SWEET Alabama Trails

SWEET TRAILS ALABAMA

STATEWIDE TRAILS PLAN

JUNE 2024

PUBLIC DRAFT

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Disclaimer

This is the draft of the Sweet Trails Alabama Statewide Trails Plan. This plan has undergone Steering Committee review and comment, but has not been reviewed by the larger stakeholder group or the general public. This Draft Plan also is incomplete, with additional content to be developed. The Final Plan will incorporate comments from stakeholders and the general public.

Downtown Riverwalk
Montgomery, AL
Source: River Region Trails

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Glossary

Accessibility: Refers to trails and trail features that respond to all abilities, including users with disabilities (e.g., accessible restrooms and accessible parking spaces with room for van access).

Innovation ecosystem hub: A coalition of government, business, and other organizations working to promote new technologies and new jobs.

Natural surface trail: An unpaved trail; most often located in natural areas such as national forests.

Ricardian rents: The ability to produce more revenue per dollar of input than the least productive producer in the same market.

Shared use path: A trail specifically intended to serve multiple user types (e.g., people bicycling and walking).

Sidepath: A shared use path adjacent or parallel to a roadway.

Trail: A path or route intended for outdoor recreation uses, including hiking, bicycling, paddling, horseback riding, or OHV/ATV riding.

Trail Town: A community through which a trail passes. These communities may provide services to trail users or promote use of the trail.

Universal design: The design of products or environments that are usable by all people to the greatest extent possible.

Unmet demand: Used to describe the discrepancy between the amount of interest in a particular type of outdoor recreation (demand) and the available facilities (supply).

ADA: Americans with Disabilities Act

ALDOT: Alabama Department of Transportation

ATC: Alabama Trails Commission

ATF: Alabama Trails Foundation

ATV: all-terrain vehicle

IMBA: International Mountain Bicycling Association

MPO: Metropolitan Planning Organization

NATR: North Alabama Trails & Recreation

OHV: off-highway vehicle

SCORP: Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan

UACED: University of Alabama Center for Economic Development

01

Introduction

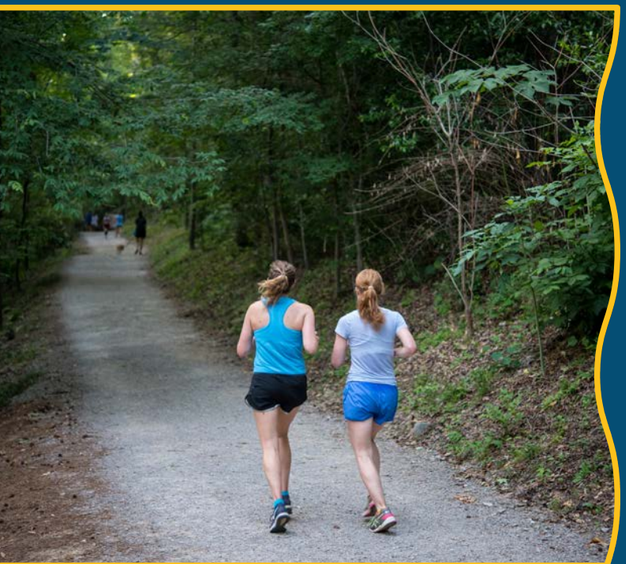
Hugh S. Branyon Backcountry Trail
Orange Beach, AL

Welcome to Sweet Trails Alabama

THE INITIATIVE THAT CATAPULTS ALABAMA AS THE TRAILS LEADER IN THE UNITED STATES.

SWEET TRAILS ALABAMA

Where a future trail network will connect the state's key destinations across all 67 counties, from the foothills of the Appalachians to the Gulf of Mexico beaches.



Jemison Trail, Mountain Brook, AL.
Source: Kalli Jones / Freshwater Land Trust

This is not a new idea, but one that builds on the hard work and recommendations of Innovate Alabama, the Alabama Trails Commission, and the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan.

It is not an unrealistic vision. Alabama is endowed with unmatched natural and cultural heritage that should be preserved, unlocked, accessed, treasured, and expressed. The Red Rock Trail System, Pinhoti Trail, Chief Ladiga Trail, Singing River Trail, River Region Trails, Tennessee RiverLine, and Hugh S. Branyon Backcountry Trail are just a few examples of ongoing and growing trail initiatives.

This is not just a trail plan. Trail systems that are safe, connected, and accessible are essential in making Alabama economically competitive. To attract and retain the nation's best and brightest (and their families), major employers require the high quality of life that trails create.

Sweet Trails Alabama is a pillar of Innovate Alabama that builds on the notion and direction that Alabama should do more to promote its outdoor recreation economy. This plan seeks to inventory, build upon, and connect all existing trails and trail initiatives across Alabama.

THE PLAN

Sweet Trails Alabama, the **Alabama Statewide Comprehensive Trails Plan**, is the statewide initiative and planning document that identifies and maps existing trails and presents a statewide network composed of regional and local trails to connect all 67 counties, their communities, and major cultural and natural resource destinations across the state. The Plan serves as a blueprint for the State's future investment in a connected, accessible, safe, and world-class trail network.

The Plan charts a feasible path forward with specific funding and implementation strategies for the State and its communities to make the Plan's vision a reality.

The Plan includes a comprehensive focus on all trails, including hiking, biking, paddling, horseback riding, and OHV/ATV riding. While the statewide system priority is hiking and biking, all trail uses are inventoried and expanded upon with this Plan's implementation.

VISION AND GOALS

The vision and goals for Sweet Trails Alabama were developed through stakeholder input received during the Swing Around the State tour, regional stakeholder meetings, and project steering committee (see Acknowledgments Page). The goals are organized around the same framework of the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (page 8).

Vision Statement

Alabama is the premier trails state in the Southeast, with a connected, publicly accessible system of trails reaching all 67 counties that bolsters thriving towns and communities, accelerates innovation and entrepreneurship, fosters sustained economic development, highlights and preserves the state's diverse natural and cultural history, and provides pathways for healthy living and quality of life.

Gulf State Park Wayfinding Signage
Orange Beach, AL
Source:
- Image: Leavell Design Consulting
- Design: Robert Finkel Design & Architecture Works
- Program Manager: University of Alabama Center for Economic Development (UACED)

Goals and Objectives

(In order of Steering Committee's perceived importance)

Funding

Increase and sustain funding resources for trail facility development and maintenance.

- Increase and sustain annual state funding commitment for design, construction, and ongoing maintenance of trails across the state.
- Leverage private and federal dollars to accelerate trail network growth.
- Develop shovel-ready projects that can be funded and built.
- Provide educational resources to inform communities of available trail funding.

Connectivity

Connect all 67 counties and major destinations with a publicly accessible trail network for transportation and recreation uses.

- Inventory all existing publicly accessible trails across the state.
- Knit together existing trail initiatives to elevate and amplify all efforts together.
- Connect existing trail systems and previously planned trails as desired by community stakeholders.
- As desired by community stakeholders, fill in trail gaps where trail planning and implementation have not occurred.

Economy and Innovation

Create economic opportunity and innovation ecosystem hubs along the trail system that provide outdoor recreation tourism and focal points for new business development.

- Partner with Innovate Alabama to position trails as the number one opportunity in the growing outdoor recreation market.
- Kick off first annual State Launch Tank to attract and benefit trail-related entrepreneurs across the state, supporting grassroots economic development in the outdoor recreation sector.
- Collaborate with the Alabama Pinhoti Trail Association initiative to advocate for trail tourism through an expanded Trail Towns program.
- Retain and attract talent by creating premier trail experiences and outdoor recreation opportunities.

Conservation and Stewardship

Promote conservation and stewardship of natural and cultural resources.

- Educate about the state's unparalleled biodiversity through trail educational signage and programs.
- Promote ecologically sound land management and collective responsibility to protect our natural resources.
- Use trails as conservation and wildlife corridors, informed by local, state, and federal conservation priorities and the efforts / research of allied initiatives.
- Partner with the State Historic Preservation Office and other to reserve the state's cultural heritage through storytelling, education, and protection of assets.

Health and Wellness

Generate safe, accessible opportunities for healthy living and exercise for all ability levels to address the state's health challenges and provide quality of life improvements statewide.

- Increase physical accessibility to trail facilities through universal design and innovative techniques.
- Improve access to outdoor recreation facilities and programs for all Alabamians while capitalizing on the diversity of the state.
- Expand ongoing and develop new statewide, regional, and local trail programs and challenges to encourage Alabamians to get outdoors.

Sweet Trails Alabama & RC&D Partnership

Promotion

Enhance public awareness of (and engagement in) trails.

- Celebrate and market the trails that are already in Alabama through internal and external marketing, including increased signage.
- Roll out Year of the Trail 2025 to amplify the message of trail tourism and economic development in Alabama.
- Develop a statewide online trail map and enhance user experience for Alabama trails in widely used trail mapping apps, acknowledging diversity of potential map users.
- Collaborate with the Alabama Tourism Department to build off existing marketing platforms to increase visibility of statewide trail and outdoor recreation opportunities.

Partnerships

Improve collaboration across Alabama to develop, maintain, and promote trails.

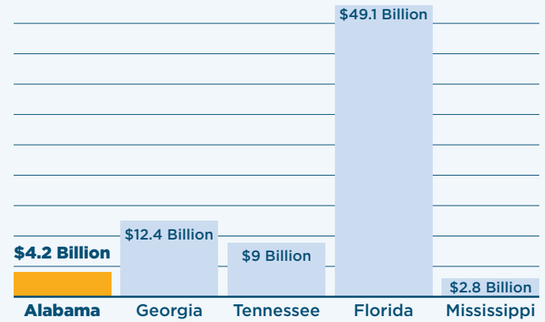
- Create a community trails toolkit to help communities plan, design, build, and promote trails, building off existing resources from allied partners.
- Begin an annual statewide trails summit to expand the reach of Sweet Trails Alabama, and share best practices and lessons learned.
- Support trail nonprofits and universities that provide regional and local commitment and technical assistance across the state.

BUILDING UPON ONGOING INITIATIVES

Sweet Trails Alabama is an extension and result of three key initiatives and efforts that have recently highlighted trails as critical infrastructure for economic growth and resident well-being.

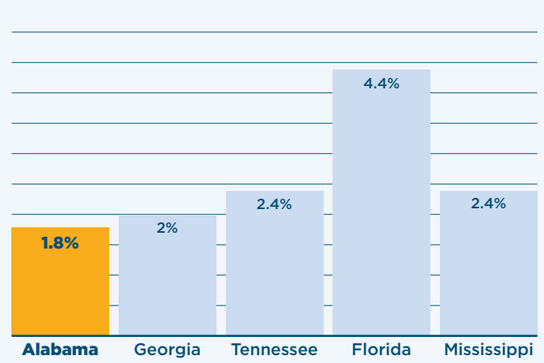
Innovative Alabama – Stanford University's Hoover Institution Report

Commissioned by Governor Kay Ivey, the 2021 report, led by Condoleezza Rice and Stanford University, provides "pragmatic, actionable policy recommendations to guide Alabama's leaders as they work to realize their state's full economic potential." **One of the main takeaways and recommendations is for the State to expand its outdoor recreation industry, enhancing the state's attractiveness to high-skilled workers and yielding substantial returns for both rural and urban communities.** The report shows that Alabama has not invested in its outdoor recreation infrastructure at the same scale as neighboring states and its "natural endowment is an under capitalized asset." The report highlights the Red Rock Trail system in Birmingham and the Cahaba Blueway as successful examples. The report recommends that the State ramp up spending on its outdoor recreation infrastructure with funding from private philanthropy, state funds, federal funds, and user fee revenue. Because of this report, Innovate Alabama established the Council on Outdoor Recreation in late 2022.



Source: US Department of Commerce. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Figure 1. | Outdoor recreation industry value added by state, 2019



Source: US Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Figure 2. | Outdoor recreation industry by state, 2019

> **"Outdoor recreation is not…simply a way to recruit high-skill workers; it is also a way to share the Ricardian rents generated by innovative industries broadly. When an employee of an innovative firm takes a walk on an urban trail and stops along the way for coffee or lunch, she is sharing some of those rents with the restaurant and its employees."**
>
> – Alexander Galetovic, Stephen Haber, Jordan Horrillo, and Isabel Lopez, "If You Build It, They Will Come: High-Skill Workers and Alabama's Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure," Innovate Alabama, a Report by the Hoover Institution

Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan

The **Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP)** is an essential statewide planning document that identifies regional outdoor recreation needs and opportunities by assessing the supply and demand for outdoor recreation facilities and important barriers to public participation. Of the 1,103 survey respondents in the outdoor recreation resident survey conducted for SCORP, three-quarters want an increase in outdoor recreation opportunities and financial support for outdoor recreation. **When analyzing unmet demand of a wide variety of 48 specific recreation facility opportunities across the state, the top three facility types with the most unmet demand were all trails.**

The goals of the SCORP include:

- Promote the conservation and stewardship of natural and cultural resources
- Increase physical accessibility to outdoor recreation facilities through universal design
- Increase and sustain funding resources for outdoor recreation facility maintenance and development, particularly for undeserved communities
- Enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion of outdoor recreation facilities and programs
- Enhance public awareness of and engagement in outdoor recreation
- Connect outdoor recreation assets and communities
- Improve the effectiveness of partnerships to develop and maintain outdoor recreation facilities

Facility Type	Respondent Request Rate	Average Days Would Use	Unmet Demand Index
Paved Walking/Jogging Paths	23.8%	117.4	28
Hiking Trails (Unpaved)	17.0%	89.1	15
Interpretive / Nature Trails (Education-Focused)	16.0%	90.0	14

Out of 48 recreation types surveyed, trails were the top three in unmet demand for the State of Alabama.

