mission: We connect people, nature and communities through a world-class trail system. Methow Trails creates and maintains one of the largest interconnected winter trail systems in North America. Large portions of the trail system are also part of, and allow access to, a vast network of multi-use, yearround recreational trails.

Methow Trails pursues its mission by maintaining and developing nonmotorized winter and summer recreational trails and facilities, coordinating year-round recreation opportunities through collaborative partnerships, supporting community and racing events, organizing public outreach, and fostering educational partnerships. Methow Trails is committed to practices that generate long-term local economic sustainability of the community and the organization, and natural resource protection for the Methow Valley.



Methow Trails maintains active partnerships with the U.S. Forest Service, Okanogan County, the Methow Trails Collaborative, the Department of Natural Resources, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Washington State Parks, private landowners, local businesses, chambers of commerce and other non-profit organizations.

This Master Plan lays out a conceptual direction for the management and future development of Methow Trails, along with specific projects to be accomplished by the organization over time. The Master Plan forms the basis of a yearly work plan, developed by the staff, and includes timelines and measurable outcomes for each project.

The Master Plan ensures public transparency and consistency within the organization over time. To remain viable and current, the Master Plan is updated on an ongoing basis and re-endorsed by the Board of Directors at least every five years.

# BACKGROUND

## 2.0 Background

Methow Trails' unique history, along with current events and anticipated trends, provides relevant background for both the Master Plan and the organization's future development.

## 2.1 History

### 2.1.1 Groomed Nordic skiing in the Methow Valley

The Methow Valley historically had a few unconnected ski trails that were maintained by individuals. However, no trail system existed until 1977, when the Methow Family Sports Club was formed. This nonprofit organization was dedicated to promoting non-motorized community sports, recreational activities and entertainment for families. Its articles of incorporation limited use of motorized vehicles to accessing, maintaining and improving the club's facilities.

In 1980, the club reorganized to focus on cross-country skiing, and was renamed The Methow Valley Ski Touring Association. The association's purpose was to "develop, establish and maintain a system of ski touring trails in the Methow Valley, which may also be used for other non-motorized recreational uses, such as running, hiking, biking and horseback riding." The Association initially focused on organizing sponsored races and other events, but by 1983 amended its mission to encompass the establishment and maintenance of a Nordic ski trail system, including trailhead parking, signs, maps, toilets, and a ski patrol.

In 1992, the Association expanded its purpose; this time to include the promotion and maintenance of a yearround multi-sport trail system and related events. The organization also changed its name to Methow Valley Sport Trails Association and is now known as Methow Trails.

### 2.1.2 Connected trail system

Initially, the trail system was divided into three separate clusters: The Diamond T Ranch in the Rendezvous area, Sun Mountain, and Mazama. In the mid-1980's a group of highly engaged individuals formed the Methow Valley Institute Foundation whose sole purpose was to acquire right-of-way easements through private property to create the Methow Valley Community Trail on the valley floor. Once completed in the early 1990's, this trail effectively linked the three separate clusters into one continuous system and created an interconnected Nordic skiing

# BACKGROUND



trail network that is unique in all North America for its length and continuity. Most trail easements were then deeded to Okanogan County which secured access to unique state funding for public trails. Methow Trails develops, maintains and operates the trail system under a non-exclusive franchise agreement

with the county. This agreement was recently extended to 2043. A large portion of the easements for the trail system are privately owned.

## 2.1.3 Funding

Methow Trails' primary funding sources are annual ski trail ticket and season pass sales, which together covers approximately 85% of Methow Trails' annual expenses. Nearly all the remaining funding comes from public sources that help support the trail system year-round, including the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO), the Community Foundation of North Central Washington (CFNCW), the Methow Fund, Title II Recreational Advisory Council (RAC) and many other grantors over the years. Additionally, private and corporate donations along with business sponsorships are important components of Methow Trails funding. Additional funding comes from cooperation between Methow Trails and Okanogan County. Over the years Methow Trails, Methow Valley tourist businesses, and Okanogan County have worked together to establish a 2% tax on overnight lodging in the unincorporated areas of Okanogan County. Methow Trails receives some of this 2% tax for capital and marketing requests, as approved annually by the Okanogan County Commissioners and the Lodging Tax Advisory Committee.

