



Recreation on Private Lands

The Northern Forest has a long history of large and small landowners opening their lands to the public for recreation, thanks to state laws releasing landowners from liability as long as they don't charge people to use their land. Access to private land is essential for the outdoor recreation economy in this region, and it comes with special challenges for recreation managers.

We gathered **Abby Long**, Executive Director of [Kingdom Trails Association](#), **Mike Morin**, former Northeast Regional director of [Access Fund](#), **Sean Ross**, managing director of [Lyme Timber Company](#), and **Josh Wilson**, then executive director of [Barkeater Trails Alliance](#), to share their insights on this topic.

The panel noted that the economic, cultural, and community benefits of recreation would not be possible without access to private lands. But poor behavior by users, conflict between user groups, increased traffic, and other issues dissuade some landowners from making their land available or causes them to revoke privileges. Thus, as Abby says, "Engagement and education on proper trail etiquette and holding users accountable is the one way we can continue to value and protect our private landowners."

Recreation managers often use programs such as [Leave No Trace](#), the Northern Forest Center's [Ride With Gratitude](#) campaign, [Hike Safe](#), or the Access Fund's [Climbers Pact](#) to reinforce messaging about land use etiquette. They also seek to minimize impact in any one area. As Mike said, "Being able to invest in new areas to spread people out is critical." Maintaining appropriate infrastructure, such as parking and bathrooms, and monitoring proper trail usage are also important to ensure that recreation development is sustainable for communities.

The panel offered advice to those seeking new access to land. "When it comes to approaching individual landowners," said Josh, "peer-to-peer contact can be really crucial for gaining permission." Sean reiterated, "Every landowner and every property are different, and you need to go in with a wide range of tools that you could present to a landowner." These tools may include conservation easements for an entire property or a corridor through it, eliminating the possibility that the land would be developed and lost to recreation forever.



“Educating the user side is probably one of the most important things we can do to continue to allow private landowners to let us use their property.”

Sean Ross, Managing Director of Lyme Timber Company

As of late 2023, liability law in New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine gives protection to landowners who open their land for public recreation only if they receive no financial compensation. While this statute gives strong protection to landowners, it can cause concerns or dissuade landowners who wish to be paid for access to their lands. Liability law differs from state to state; panelists shared the resources below for more information:

- [Overview of Recreation Use Statutes](#) in Northern Forest states from Cornell (2006)
- [Recreation Use Statutes](#) linked in all 50 states.

Additional recommendations from the panel include:

- Build relationships with landowners and community members. Listen to and address their concerns.
- Collaborate with other trail groups and encourage collaboration between user groups to strengthen advocacy and public messaging.
- Creative policy change at the state level could address different methods for compensating landowners while maintaining their liability protections.

Access to recreation on private land is a tremendous gift to Northern Forest residents and visitors. It’s our responsibility to respect the land and the private landowners generous enough to let us walk, bike, sled, ride, and hunt on their land.



The Community Learning Briefs summarize the Northern Forest Center’s 2021-2023 “Building the New Forest Future” webinar series. The Recreation on Private Lands webinar and others in this series are available [here](#). This project has been supported in part by USDA Rural Development.