Alabama Trails Commission and Alabama Trails Foundation

The Alabama Trails Commission (ATC) was established by Act. 2010-585 (HB 376) of the 2010 Regular Legislative Session. The purpose was to gather representatives across the state to promote, develop, and facilitate trail efforts across the state. The ATC has led outreach, engagement, leadership training, and technical assistance through staff support from the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development. The group continues to meet quarterly to discuss trail topics around the state.

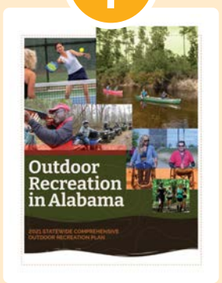
The Alabama Trails Foundation (ATF) was developed out of the ATC when the group desired to focus on funding to support trail development. The Pinhoti Trail was identified as a priority and has been the focus of the ATF since its inception. In addition, the ATF has focused on Trail Town economic development and is using the Pinhoti Trail as an example for the rest of the state.

Current and past members of the ATC and ATF have institutional knowledge, personal and professional networks, and a passion for trails and the outdoors that could become a cornerstone in the successful implementation of Sweet Trails Alabama.

Sweet Trails ALABAMA

INNOVATE ALABAMA

Focused, inspired, and well-analyzed focus on how to keep Alabama competitive—outdoor recreation identified as a key pillar for future investment.



SCORP

Identified outdoor recreation and trails as strong desires of residents; walking, hiking, and nature trails made up the top three highest categories on the Unmet Demand Index.

Alabama Trails Commission

Alabama Trails FOUNDATION

ALABAMA TRAILS COMMISSION (ATC) & ALABAMA TRAILS FOUNDATION (ATF)

Groups with institutional knowledge who have advanced trails statewide, regionally, and locally for over a decade.

THE PROCESS

SWING AROUND THE STATE TOUR
October 2023

This tour happened across the state to inventory trail initiatives and meet partners.

STATEWIDE INVENTORY
November 2023 – February 2024

Collection of relevant plans and data for existing and proposed trails and blueways.

STAKEHOLDER / FOCUS GROUP MEETINGS
November 2023 – February 2024

These sessions provided an opportunity for information gathering in multiple geographically distributed areas in the state.

PUBLIC INPUT
October 2023 – March 2024

- Public Survey, Online Input Map, E-Newsletter, and Social Media Campaign

NETWORK DEVELOPMENT
Spring 2024

A network will be developed with gaps in the network highlighted. Projects were prioritized through stakeholder and public input.

STAKEHOLDER / JURISDICTIONAL / PUBLIC FEEDBACK
March – May 2024

Virtual regional stakeholder meetings to get feedback on the draft proposed trail network utilizing online input maps.

PLAN FINALIZED!
Summer 2024

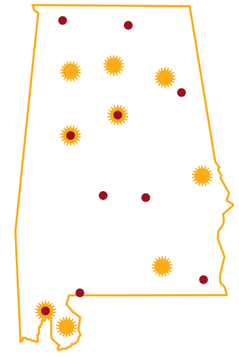
Including Statewide Trail Network and Implementation Plan.

ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

Sweet Trails Alabama has been an inclusive effort that has sought the input of stakeholders and residents across the entire state over a nine-month period. The goal of the process was to engage with all trail initiatives but also to broaden the discussion of trail interests, expanding to topics of tourism, health and wellness, economic development, and more. See Appendix A for a comprehensive summary of the engagement process and findings.

BY THE NUMBERS

TOUR OF ALABAMA October 2023
282 attendees to the Tour of Alabama meetings (see map of the Tour to the right)



STATEWIDE INVENTORY Nov 2023 – Feb 2024
7,672 miles of trails gathered:
- 2,089 miles of surface trails
- 3,068 miles of water trails
- 2,515 miles of road routes

STAKEHOLDER MEETINGS Nov 2023 – May 2024
298 total attendees to regional, jurisdictional, & one-on-one meetings

FOCUS GROUP ATTENDANCE
200 total attendees of focus groups based on the following topics:

- Equestrian
- Blueways
- Road/gravel biking
- Mountain biking
- Bikeways
- Hiking
- Accessibility
- OHV/ATV
- Two open meetings

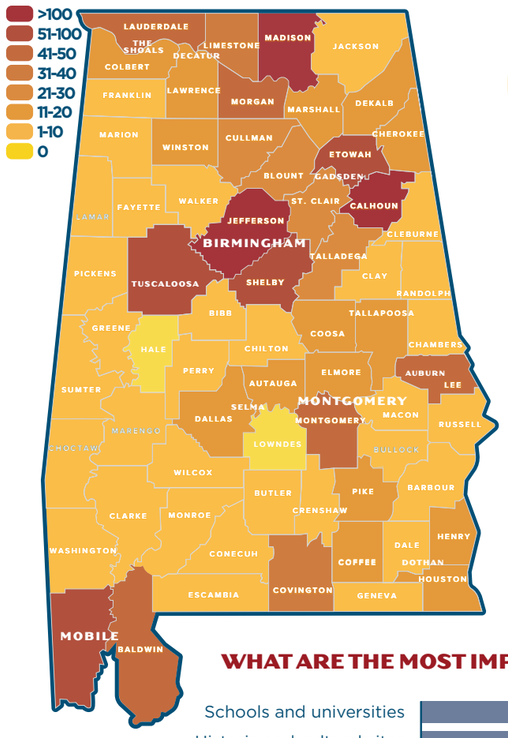
PUBLIC INPUT Oct 2023 – May 2024
1,501 citizens of Alabama took the survey

PUBLIC AWARENESS
- Over **800** followers on Facebook
- Over **26,170** reached on Facebook
- Over **2,869** actively engaging in emails with interactive content
- Website launched with over **1,700** views in 2024

WHAT WE HEARD

Survey Results

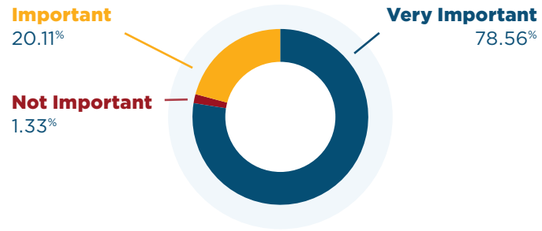
WHAT COUNTY DO YOU LIVE IN



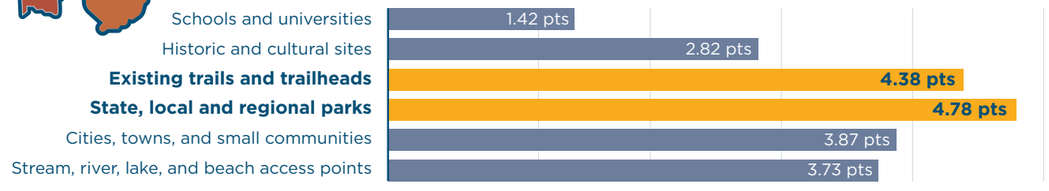
HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE AREA WHERE YOU LIVE?

- **Small Town** 29.74%
- **Rural** 29.27%
- **Suburban** 28.33%
- **Urban** 12.65%

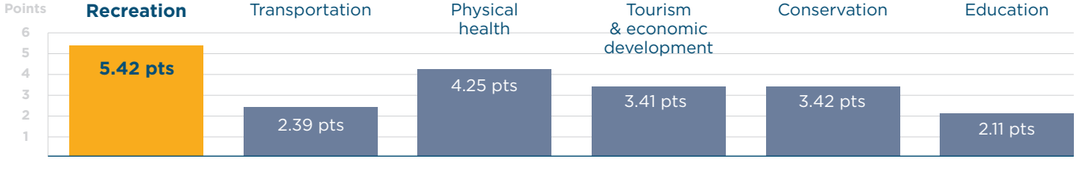
HOW IMPORTANT TO YOU IS THIS PROJECT AND CREATING A TRAIL SYSTEM ACROSS ALABAMA?



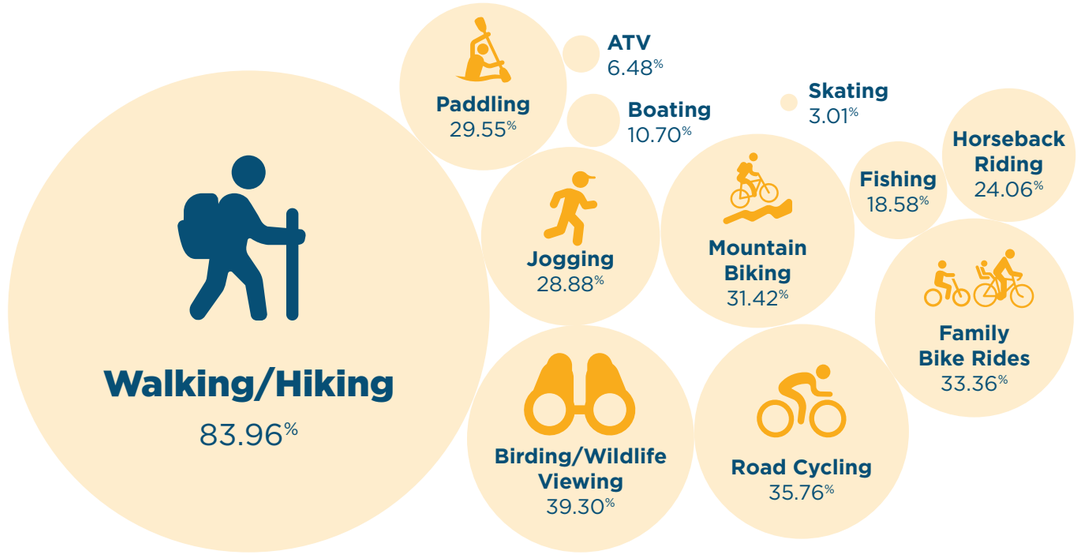
WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT DESTINATIONS TO CONNECT BY TRAILS?



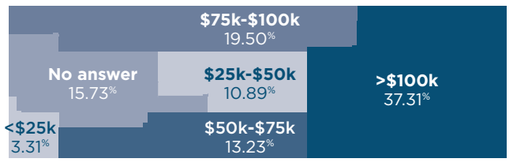
WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF A STATEWIDE TRAIL SYSTEM?



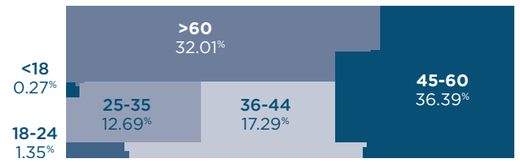
HOW DO YOU (OR WOULD YOU) USE TRAILS IN ALABAMA?



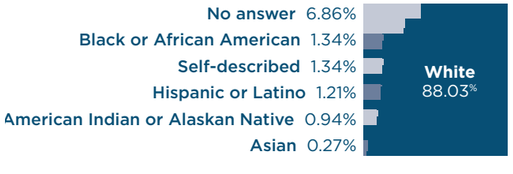
ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME



AGE



RACE



GENDER

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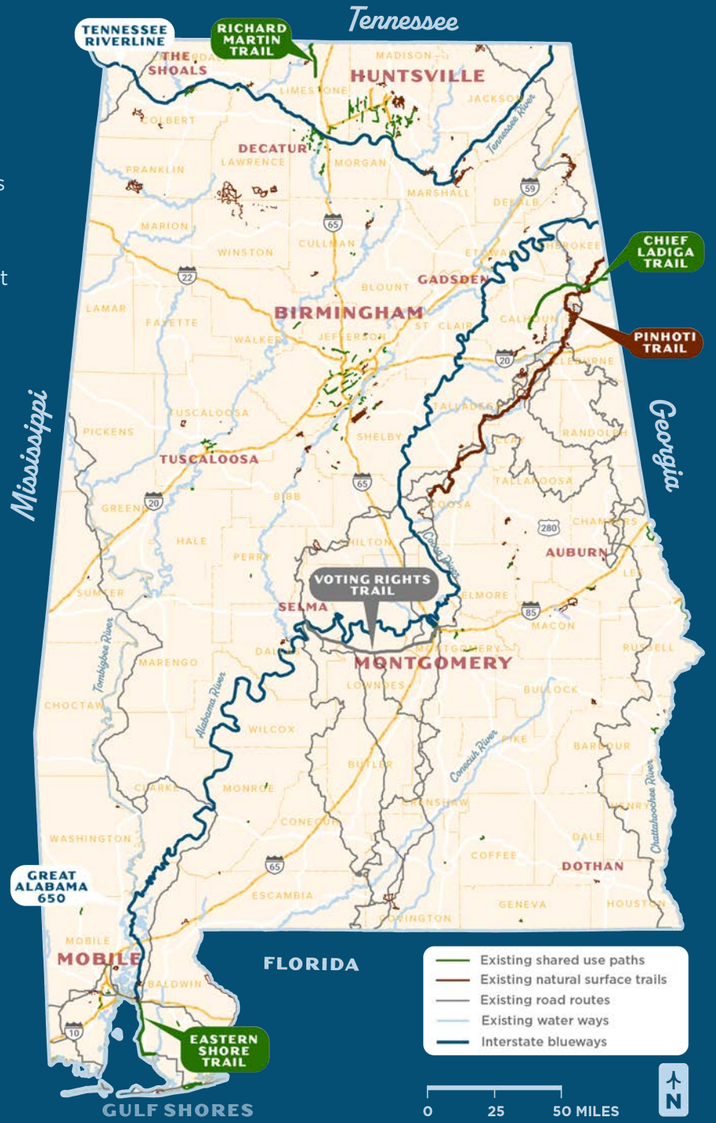
02 Existing Conditions

High Ore Line Trail Crosses Valley Creek
Birmingham, AL
Source: Freshwater Land Trust

Introduction

Alabama enjoys an abundance of natural and cultural resources with trails traversing a variety of landscapes from the Appalachian Mountains to the Gulf Coast. Trails are an essential component of outdoor recreation for Alabamians and allow activities such as horseback riding, hiking, jogging, cycling, mountain biking, ATV/OHV riding, paddling, and more. They provide access to parks and open space while also connecting people to schools, places of employment, daily needs, and entertainment.