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# BACKGROUND

## 2.2 Current condition of Methow Trails and use of its trail system

The current winter trail system encompasses 200 kilometers(km) (the longest continuous groomed Nordic trail system in the U.S.) and provides a variety of year-round experiences on terrain ranging from gentle trails through the rural setting on the valley floor to challenging trails in mountainous terrain. The system includes trails that are single use and others that are open to a variety of uses. Of the approximately 200km trails for Nordic skiing, 42 km allow dogs, 34 km are for fat-tire bike use and we have 52 km of snowshoe trails.

Approximately 44% of the trail system is on private property. Of the remaining trail system, the trail distance by land management agency is approximately 52% on USFS lands, 2.1% on Washington Department of Natural Resources lands, 1.7% on Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife lands and .02% on U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lands.

Visitor user ski days have increased significantly over time from 6,300 in 1983-84 to 80,000+ in 2020-21. There is also a significant and increasing amount of use by mountain bikers and hikers in other seasons. Nevertheless, an estimated 65% of all reported Methow Trails winter trail user visits occur during the months of December, January and February. Winter trail users provide an economic and employment boost to the valley community when many other tourist attractions are not available.

In 2012-2013 Methow Trails piloted a “Fat Bike” program. The program exposed thousands of new potential trail users to our organization and to the Methow Valley. As a result of the pilot’s program success, Methow Trails has fully integrated fat biking into its operations and plans to develop more fat bike and snowshoe specific groomed trails.



# BACKGROUND

At the request of the Forest Service, Methow Trails adopted its first summer-only mountain biking trail, the user-created Buck Mountain Trail. Methow Trails, the Forest Service, and the Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance (EMBA, a



mountain bike advocacy non-profit) worked together and successfully made Buck Mountain a recognized Forest Service trail. Additional collaboration and partnership between Methow Trails and Evergreen resulted in further development of the Sun Mountain bike trails. Methow Trails also takes a leadership role with the Methow Trails Collaborative initiatives such as the “Save a Trail” program, both examples of the organization’s commitment to expanding year-round use opportunities.

## 2.2.1 Events and programs

Methow Trails has 5 events throughout the year. Ski to the Sun, Tour of the Methow, and The Doggie Dash are winter events, while the Sunflower Half-Marathon, Marathon, and Relay and the Cutthroat Classic Trail Run provide large attractions in the non-skiing months.

Additional free winter programs hosted by Methow Trails are: kids seventeen and younger ski and participate in events for free, 75 and older adults ski free, Backyard ski days (free ski days) and snowshoe tours. Methow Trails is also involved with the Adaptive Ski Program for physically challenged skiers. Through a partnership with Room One, a social services organization, Methow Trails also makes free seasonal passes available to local families in financial need.

In an average year, 12,100 people participate in Methow Trails events and an additional 15,000 people participate in partner events that Methow Trails facilitates. Methow Trails and partner programs and events encourage high participation among all users.