Alabama trails range from natural surface trails found throughout the state's national forests to urban trails along roadways in cities. In some cases, trails traverse long linear distances connecting multiple communities, while others are loop systems within public lands. These trails provide a starting point for expansion and connection. **There is much to celebrate in terms of Alabama trails and trail initiatives, but there is also significant need and opportunity to grow out statewide, regional, and local trail networks to meet demand and accomplish the vision and goals of Sweet Trails Alabama.**



~3,000 MILES
Existing natural surface trails

~400 MILES
Existing shared use paths

~1,650 MILES
Previously proposed shared use paths and active transportation corridors

MAJOR TRAILS, TRAIL SYSTEMS, AND TRAIL INITIATIVES

Long-distance trails offer the ability to serve residents but also attract out-of-state tourists for multi-day excursions. The two longest trail spines in Alabama are the ***Pinhoti Trail*** and ***Chief Ladiga*** Trail, both in east central and northeast Alabama. Other long-distance trails include the ***Richard Martin Trail*** in North Alabama (10.8 miles from Athens to the Tennessee border) and the ***Hugh S. Branyon Backcountry Trail*** in Gulf Shores and Orange Beach (11.6 miles plus additional trails connected in Gulf State Park). The ***Eastern Shore Trail***, a 22-mile trail mostly along Mobile Bay is in close proximity. While mostly found along roadways in South Alabama before following the Pinhoti Trail, the ***Eastern Continental Trail*** runs from Key West, FL, to Maine and Canada. It covers hundreds of miles in Alabama and presents a low-hanging fruit opportunity for trail enhancements and wayfinding to draw additional trail users into the state. The ***Tennessee RiverLine*** is a multi-state initiative in its early stages to improve access to the Tennessee River and enhance the experience of paddling and exploring towns along the river.

Existing Long Distance Trail Spines

Pinhoti Trail, Source: Creative Commons.

Pinhoti Trail – The Pinhoti Trail is a natural surface hiking trail, roughly 350 miles long (with 180 miles in Alabama), with a southern terminus at Flagg Mountain and the northern terminus where it joins the Benton MacKaye Trail and ultimately the Appalachian Trail in northern Georgia. Together, these trails are a realization of the original 1920s vision of a trail extending the entire Appalachian Mountain chain. Construction began in 1970 within the Talladega National Forest and was completed in 2008. In 2019, the ATF developed the Pinhoti Trail Built Environment Master Plan, providing design standards and enhancement recommendations, and promoting collaboration, partnership, and stewardship of the trail. The Alabama Pinhoti Trail Association is a volunteer organization that aims to improve and maintain the trail corridor.

Ladiga Gardens, Jacksonville, AL. Source: DeForest Tuggle

Source: Tennessee RiverLine

Source: Alabama Scenic River Trail

Chief Ladiga Trail – The 34-mile Chief Ladiga Trail connects Anniston to the Alabama-Georgia state line, where it becomes the Silver Comet Trail that connects to Smyrna, GA. It is the state's first rail trail project and intersects with the Pinhoti Trail near Piedmont, AL. The trail is paved, providing a safe way to walk or roll across the region. Currently, the trail ends in northern Anniston at Mike Tucker Park, but work is underway to extend the trail an additional 6.5 miles to the Amtrak station in Anniston.

Tennessee RiverLine (TNRL)– Started at the University of Tennessee, the 652-mile RiverLine is a vision for a continuous system of outdoor recreation and multi-modal trail experiences along the Tennessee River from Knoxville, TN, to Paducah, KY. 202 miles of this river corridor are in Alabama. The goals of the RiverLine are to celebrate the beauty, diversity, and history of the Tennessee River Valley; connect the people and communities of the valley to each other, to their river heritage, and to the Tennessee River landscape; and to catalyze economic development, public health, resource stewardship, and equitable access to river spaces and experiences. The Tennessee RiverTowns Program has enabled communities along the river, including Bridgeport, Jackson County, Guntersville, Huntsville, Decatur, Lawrence County, and the Shoals, to begin working on these goals.

Alabama Scenic River Trail – The Alabama Scenic River Trail (ASRT) covers over 6,300 miles of river trail with over 650 core trail miles. While not an actual continuous paddle trail, the waterways are navigable by kayak or canoe, and the nonprofit organization is working on multiple initiatives to expand access, add mile markers, improve and develop camping sites, and advance education programs across the state. ASRT currently hosts the annual Great Alabama 650, America's longest paddle race.

Hugh S. Branyon Backcountry Trail. Source: City of Orange Beach

Cyclists on Eastern Shore Trail. Source: FHWA, Wikimedia.org

ECT at Conecuh National Forest. Source: Google Street View

Hugh S. Branyon Backcountry Trail – The Hugh S. Branyon Backcountry Trail system, in Gulf State Park features more than 28 miles of paved multi-use trails, just a short distance from the Gulf Coast. Throughout the trail, locals and visitors can enjoy biking, jogging, walking, skating, rock climbing, wildlife watching, photography, and connecting to nature. The first trail section was complete in 2003 and in 2010, it was designated a National Recreational Trail and added to the Alabama Coastal Birding Trails list. USA Today named this trail 2024's best recreational trail in the country. The Backcountry Trail project is a collaborative effort between the City of Orange Beach, Gulf State Park, City of Gulf Shores, and property owners along the trail's alignment.

Eastern Shore Trail – The 22-mile, mostly flat, Eastern Shore Trail runs along the east side of Mobile Bay from Spanish Fort to Weeks Bay, passing through the communities of Daphne, Montrose, Fairhope, Battles Wharf and Point Clear along the way. The varied surface, multi-use trail is mostly sidewalks and asphalt but includes elevated boardwalks and low bridges. Visitors can stop to swim, fish, or enjoy nature trails along the trail's route. The trail's initial funding came from an earmark from an Alabama congressman in 1998 with multiple grants supporting its continued development.

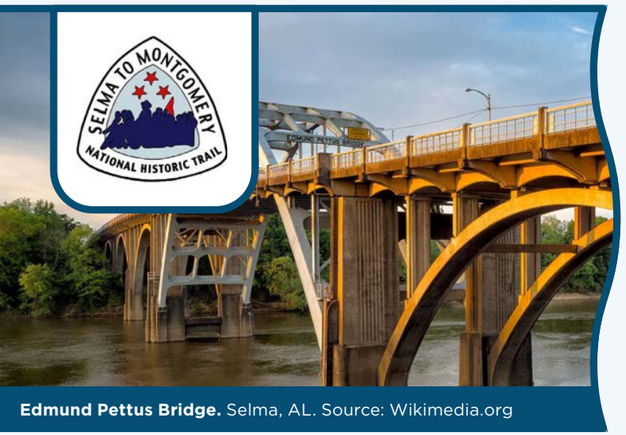
Eastern Continental Trail – The 4,400 mile Eastern Continental Trail (ECT) is a network of hiking trails in the United States and Canada, reaching from Key West, Florida to Belle Isle, Newfoundland and Labrador. From south to north, the route strings together the Florida Keys Overseas Heritage Trail, the Florida Trail, a road walk through southern Alabama, the Pinhoti National Recreation Trail, and part of the Benton MacKaye Trail, to reach the southern terminus of the Appalachian Trail. From the Alabama/Florida border, it is entirely along a roadway until it reaches the Pinhoti Trail. There is significant potential in upgrading the southern Alabama portion to complete the connection from Florida to the Appalachian Trail, bringing more interest and through hikers to the state.

Planned Long-Distance Trail Spines

As the Chief Ladiga Trail and Pinhoti Trail have continued to expand and evolve, other regional long-distance trail visions have been established.

Swan Creek Greenway on the Singing River Trail. Athens, AL.
Source: Singing River Trail

Singing River Trail – This 200+ mile envisioned trail will connect nine counties from the Muscle Shoals/Florence area to Bridgeport and South Pittsburg though Huntsville, Decatur, Athens, Scottsboro, and more. Today, nearly 50 miles of the trail are on the ground, mostly in the Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge and City of Huntsville. The Singing River Trail nonprofit is leading the charge and is actively collaborating with large and small communities to build out the trail.



Edmund Pettus Bridge. Selma, AL. Source: Wikimedia.org

Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail – Already established as a historic trail through the National Park Service, this 54-mile trail begins at the Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Selma, following the 1965 historic routes of the Selma to Montgomery voting rights marches to the Alabama State Capitol in Montgomery. There are few dedicated trail, walking, or biking facilities except for sidewalks in Selma and Montgomery, but planning efforts are in progress to create a continuous trail along the historic corridor, and this project received a 2023 USDOT Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods grant for this work.

TRAIL SYSTEMS

Urban Trail Systems and Planning Initiatives

Alabama's largest cities and urban regions have been planning trails and bikeways for the better part of two decades. This has resulted in the development of trail master plans and, in some cases, nonprofits that lead the charge to implement trails.

Rotary Trail. Birmingham, AL.
Source: Kalli Jones / Freshwater Land Trust

Red Rock Trail System (Birmingham) – The Red Rock Trail System is a network of trails, parks, bike lanes, and sidewalks in Jefferson County. Originally envisioned in the 2010 Red Rock Ridge & Valley Trail System Master Plan, the Red Rock Trail System® now includes 129 miles of existing trails within a proposed 750-mile regional trail initiative. The nonprofit Freshwater Land Trust recently completed the Red Rock Trail System Action Plan in 2023, identifying alignments and implementation steps for 19 additional miles of priority trails that will ultimately create a 36-mile loop around the Greater Birmingham Metropolitan Area. Working closely with the City of Birmingham and other metro jurisdictions, the Freshwater Land Trust has successfully developed new greenways along with urban trail connections including Complete Street corridors and bike lanes.

Source: City of Huntsville

Huntsville, AL Greenway System – The City of Huntsville, working in partnership with the Land Trust of North Alabama, has developed 73 miles of greenways and trails with an additional 44 new miles budgeted for construction. The City updates its Greenway Master Plan regularly, which reflects the community's vision for a connected system of trails and greenways. The plan recommends 312 miles of interconnected trails that include river trails, pedestrian/bicycle Complete Streets, paved pathways, and hiking trails. Greenways were identified as the greatest need through the City's The BIG Picture comprehensive planning process.

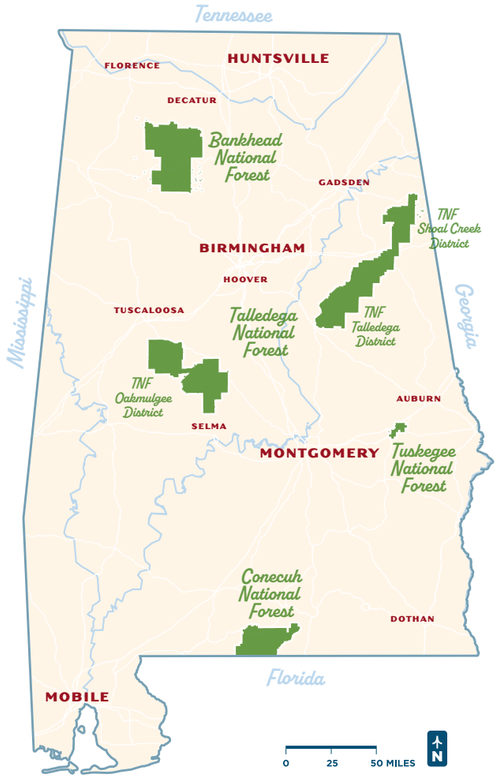
Trail at Wright Brothers Park. Montgomery, AL
Source: River Region Trails, Inc.

River Region Trails (Montgomery) – The River Region Trails nonprofit organization, working closely with City of Montgomery and Montgomery County, completed a citywide trails master plan in 2023 that identified over 100 miles of recommended trails. The vision is to create a connected trail system across the city to positively impact community health, quality of life, economic development, transportation, and neighborhood connectivity. River Region Trails and the City have partnered to develop tactical "pop-up trails" and new trail sections in recent years and are poised to build off that work and the master plan. River Region Trails completed an economic impact that conservatively estimated over $18 million in annual benefits for the City.

RURAL/NATURAL TRAIL SYSTEMS

National Forests

Alabama has four national forests that provide trails for a variety of activities such as hiking, mountain biking, horseback riding, paddling, and OHV trail riding. Some highlights are provided below.



BANKHEAD NATIONAL FOREST

181,230 ACRES

Over **90 miles** of recreational trails, home to the Sipsey Wilderness and many canyons and waterfalls.

TALLADEGA NATIONAL FOREST

392,567 ACRES

Nearly **200 miles** of recreational trails, home to Mount Cheaha, the state's highest point, and **140 miles** of the Pinhoti Trail.

TUSKEGEE NATIONAL FOREST

11,252 ACRES

The smallest national forest in the United States, with around **20 miles** of recreational trails. Home to the Bartram National Recreation Trail that extends through Georgia and North Carolina.

CONECUH NATIONAL FOREST

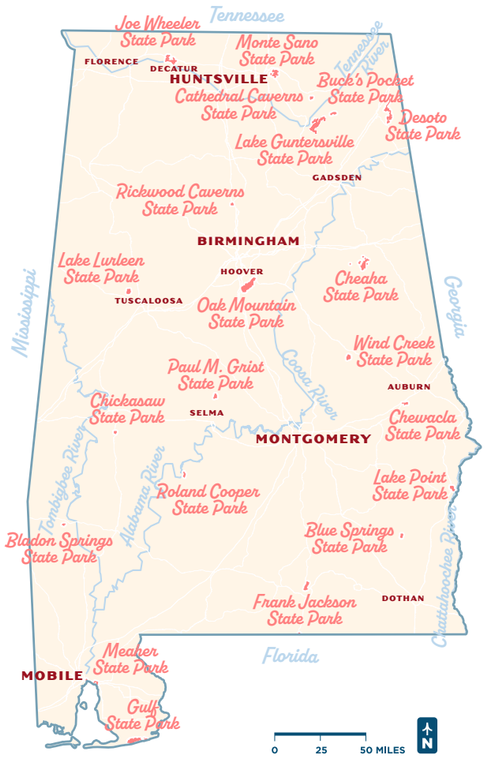
83,000 ACRES

Over **30 miles** of recreational trails, including the 22-mile Conecuh Trail, along the Alabama-Florida line, known for long-leaf pine stands, hardwood swamps, and pitcher plant bogs.

Source: USDA Forest Service. "National Forests in Alabama." Accessed May 28, 2024. https://www.fs.usda.gov/alabama#:~:text=Alabama's%20National%20Forests&text=Experience%20the%20natural%20beauty%20of,quiet%2C%20secluded%20havens%20of%20nature.

State Parks

Alabama is home to 21 state parks comprising a total of almost 50,000 acres and over 450 miles of trails. The state parks accommodate over 6 million visitors annually. While most state parks provide some recreational trail opportunities, some are standouts for trail mileage.



MONTE SANO

22 MILES

22 miles of scenic hiking and biking trails, known for mountain vistas and proximity to downtown Huntsville.

DESOTO

30+ MILES

More than **30 miles** of hiking and mountain biking trails, known for the Little River and DeSoto Falls, a 104-foot-high waterfall.

LAKE GUNTERSVILLE

36 MILES

36 miles of hiking and biking trails, known for its beautiful lake and bald eagle habitat.

OAK MOUNTAIN

+100 MILES

More than **100 miles** of trails, with mountain biking, horseback riding, and hiking being the three most popular activities at the park. Features a pump track and BMX course.

CHEWACLA

30+ MILES

Over **30 miles** of trail, including over 25 miles of single-track mountain biking.

GULF

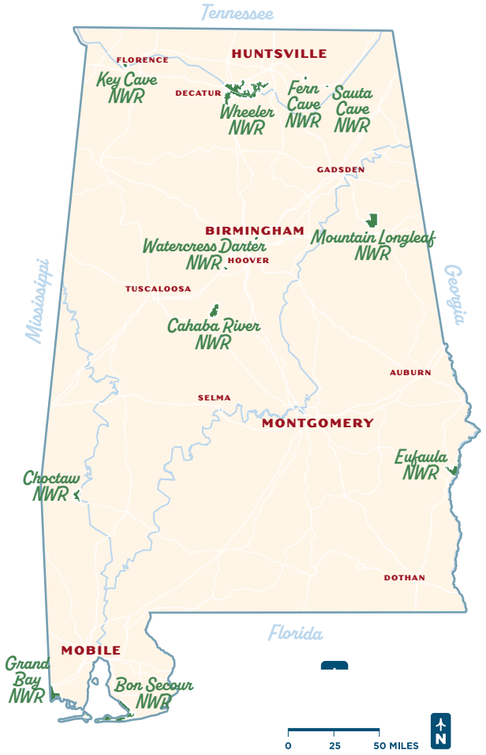
≈30 MILES

Nearly **30 miles** of trail including the Hugh S. Branyon Backcountry Trail that recently was named best recreational trail in the United States in 2023 by USA Today.

Source: Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. "Alabama State Parks." Accessed May 28, 2024. https://www.alapark.com/

National Wildlife Refuges (NWR)

Alabama is home to 11 National Wildlife Refuges, each with a unique ecology. The refuges serve as safe havens for wildlife to thrive and become a destination for wildlife viewers, nature lovers, and birders to access and immerse themselves in beautiful Alabama landscapes.



KEY CAVE NWR

2.5 MILES

The 1,060 acre refuge has **2.5 miles of hiking and biking trails** with viewing platforms to observe the rare Gray Bats as they exit the cave.

WHEELER NWR

+100 MILES

Provides habitat for many species of migrating waterfowl and endangered species. Many parts of the refuge can be explored gravel biking the **one hundred-mile network of dirt** road**s** or hiking the **five nature trails.**

MOUNTAIN LONGLEAF NWR

19.8 MILES

The 9,015.68 acre Mountain Longleaf refuge with **19.8 miles of trails**, is home to the rare red-cockaded woodpecker.

CABAHA RIVER NWR

6.5 MILES

6.5 miles of trails, there are 3,314 acres of refuge with plans to nearly double. The river is among the most biodiverse rivers in North America.

EUFAULA NWR

9–10 MILES

The massive 11,184 acre riverfront refuge has **9-10 miles of hiking trails.**

BON SECOUR NWR

6 MILES

Contains much of the state's intact coastal barrier habitat. The refuge consists of 7,000 acres and features **six miles of trails** that attract wildlife and birding enthusiasts.

Land Trusts

Conservation land trusts acquire and steward properties to preserve green and open spaces. Land Trusts in Alabama have protected over **450,000 acres** of land in the state, providing over **200 miles** of trails, including 18 miles with universal access. A few select land trusts within the state are described below. While not all land trust space is open to public use, these trusts make space for people to recreate in portions of these open spaces.

FOREVER WILD LAND TRUST

284,000 ACRES

Secured more than **284,000 acres** of land, creating more than **360 miles** of recreational trails. The Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) manages these lands through its various divisions: State Lands, State Parks, and Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries. Trails include Coldwater Mountain, Perdido River, and Walls of Jericho.

LAND TRUST OF NORTH ALABAMA

10,000 ACRES

10,000 acres protected with over **80 miles** of public trails on 10 public nature preserves. The Land Trust of North Alabama works closely with the City of Huntsville to update the citywide greenway master plan and prioritize each year's construction program. Trails include the Monte Sano Preserve, Wade Mountain Preserve, and Cane Creek Canyon Nature Preserve.

FRESHWATER LAND TRUST

10,000 ACRES

Over **10,000 protected acres** including four privately owned properties open to the public with two miles of trails and two canoe launches (Freshwater Land Trust also leads the Birmingham regional Red Rock Trail System initiative which encompasses 129 miles of trails (and growing); led the purchase of **1,200 acres** that became the popular Red Mountain Park, which now has 16 miles of multi-use trails; and played a role in the conservation of Turkey Creek Nature Preserve, which includes over six miles of trails).

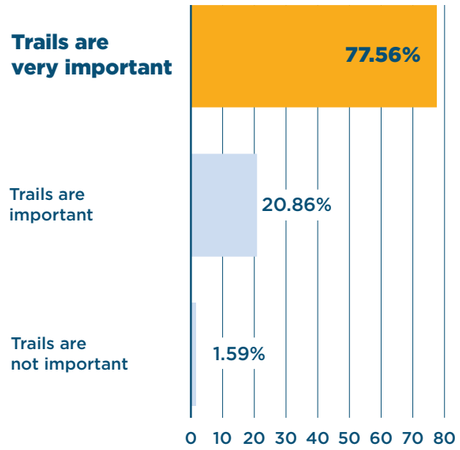
OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Even with the amazing resources described in the preceding section, Alabama is not competitive with other states across the Southeast and nationally when it comes to outdoor recreation and trails. This was indicated through analyses of trail mileage, comparable of state rankings, and public surveys about how Alabama compares to other regional states when it comes to trails.

In the 2014 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) document, almost half of survey respondents said they traveled out of the state for outdoor recreation or trail-related activity. These sentiments were echoed during this planning process. In many cases, this is due to the quantity of trail availability but was also due to a lack of trail promotion and marketing, as many Alabama trails are unknown to the public.

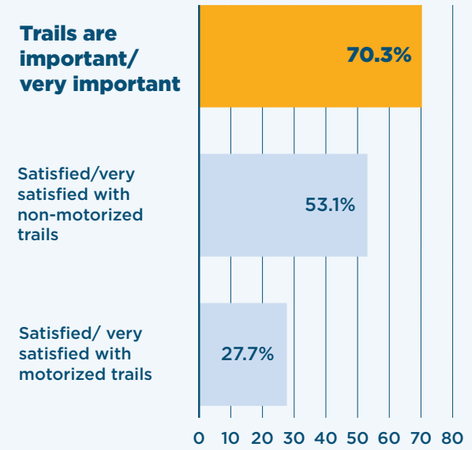
Comparison - Perceived Importance of Trails

Sweet Trails Alabama



77.56%
of respondents said trails were **very important** to them

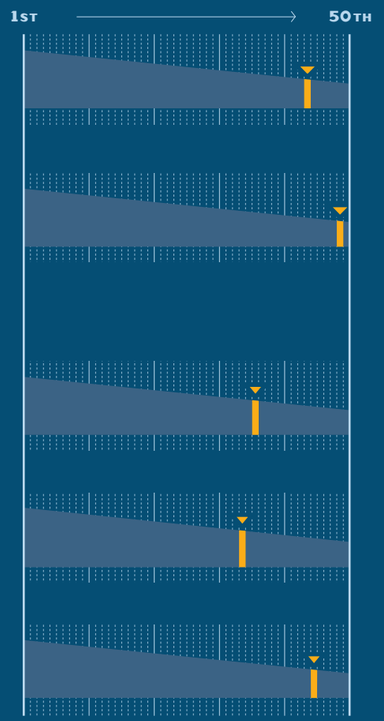
SCORP Survey Summaries



Of respondents, **70.3%** stated that recreational trails were important or very important to them (2021). However, only **53.1%** of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with non-motorized trails in the state, and **27.7%** indicated they were satisfied or very satisfied with motorized trails (2021).

State Comparisons

When compared to other states, Alabama ranks low in bike and walk-friendly communities and is the second most dangerous state for bicyclists and pedestrians. Part of this is due to the relatively low acreage of publicly accessible land in Alabama relative to its peers and thus fewer trails. The following rankings show how Alabama measures up:



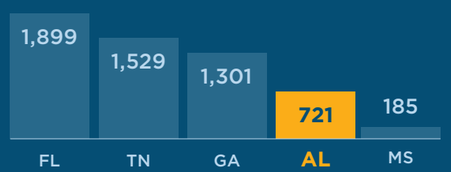
44TH in bike friendly state ranking[1]

2ND most dangerous for pedestrian commuters and 2nd most dangerous for bicycle commuters
(2nd highest rates per 10,000 commuters)[2]

36TH in total trail miles[3]

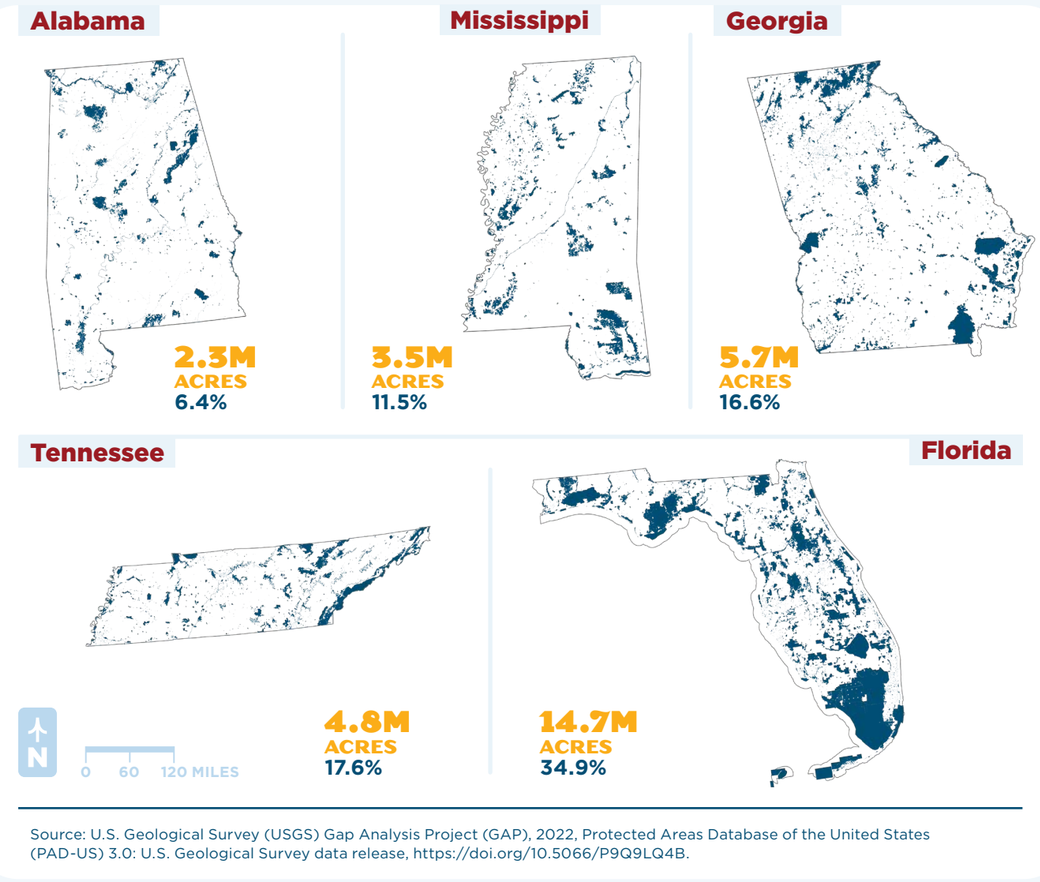
34TH in country in mileage of trails on state land[4]

45TH in country in mileage of trails on federal land[5]



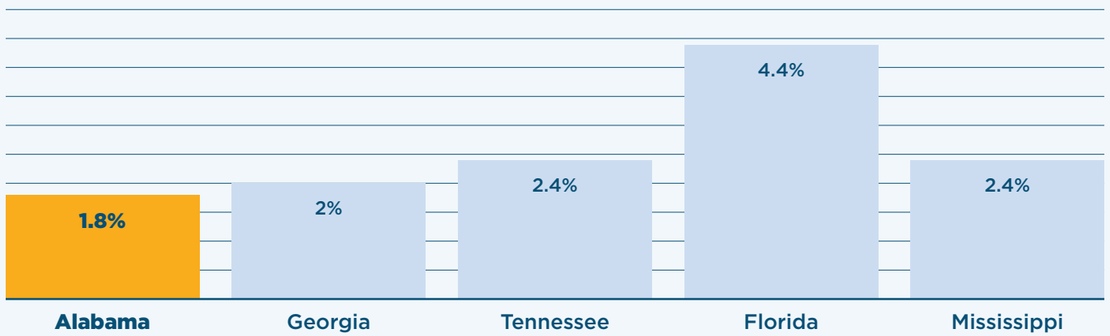
721 trails constructed and marked
compared with Georgia's 1,301; Tennessee's 1,529; and Florida's 1,899. Alabama surpasses only Mississippi, which has 185 trails listed (using AllTrails as data source)[6]

1. League of American Bicyclists. "Bicycle Friendly StateSM Ranking." Accessed May 28, 2024. https://bikeleague.org/bfa/states/ranking/.
2. League of American Bicyclists. Bicycling and Walking in the United States: 2018 Benchmarking Report. 2018.
3. Destination Hikers. "Trail Miles by State." February 27, 2020. Accessed May 28, 2024. https://www.destinationhikers.com/trailmiles-by-states/.
4. American Hiking Society. Hiking Trails in America: Pathways to Prosperity. June 2015.
5. American Hiking Society. Hiking Trails in America: Pathways to Prosperity. June 2015.
6. Hoover Institution and Stanford University. Innovative Alabama: A Report by the Hoover Institution. 2021.