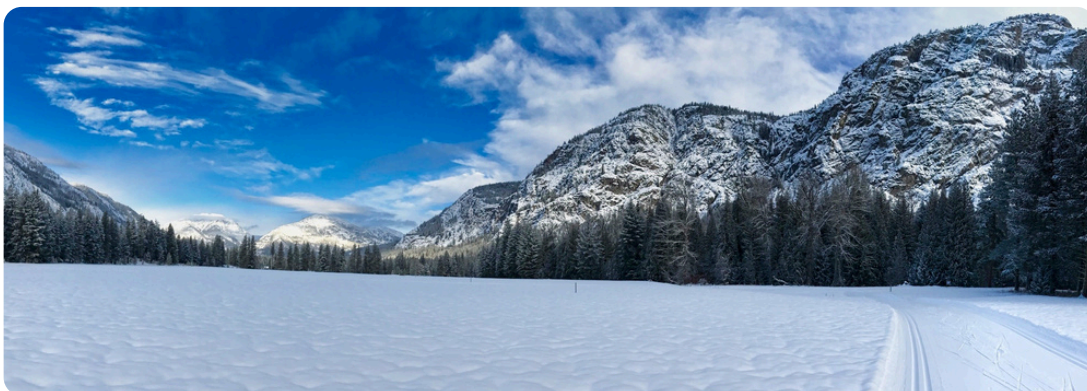
# BACKGROUND

## 2.2.2 Community outreach and activities

Methow Trails focuses on community and a sustainable trail system. Methow Trails:

- Grooms the Big Valley area which is free to community members and visitors.
- Provides free skiing for individuals 17 and under and 75 and older.
- Maintains relationships with over 195 private land owners that provide 44% of the trails in Methow Trails system.
- Actively participates in the “Save a Trail” initiative with the Trails Collaborative, bringing back closed or unmaintained trails.
- Provides a high number of user days (approximately 174,000 annually).  
Additionally, Methow Trails partners with over a dozen trail/event organizations to host an additional 7500 user days on our trails, providing an economic engine for the surrounding community.
- Acts in a leadership role in the Methow Valley Trails Collaborative.
- Provides dog-friendly trails.
- Provides free passes to those who cannot afford them in partnership with Room One.
- Provides discounted grooming for Methow Valley Nordic Ski Education Foundation (MVNSEF).
- Provides free ski trail access to parents during MVNSEF ski practices.
- Coordinates the cub ski program to ensure equipment is available and teachers and kids have what they need to get every elementary student on skis.
- Provides a growing Sit-Ski program for physically challenged users.

The development of a commuter and recreation year-round trail connecting the communities of Twisp and Winthrop began in 2020. When completed it will be a key component of the trail network, greatly enhancing recreation and transportation opportunities for valley residents and visitors alike.





# BACKGROUND

## 2.2.3 Economic Impact

In 2014 Methow Trails hired Resource Dimensions to conduct an economic impact analysis. That analysis updates prior surveys in 1998 and 2005 and examines the broad range of economic impacts of the trail network and land resources on the local economy. Some key findings of the survey include:

- Nearly 12.4 million dollars (2014 dollars) in direct and indirect expenditures are contributed to the Methow Valley economy by trail users.
- Seventy-six percent (76%) of resident and 84% of trail user respondents said the network of Methow Trails was the most important factor in their visit. Another 20% and 15%, respectively, indicated it was an important factor.
- Fifty-two percent (52%) of all businesses indicated that trail visitors and resource-based tourism has increased significantly (24%) or somewhat (28%) since they have been in business.
- Annual expenditures by all trail users for the period between 2012 and 2014 generated an estimated \$292,740 in city and county tax revenues; \$94,391 in state shared lodging taxes; \$97,269 in additional hotel/motel taxes, and \$211,896 in state taxes.
- Almost 92% of both resident and trail user survey respondents indicate their access to public and private recreational facilities in the Methow Valley is very important (80%) or important (12%).

The Executive Summary of the 2014 study is available from Methow Trails.



## 2.2.4 Budget and Finance

Methow Trails emphasizes cost control and efficient operations to maintain a strong financial position which includes establishing reserve funds. Methow Trails recognizes the volatility of recreational activities and that poor snow years will happen. Its annual budgets keep Methow Trails on a solid financial footing to continue to offer world-class trails into the future.

# BACKGROUND

## 2.2.5 Organizational Resources

Methow Trails utilizes the following resources to manage and maintain trails:

- **Equipment:** The current inventory of equipment includes snow cats, snowmobiles, a mini-excavator, several trucks, trailers, ATVs, a snow bucket for the snow cats, mowers, skid steer, a chipper, and a variety of hand tools. Currently, most of the equipment maintenance is performed in-house by Methow Trails staff.
- **Staff:** Methow Trails employs the following: Executive Director, Trails Manager, Trails Technician X 2, Mechanic, and Office Manager. Part time positions: Partnership Manager, Access and Outreach Manager, and 10 seasonal Groomers.
- **Local Business:** Methow Trails utilizes local businesses the local work force.
- **Trailheads:** Multiple parking areas and trailhead facilities (restrooms, kiosks, maps, trail signs and bulletin boards) are provided, managed, and maintained for users' convenient year-round trail access. Given the increase in user-days, Methow Trails improves and expands trailhead facilities for future and year-round use. Community artists have donated artwork for multiple trailhead structures to enhance the visual and cultural value of our trailheads.
- **Volunteers:** Methow Trails could not operate or maintain its trail system without the tireless support of dedicated volunteers. Service volunteers help with race events and trail maintenance, check trail passes, act as ski patrol and provide information to trail users. Monthly volunteer work parties, led by Methow Trails staff, contribute hundreds of hours of physical work to keep the summer and winter trails in excellent shape. Combined, these community members contribute over 4000 hours towards the trails and number over 200 people.
- **Vendors:** Local businesses provide information, sell tickets, distribute maps, and promote Methow Trails to a variety of locals and visitors.



# CHALLENGES

## 3.0 Challenges

The following challenges represent some of the trends that will affect the future of trail use on the Methow Trails system.

- **CLIMATE CHANGE:** The impacts of a changing climate are felt throughout the Pacific Northwest, including in the Methow Valley and Methow Trails must be resilient to meet a changing climate. Contingencies include those for low-snow winters that limit snow-based activities; and dry summers that bring increased wildfire risk. Mitigation ideas explored include development of shaded trails on northfacing slopes, high-altitude trail options with better snow coverage, and creation of a trail system that can act as a fire-break to protect valley towns and other infrastructure.
- **INCREASED GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT:** As the Methow Valley's resident and non-resident population continues to grow, the Methow Trails trail network sees a corresponding increase in use and fractioning of private landowner holdings that remain the basis of the trail system. Increased user numbers are expected from the fast growth of the population in the Northwest, particularly in the greater Seattle area. Locally and nationally, mountain biking is the fastest growing trail user demographic. These trends contribute to additional recreationalists visiting the Methow Valley year-round, and increases the need for trailhead parking, infrastructure and most importantly: community alignment around capacity and thresholds of trails, trail users and amenities.
- **INCREASED USER DIVERSITY:** Fat-bikers, mountain bikers, hikers, runners and physically challenged users are only a few of the diverse user groups that place increasing demands on trails in the Methow Valley. As user growth and diversity increase there is potential for conflict between user groups. Methow Trails will be challenged to effectively manage and maintain the trail networks to meet both user and community expectations