Source: U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Gap Analysis Project (GAP), 2022, Protected Areas Database of the United States (PAD-US) 3.0: U.S. Geological Survey data release, https://doi.org/10.5066/P9Q9LQ4B.

Figure 3. | Non-federal publicly accessible land in Alabama and its neighboring states



Source: US Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Figure 4. | Outdoor recreation industry compensation by state, 2019

Unmet Demand Summary from 2021 SCORP

Trails led the way for unmet demand in the 2021 SCORP. **Out of 48 recreational facility types ranging from football, to camping, to golf, to fishing, to archery, the top three requested by survey respondents and included on the unmet demand index are trails (paved walking/jogging, hiking trails (unpaved), and interpretive/nature trails (education-focused).** Paved walking/jogging trails led the entire field by a significant amount in unmet demand index.

When applying the unmet demand index across the 12 regions of the state, levels of unmet demand can be seen with the highest totals in the Black Belt and Wiregrass regions of the state.

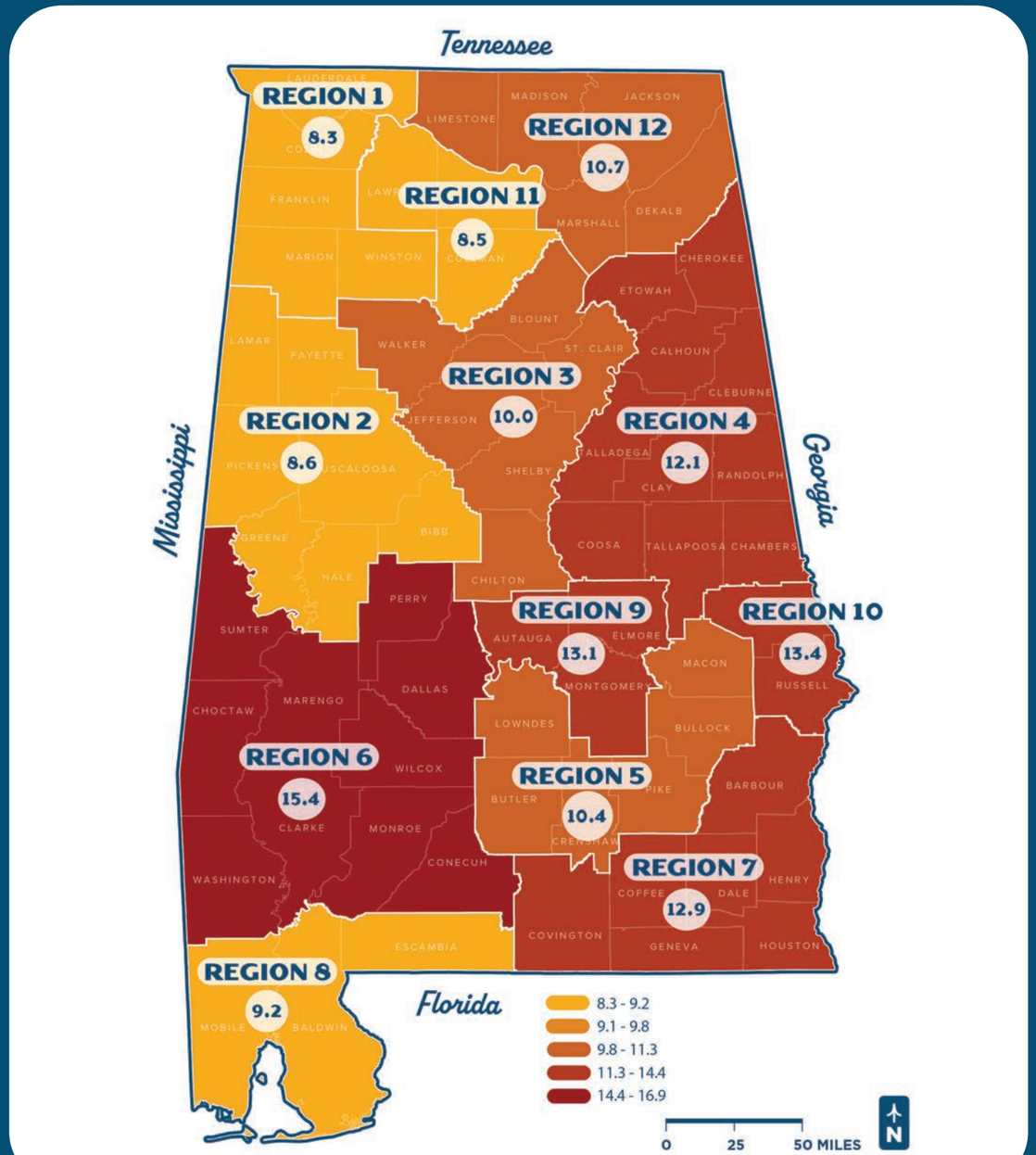
Table 1. | Consolidated unmet demand for local facilities across Alabama (in rank order by unmet index)

Facility Type	Respondent Request Rate	Average Days Would Use	Unmet Demand Index
Paved Walking/ Jogging Paths	23.8%	117.4	28
Hiking Trails (Unpaved)	17.0%	89.1	15
Interpretive / Nature Trails (Education-Focused)	16.0%	90.0	14

Table 2. | Unmet Demand Summary for Trails by Region

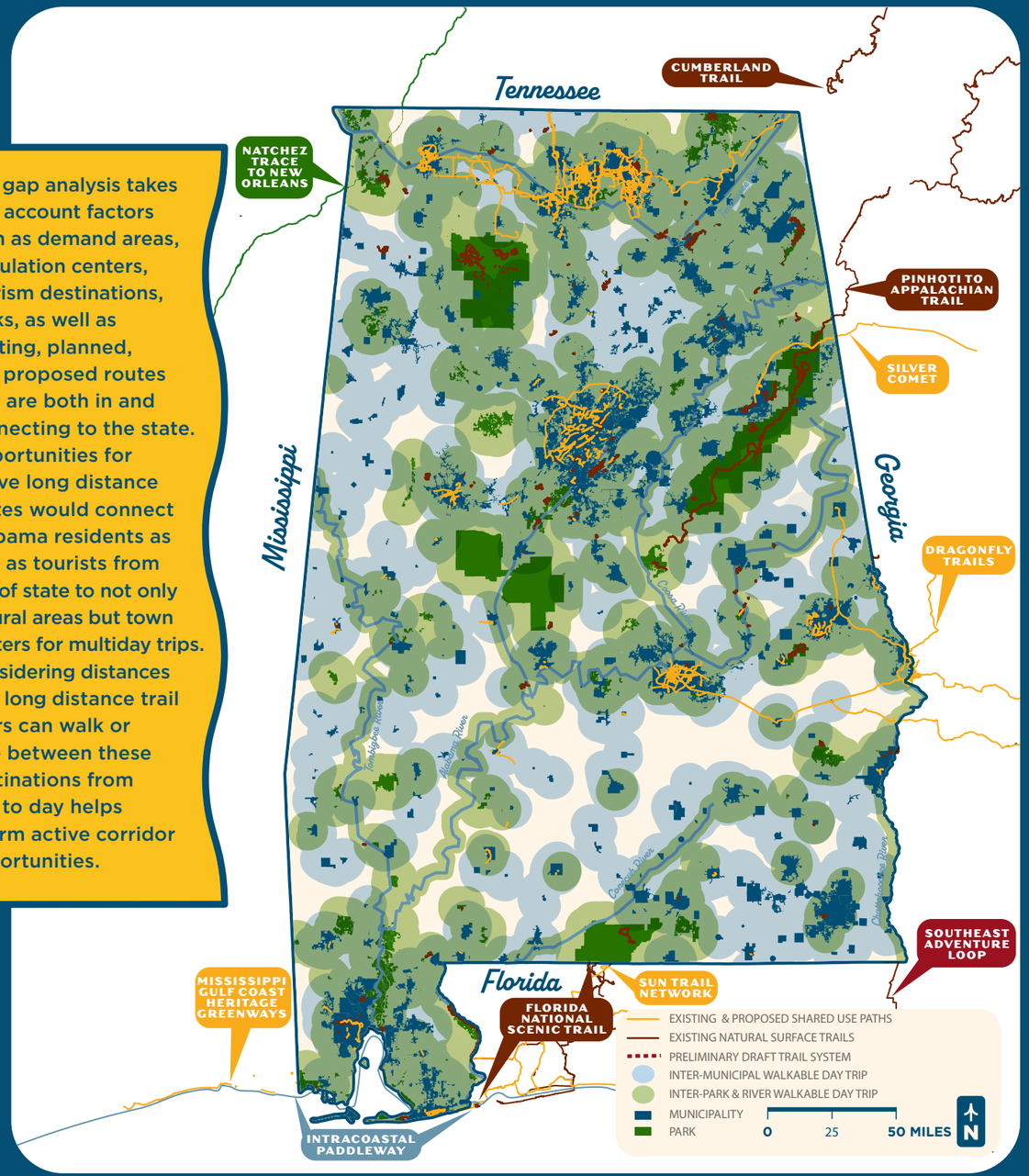
Region	Paved Walking/ Jogging Trails*	Hiking Trails (Unpaved)	Interpretive/ Nature Trails (Education-Focused)	Canoe/Kayak Launches	Horseback Riding Trails	Mountain Bike Trails	Paved Bicycle Paths (Off-Street)	ATV Trails	OHV (4x4) Trails	Average Unmet Demand Across All Trails
1	18	5	10	9	11	9	7	6	0	8.3
2	28	13	9	7	0	4	9	7	0	8.6
3	29	13	12	4	7	7	14	3	1	10.0
4	36	19	17	6	6	3	14	6	2	12.1
5	19	11	11	20	10	6	3	9	5	10.4
6	44	20	19	4	8	10	8	18	8	15.4
7	39	23	20	1	6	8	8	9	2	12.9
8	21	11	14	4	11	6	11	2	3	9.2
9	25	21	21	10	10	11	10	4	6	13.1
10	30	24	16	10	6	10	16	8	1	13.4
11	33	9	6	4	5	5	11	0	4	8.5
12	23	15	12	7	5	5	12	12	6	10.7
Average	**28.8**	**15.3**	**19.9**	**7.2**	**6.8**	**7.0**	**10.3**	**7.0**	**3.2**	

Unmet Demand Average score by 12 regions



Map Gap Analysis

The gap analysis takes into account factors such as demand areas, population centers, tourism destinations, parks, as well as existing, planned, and proposed routes that are both in and connecting to the state. Opportunities for active long distance routes would connect Alabama residents as well as tourists from out of state to not only natural areas but town centers for multiday trips. Considering distances that long distance trail users can walk or hike between these destinations from day to day helps inform active corridor opportunities.



Existing Trail Challenges
(Summarized from Stakeholder Engagement)

During the Sweet Trails Alabama planning process, dozens of stakeholder meetings and focus group meetings occurred where people were asked the challenges they face as trail users. The most common themes are described here:

- Lack of **resources** and **capacity** for small towns and rural communities to advance trails
- Lack of **funding** to move trails forward
- **Accessibility challenges** at trails and trailheads
- Lags other states in **medium-to long-distance trails**
- Lack of trail and **trailhead amenities** such as restrooms, lighting, drinking water, and adequate parking
- Lack of trails and **connected system** across the entire state—only found in some cities and pockets of the state
- Challenge of sustained and consistent trail **maintenance**
- Positive impacts of trails on **economic development** and **growth** are not widely understood in Alabama
- Lack of trail **promotion** and **marketing**
- Lack of a **variety of trail options to meet the needs of *all* Alabamians**
- Concerns about **safety** or **perception of safety** concerns (personal safety and roadway safety)
- Lack of **information** or **signage** to get to the trail destination, but also at the trailheads and along trails

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03 Statewide Network

Three-Mile Creek Greenway
Mobile, AL
Source: City of Mobile

Introduction

This chapter represents a long-term vision of trail connectivity across Alabama, focusing on the physical trail network, the spectrum of trail types, and the mapped network divided by regions. Individual segments of the network will serve local communities, providing local recreation and transportation opportunities. Long-distance corridors have the potential for regional and national recognition, attracting tourism and entrepreneurship.