# CHALLENGES

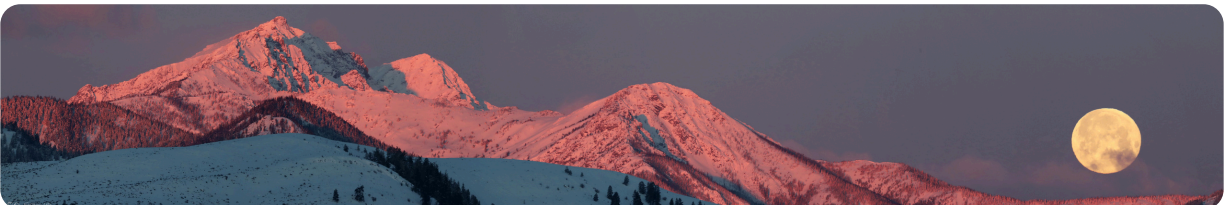
- **CONNECTING COMMUNITIES THROUGH TRAILS:** No non-motorized trails exist that connect the communities and schools within the Methow Valley. With a growing population, there is an increased need for trails as safe transportation and recreation routes. There also is not a commuter-friendly summer trail connector from Winthrop to Twisp, Mazama, or Pearrygin Lake State Park, the most visited recreational site in the entire valley. Recreationalists and commuters must travel on busy highways or county roads, which create safety hazards to any user. Long-distance cyclists who pass through this area need safe alternatives to these busy roads. Methow Trails is working on creating a trail between Twisp and Winthrop to address this challenge.
- **CHANGING AGENCY ROLES:** The U.S. Forest Service (the single largest land manager of the current system of trails), the Department of Natural Resources, and the Department of Fish and Wildlife currently have shifting and changing priorities. Methow Trails maintains a positive relationship with federal and state agencies through which current or future trails run. The complexity involved in the renewal of permits increases as government agencies expand their consideration of the needs and priorities of ever-growing and ever-changing user groups.
- **ACCURACY AND CONSISTENCY OF MAPS:** The expansion in the number and type of trail users in the Methow Valley is accompanied by a proliferation of maps by different user groups that differ in both emphasis and accuracy. Confusion about the trail system occurs among visitors and residents alike. Land owner permission may not be year-round and issues may arise as visitors use inaccurate maps. Methow Trails creates accurate maps annually to reflect the current summer and winter legal trails.
- **ECONOMIC STABILITY:** Economic volatility and other factors, including the ongoing uncertainty and everchanging conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic could result in lower visitor numbers. Trail passes may have an upper pricing limit that would result in a need for an alternative income stream. Methow Trails must prepare for financial challenges to sustain its long-term viability and contribution to the community.

# STRATEGY

## 4.1 Strategic priorities

The following strategic priorities are critical to the long-term success of Methow Trails. Key elements for each priority are established and evaluated annually.

- **LEGAL ACCESS FOR TRAILS:** Government agency permits, permanent rights-of-way, easements, deeds or licenses are critical for the longterm existence of the entire trail system. The priority is to secure these accesses for winter use, while yearround access remains desirable for all users.
- **TRAIL QUALITY:** High quality trail design, maintenance, and winter grooming are an essential part of the organization’s reputation. Methow Trails enhances users’ experiences, including appropriate changes to the Methow Trails system, amenities and other supporting infrastructure by keeping trail quality a major focus.
- **FINANCIAL STABILITY:** Methow Trails supports community vitality by ensuring long-term financial stability. To execute these strategic priorities to their full potential, Methow Trails will develop additional sources of funding.
- **CONTINGENCIES FOR CLIMATE CHALLENGES:** Methow Trails will develop mitigation strategies for year-round changes in weather patterns that result in inadequate snow coverage, fire, flooding, and landslides.
- **INTERCONNECTED TRAIL SYSTEM:** Methow Trails relies on collaboration, connections, and partnerships to create and maintain a valley-wide trail network that connects local communities. This network, its infrastructure, and communication of this resource (maps and descriptions) are valuable for all users and all seasons.
- **COMMUNITY OUTREACH:** The Board and Staff actively engages with the community, businesses, landowners, land managers, elected officials and all other stakeholders and will engage in educational initiatives.



# STRATEGY

## 4.2 Strategic goals

Strategic goals are an intermediate between Strategic Priorities (that identify Methow Trails' strategy at the most general level) and the Work Plan (that identifies specific projects and includes timelines). The goals presented below are arranged in group identified by function. Taken together, the goals include and expand each Strategic Priority. These goals provide the basis for management to develop annual Work Plans. Methow Trails prioritizes winter activities and plays a supportive and collaborative partnership role throughout the year. Methow Trails maintains select summer trails and hosts two popular summer running events.

### 4.2.1 Trails and facilities

The following goals encompass standards for trails including aspects of planning, maintenance, and type of use, reports, trailheads, signage, safety, and access.