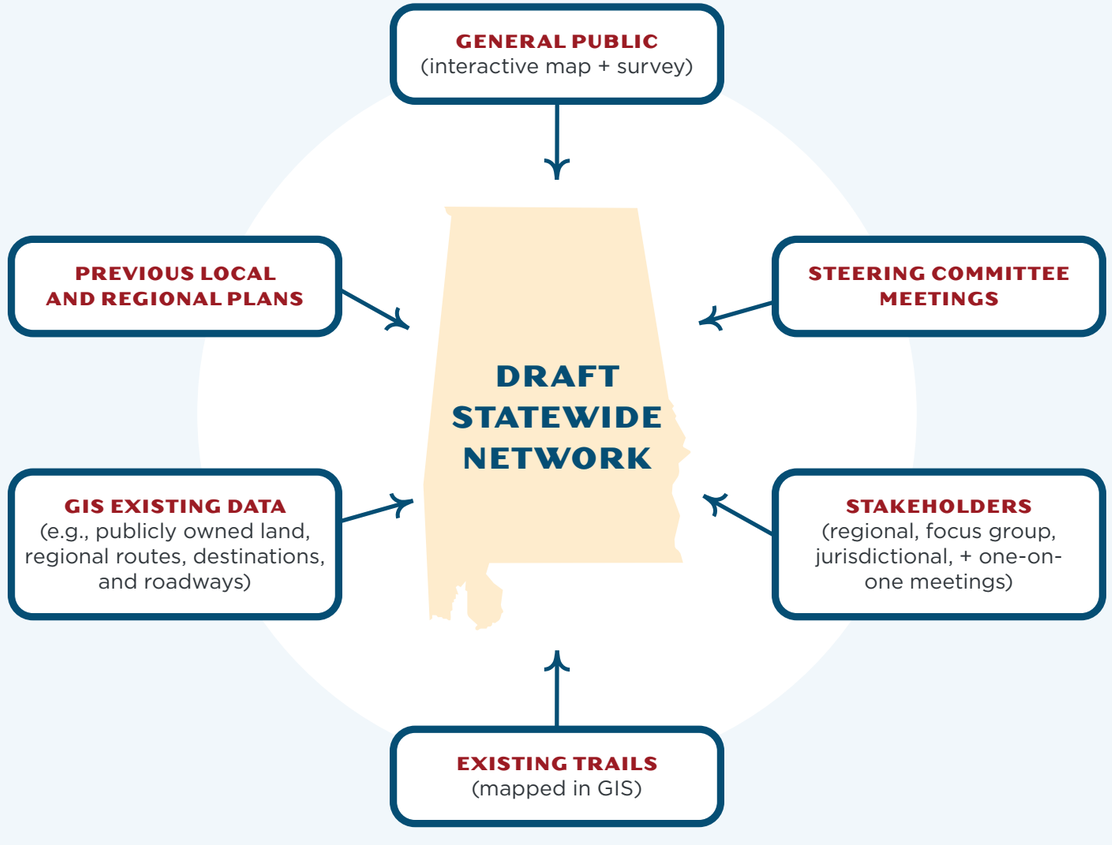
It should be noted that this first-ever recommended trail network in Alabama is largely intended to show how destinations could be connected and there is nothing committing these trail corridors to being constructed. Further planning and design will be necessary to work with communities who desire these trails. Initial projects have been identified to move forward into feasibility, design, or construction and are described in Chapter 4.

Lee-Russell Stakeholders Discussing Sweet Trails Alabama Vision. Opelika, AL

NETWORK METHODOLOGY

The methodology is rooted in the Plan's goals, especially the Connectivity goal of connecting all 67 counties and major destinations with a publicly accessible trail network for transportation and recreation uses. The network was developed to connect to and build off existing trail systems and previously planned trails, with an effort to fill in trail gaps where planning and implementation haven't occurred. In addition, the Health and Wellness goal is to generate safe, accessible trail opportunities for all Alabamians, which ties back to the notion of not only connecting all 67 counties, but connecting our communities and population centers.

From the overarching guidance of the Plan's goals, the next steps in determining the network included listening to stakeholders and reviewing data, including the following:



Rotary Trail
Downtown Birmingham, AL. Source: Freshwater Land Trust

Finally, with these inputs considered, a series of analyses occurred in drawing the network:

Origins and Destinations

Where are the major destinations across the state, including population centers, state parks, national forests, regional attractors, and other recreational assets?

Connectivity

Does a trail make a connection between key origins and destinations or with existing or proposed trails?

Edge Analysis

When looking across state lines, do trails connect to other regional or state systems?

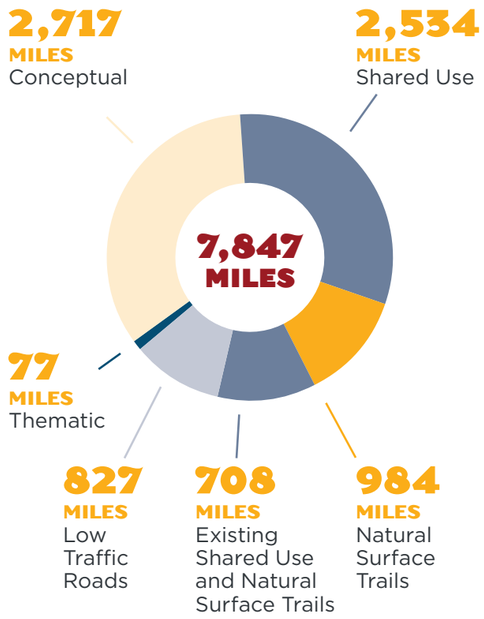
Gap Review

What trail planning and physical trail gaps exist where connections are desired? Where are other priority corridors for transportation, conservation, etc.?

TRAIL NETWORK TYPES

This Plan calls for the expansion of multiple trail types including shared -use paths (paved or unpaved), hiking trails, mountain biking trails, equestrian trails, paddle trails, and OHV and ATV trails. In most cases, the statewide network is not prescriptive about trail surface or user type, and there is built-in flexibility on routing and trail surface type based on local preference. Long-distance trail corridors typically would provide some form of shared use, although some may just support hiking. Generally, the trail will look different in varying contexts from urban to rural and mountain to coast landscapes of Alabama, as shown in the diagram below. The appendix provides a summary of high-level design needs and guidance for each trail user type.

Preliminary Draft Network



Shared Use

Trail corridors that would support multiple uses, particularly bicycling and walking, and may be paved or unpaved. Many of the proposed trails in the network under this category were identified in past plans or were informed by public support of the corridor.

Thematic

Proposed trail corridors follow an historic route or national corridor such as the Natchez Trace or Byler Road.

Natural Surface

Trail corridors that are proposed as singletrack natural surface or gravel trails that could support hiking, biking, birding, and/or equestrian use. During the network routing process, these trail types were mostly identified along river corridors or where there were opportunities to expand existing natural surface trails.

Existing Hiking or Shared Use Path

An existing trail for either hiking or multiple user types such as the Pinhoti Trail and Chief Ladiga Trail. The proposed network includes over 900 miles of these existing trails.

Low Traffic Road

Low traffic public roads, often unpaved, that could provide low-cost, safe trail access through signage. When developing the network, these roads were identified as a potential “quick-win” to develop routes quickly for a variety of trail uses.

Conceptual

Trail corridors that are not defined in terms of surface or user types at this stage of planning. These corridors might require easements or coordination with roadway agencies and rail operators.

ALABAMA RECOMMENDED TRAIL NETWORK
By the Numbers

7,847
MILES OF TRAILS CONNECT TO:

67
COUNTIES

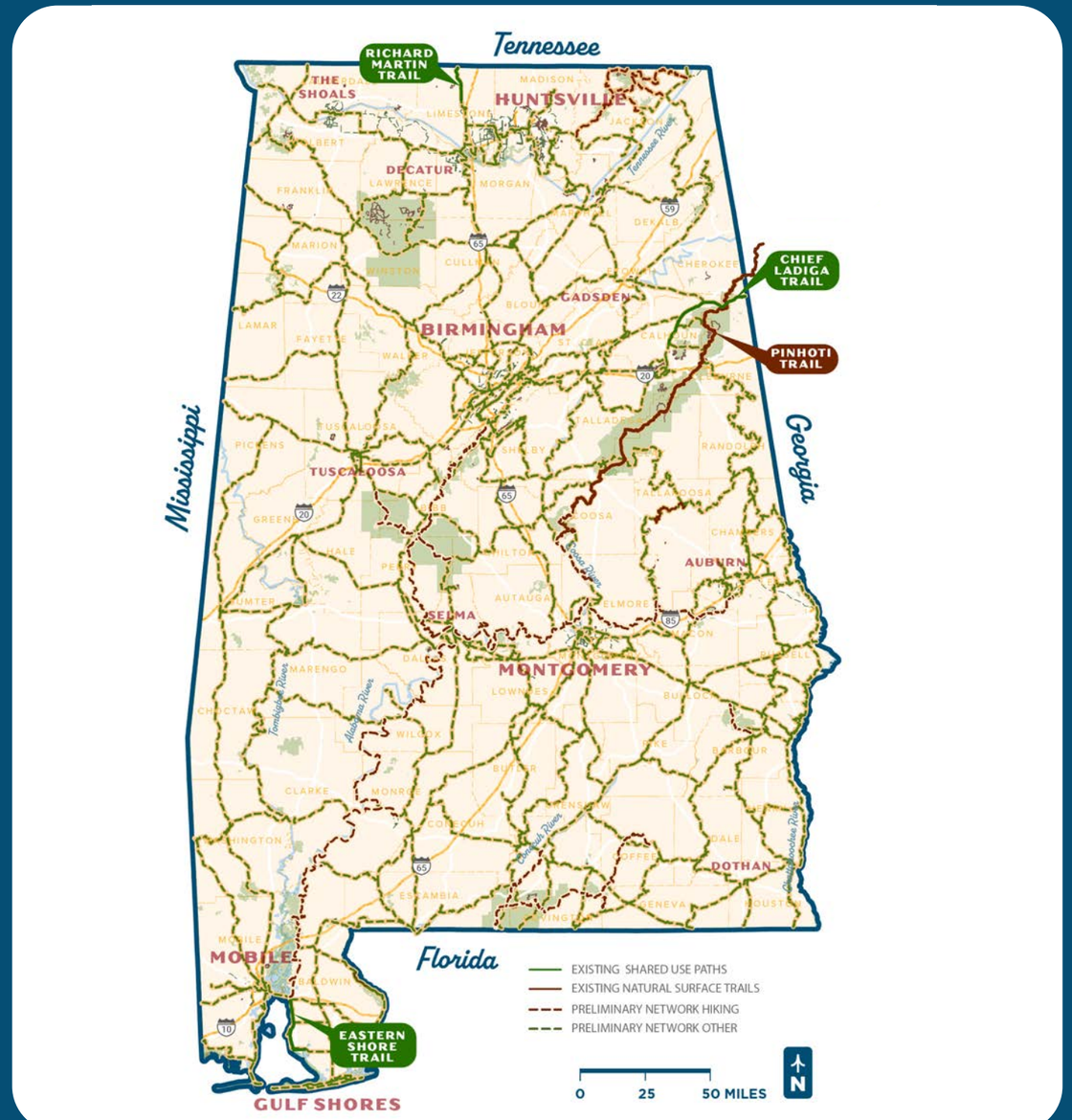
128
STATE PARKS AND FOREVER WILD LANDS

4
NATIONAL FORESTS

341
MUNICIPALITIES

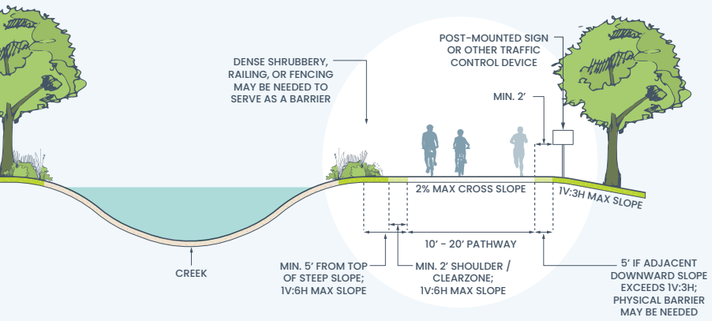
ALABAMA SURFACE TRAIL NETWORK MAP

Building off existing trails and planned trails, the recommended network fills gaps and makes connections between public spaces, recreation destinations, and communities. This map shows the network of surface trails.



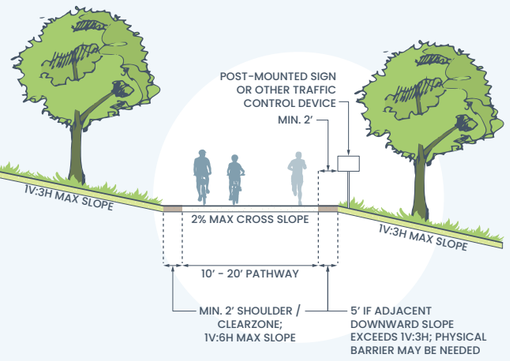
TRAIL TYPOLOGIES

Rural ← → **Urban**



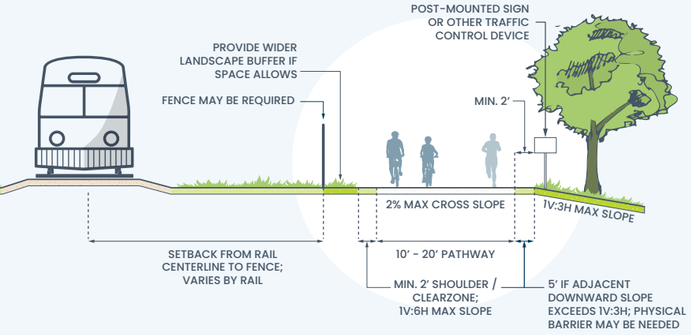
Riparian Corridor in Rural Areas

Shared use paths (SUPs) running along a riparian corridor offer scenic views, access to natural areas, and connections to additional recreational opportunities. In rural areas, natural surface trails are a low-impact solution where a more primitive experience is desired. SUPs along riparian corridors should provide plenty of separation between the path and waterway.