- Goal A: Maintain the existing system of trails to a high standard.
- Goal B: Improving the trail system equity in linking new trail sections.
- Goal C: Design, maintain, and construct facilities and infrastructure to support the growing year-round trail system and enhance the trail experience for all users.
- Goal D: Support year-round recreation opportunities in collaboration with other organizations to enhance the overall quality and use of the Methow Valley's trails.
- Goal E: Be a valuable community resource.
- Goal F: Foster good working relationships with private landowners, public land managers, local government, chambers of commerce, sports advocacy organizations, businesses, schools and local/regional non-profits.
- Goal G: Participate in a leadership role in an effective Methow Valley Trails Collaborative.



# STRATEGY

## 4.2.2 Community relations

Methow Trails is committed to operate as a respected major contributor to the Methow Valley Community.

- Goal E: Be a valuable community resource.
- Goal F: Foster good working relationships with private landowners, public land managers, local government, chambers of commerce, sports advocacy organizations, businesses, schools and local/regional non-profits.
- Goal G: Participate in a leadership role in an effective Methow Valley Trails Collaborative.

## 4.2.3 Environmental practices

Environmental stewardship is key to conserving the natural resources and the special nature of the Methow Valley. Methow Trails takes responsibility for minimizing the environmental impacts of creating and maintaining its trail system.

- Goal H: Be an exemplary care-taker of the land.
- Goal I: Collaborate with the other organizations and tribes to protect natural resources.

## 4.2.4 Finances

Sound financial management ensures that Methow Trails continues to provide the public with a high-quality trail system into the future.

- Goal J: Openly communicate financial information.
- Goal K: Maintain revenue streams sufficient to support the goals of the organization.

## 4.2.5 Organization

Methow Trails works to improve the skills and abilities of its employees, volunteers, and board members. Methow Trails' members have regular opportunities to readily interface with the organization.

*Note: Members include lifetime pass holders, annual pass holders, trailside landowners, service program members, business members, board members, and annual donors of \$50 or more. There are currently over 1000 members.*

- Goal L: Maintain a program of volunteers year round
- Goal M: Provide a safe and healthy work environment.
- Goal N: Engage members to contribute to the organization.

# STRATEGY

## 4.2.6 Events and Programs

Methow Trails supports events and programs to promote the use, enjoyment, and awareness of the trail system and to contribute revenue to the organization and the local economy. This includes supporting both summer and winter programs.

- Goal O: Regularly evaluate events and programs to support the culture and finances of Methow Trails and the community.

## 4.2.7 Outreach

Methow Trails' outreach focuses on connecting users and trails. Methow Trails promotes a strong partnership between local businesses, program partners, government agencies, sports advocacy organizations, chambers, and tourist agencies.

- Goal P: Responsively manage growing use with events and programs.
- Goal Q: Enhance year-round recreation opportunities and partnerships that will improve the overall quality and use of the
- trail system.

## 4.2.8 Education and communication

Methow Trails will educate and communicate to trail users.

- Goal R: Provide effective maps for year-round trail use to responsibly spread growing use.
- Goal S: Communicate year-round trail opportunities through links to websites, apps, customer service and publications.
- Goal T: Promote a healthy life style.





# APPENDICES

## Appendices:

- Maps of Existing Trail System- Maps are available on the Methow Trails website or at the Methow Trails office
- Current Financial Statements- Available by request from Methow Trails
- Executive Summary of the study -Available by request from Methow Trails
- List of Methow Trails Collaborative Members:
  - USFS Methow Ranger District
  - Washington State Parks
  - Methow Trails
  - Methow Valley Snowmobile Association
  - Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance-Methow Chapter (EMBA)
  - Washington Department of Fish and Wild Life
  - Okanogan County
  - Mountain Trails Grooming Association
  - Loup Loup Ski Education Foundation
  - Winthrop Chamber
  - Rendezvous Huts
  - Methow Conservancy
  - Washington Trails Association
  - Other Represented Partner Organizations: North Cascade Outfitters and Cascade Wilderness Outfitters, Washington Department of National Resources, Twisp Chamber and Parks, Pacific Crest Trails Association, Access Fund, Methow Valley Fat Bike, and North Central ATV Club