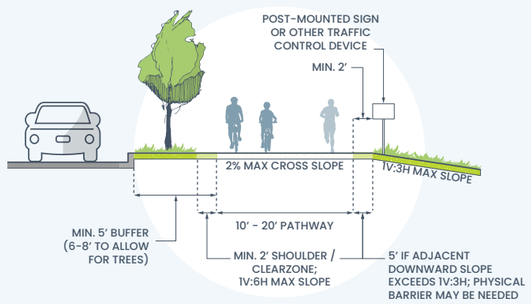
Shared Use Path

A shared use path (SUP), provides a travel area separate from motorized traffic for cyclists, pedestrians, skaters, wheelchair users, joggers, and other users. These off-road travelways generally provide routes and connections not provided by existing roadways. Most SUPs are designed for two-way travel of multiple user types. Designs vary depending on factors such as the grade of the land, size and amount of vegetation present, and proximity to waterways, structures, and other elements.



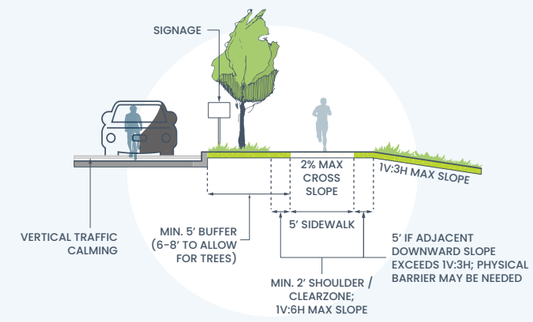
Rail-with-Trail (Active Rail Corridor)

A shared use path (SUP) that runs along an active railroad is referred to as a rail-with-trail. Rail-with-trail designs vary widely, depending on factors such as requirements for setbacks from trains, the frequency and speed of rail service, and the presence of at-grade crossings.



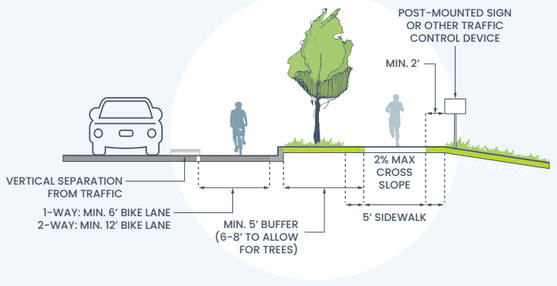
Roadway Corridor

Shared use paths (SUPs) located alongside roadway corridors, also known as sidepaths, serve as both recreational and utilitarian routes. While this placement poses unique SUP challenges, such as driveway crossings and close proximity to moving vehicles, these trails create direct, important routes through the community.



Bike Boulevard / Neighborhood Greenway

A bike boulevard is a low-speed, low-volume roadway that is designed to enhance comfort and convenience for people cycling. It provides better conditions for cycling while maintaining emergency vehicle access. Key elements are unique signage and pavement markings, traffic calming and diversion features to maintain low vehicle volumes, and convenient street crossings.



Cycle Tracks

Cycle tracks designate an exclusive space for cyclists in the roadway through the use of pavement markings, signs, buffer space, and vertical separation from vehicle traffic. Cycle tracks are located adjacent to motor vehicle travel lanes and either travel in the same direction as motor vehicle traffic or are bidirectional.

When additional width isn't available or traffic counts are low, a marked buffer may be excluded between the bike lane and travel or parking lane.

TRAIL NETWORK MAPS (REGIONAL LOOK)

The network maps were divided into the twelve (12) Regional Council regions for better legibility and to provide a framework for future regional trail planning efforts. These twelve council regions are shown in the adjacent map and listed by council and county below.

Region 1

Northwest Alabama Council of Local Governments (NACOLG)

- Colbert
- Franklin
- Lauderdale
- Marion
- Winston

Region 2

West Alabama Regional Commission (WARC)

- Bibb
- Fayette
- Greene
- Hale
- Lamar
- Pickens
- Tuscaloosa

Region 3

Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham (RPCGB)

- Blount
- Chilton
- Jefferson
- Shelby
- St. Clair
- Walker

Region 4

East Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission (EARPDC)

- Calhoun
- Chambers
- Cherokee
- Clay
- Cleburne
- Coosa
- Etowah
- Randolph
- Talladega
- Tallapoosa

Region 5

South Central Alabama Development Commission (SCADC)

- Bullock
- Butler
- Crenshaw
- Lowndes
- Macon
- Pike

Region 6

Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Commission (ATRC)

- Choctaw
- Clarke
- Conecuh
- Dallas
- Marengo
- Monroe
- Perry
- Sumter
- Washington
- Wilcox

Region 7

Southeast Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission (SEARPDC)

- Barbour
- Coffee
- Covington
- Dale
- Geneva
- Henry
- Houston

Region 8

South Alabama Regional Planning Commission (SARPC)

- Baldwin
- Escambia
- Mobile

Region 9

Central Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission (CARPDC)

- Autauga
- Elmore
- Montgomery

Region 10

Lee-Russell Council of Governments (LRCOG)

- Lee
- Russell

Region 11

North-Central Alabama Regional Council of Governments (NARCOG)

- Cullman
- Lawrence
- Morgan

Region 12

Top of Alabama Regional Council of Governments (TARCOG)

- DeKalb
- Jackson
- Limestone
- Madison
- Marshall

NETWORK MAPS

REGION 1

NACOLG

- Railroads
- Existing Natural Surface Trails
- Previously Proposed Natural Surface Trails
- Existing Shared Use Trails
- Previously Proposed Shared Use Trails
- Blueways / Rivers
- Previously Proposed Blueways

Draft Network

- Conceptual
- Natural Surface Trail
- Low Traffic Road
- Shared Use Path
- Thematic
- Existing Natural Surface Trail
- Existing Shared Use Path
- Proposed Feasibility Studies
- Trail Design, Construction, or Acquisition

Boundaries

- Easements
- State and City Public Lands
- Military
- Federal Lands
- Municipalities
- County Boundaries
- AL Council of Governments

Destinations

- Farms, Farmers Markets, and Wineries
- Blueway Access
- Boat Launch
- Campground
- Historic Native Townsite
- Historical
- Landmark
- Trailhead
- Scenic Overlook
- Recreation / Park
- Multipurpose or Day Use Area

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See page 37 for a description of trail types.

REGION 11

NARCOG

- Railroads
- Existing Natural Surface Trails
- Previously Proposed Natural Surface Trails
- Existing Shared Use Trails
- Previously Proposed Shared Use Trails
- Blueways / Rivers
- Previously Proposed Blueways

Draft Network

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REGION 12

TARCOG

- Railroads
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- Previously Proposed Shared Use Trails
- Blueways / Rivers
- Previously Proposed Blueways

Draft Network

- Conceptual
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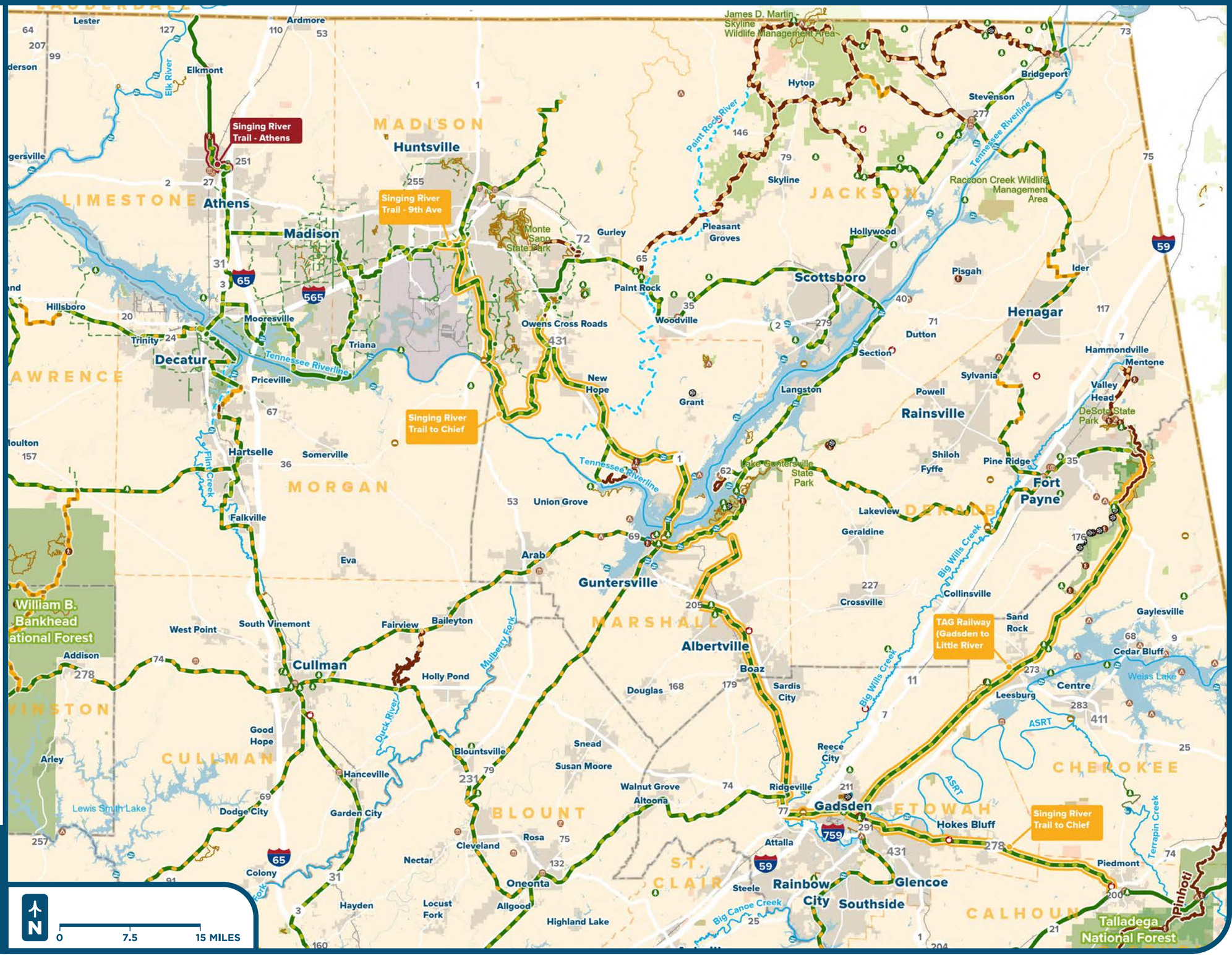

REGION 2A

WARC

- Railroads
- Existing Natural Surface Trails
- Previously Proposed Natural Surface Trails
- Existing Shared Use Trails
- Previously Proposed Shared Use Trails
- Blueways / Rivers
- Previously Proposed Blueways

Draft Network

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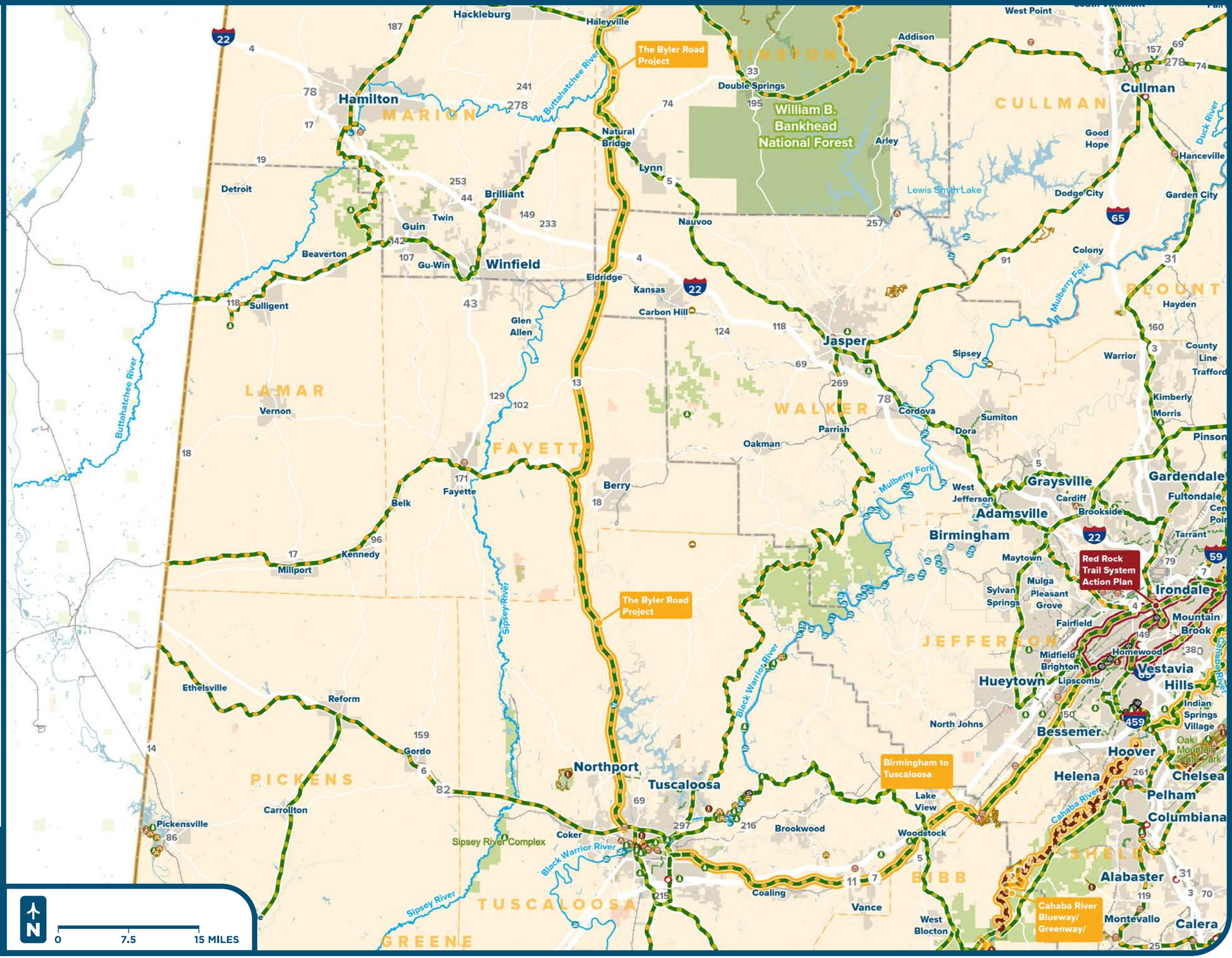

REGION 2B

WARC

- Railroads
- Existing Natural Surface Trails
- Previously Proposed Natural Surface Trails
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- Previously Proposed Shared Use Trails
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Draft Network

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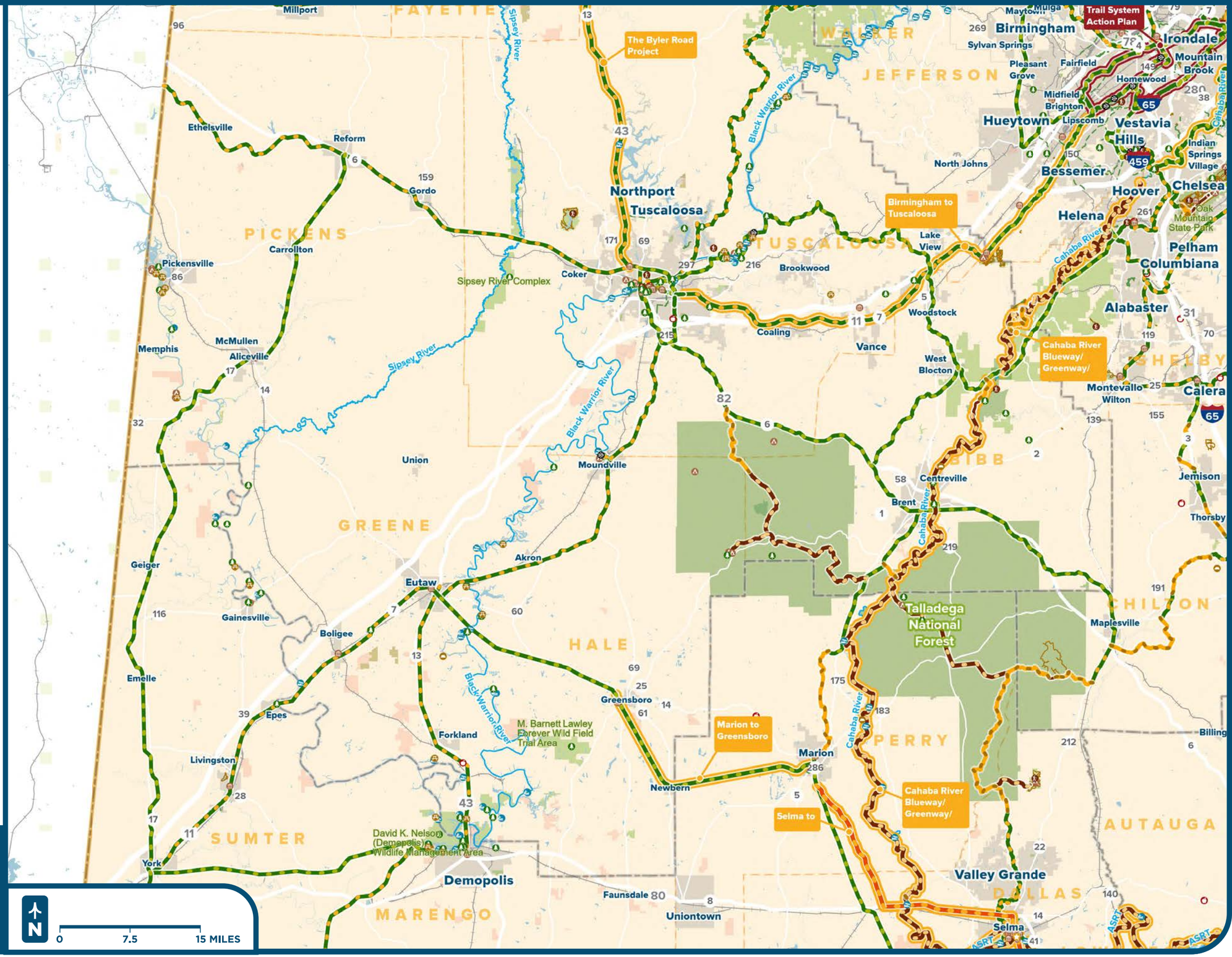

REGION 3A

RPCGB

- Railroads
- Existing Natural Surface Trails
- Previously Proposed Natural Surface Trails
- Existing Shared Use Trails
- Previously Proposed Shared Use Trails
- Blueways / Rivers
- Previously Proposed Blueways

Draft Network

- Conceptual
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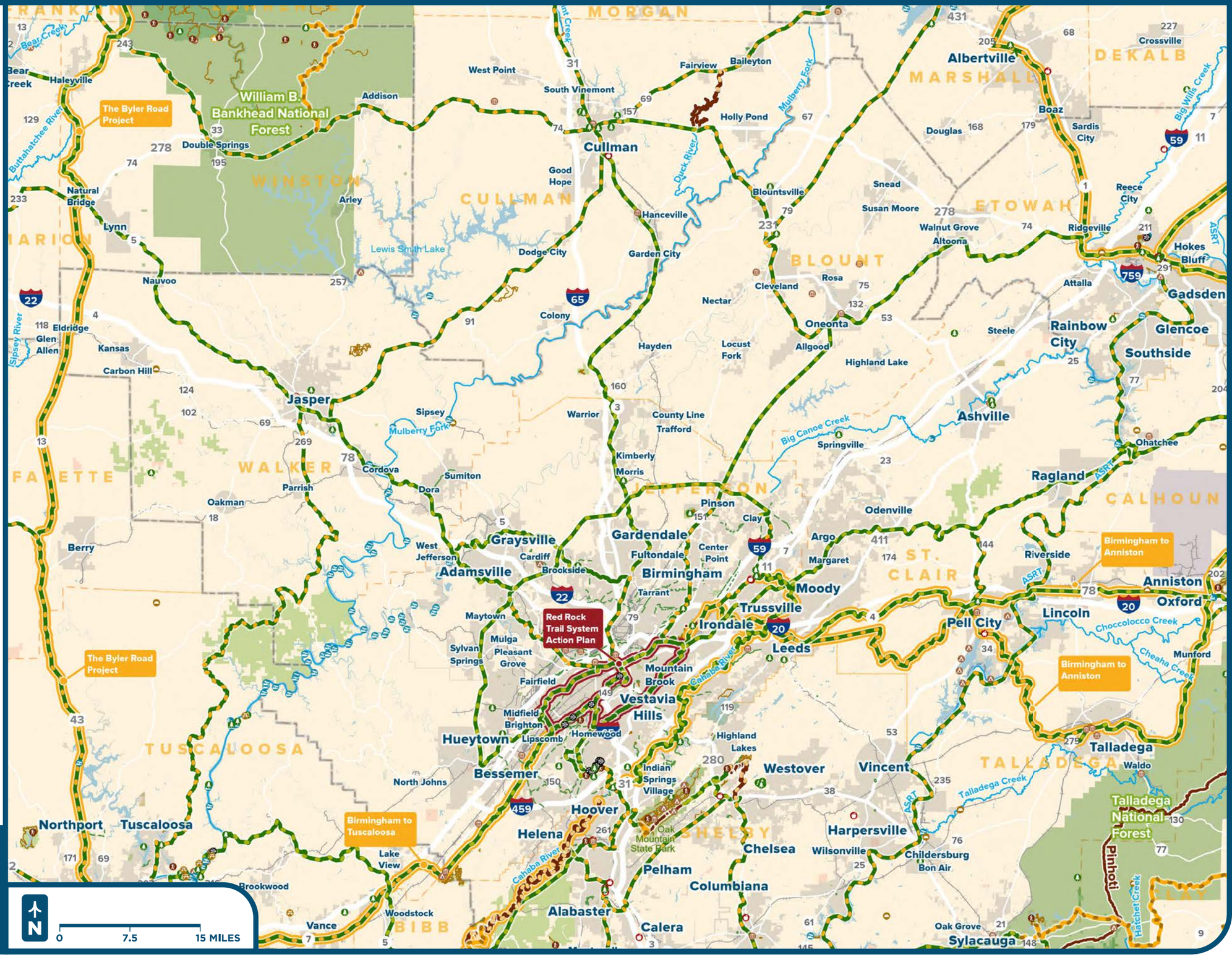

REGION 3B

RPCGB

- Railroads
- Existing Natural Surface Trails
- Previously Proposed Natural Surface Trails
- Existing Shared Use Trails
- Previously Proposed Shared Use Trails
- Blueways / Rivers
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Draft Network

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See page 37 for a description of trail types.

REGION 4A

EARPDC

- Railroads
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- Previously Proposed Shared Use Trails
- Blueways / Rivers
- Previously Proposed Blueways

Draft Network

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REGION 4B

EARPDC

- Railroads
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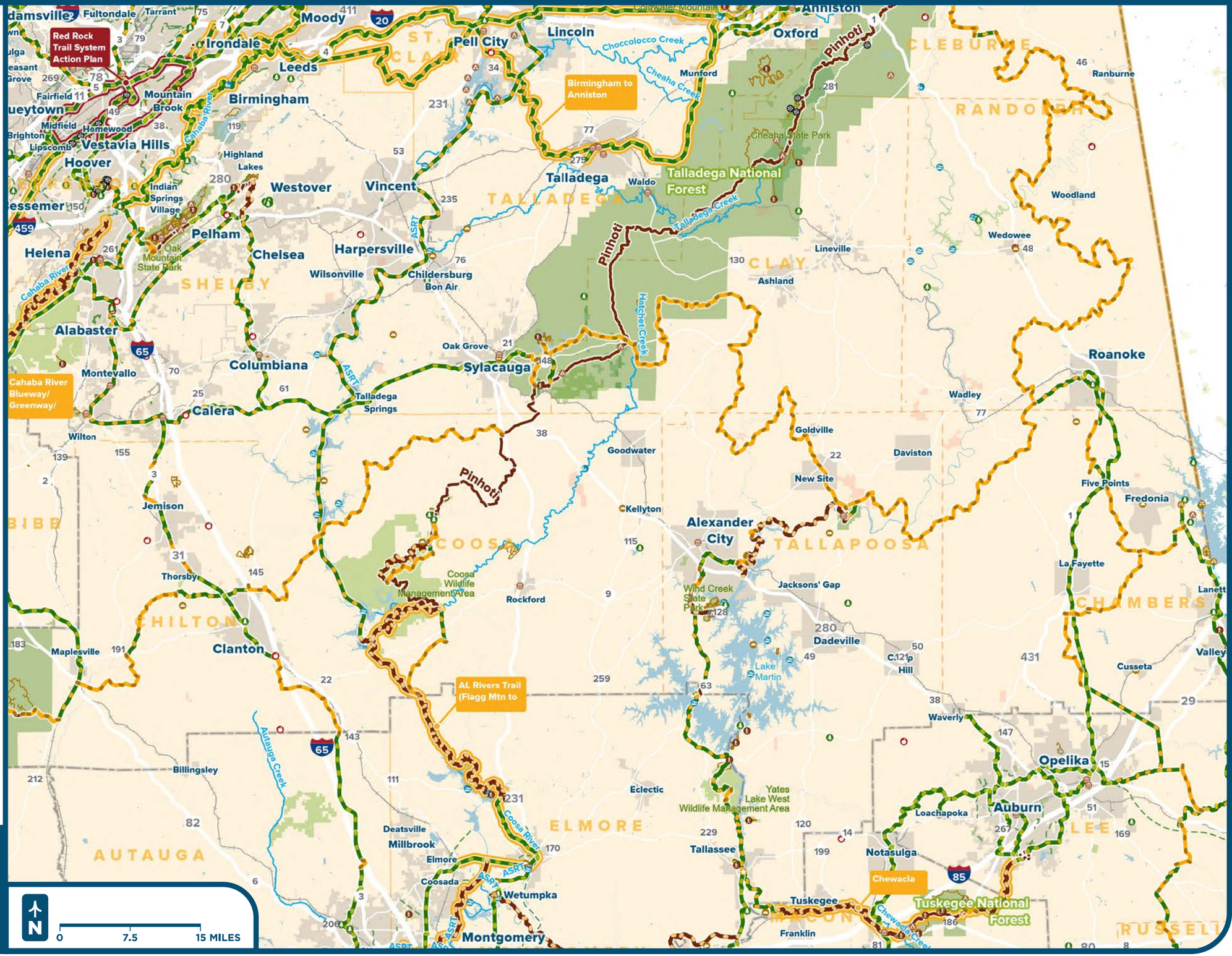

REGION 6A

ATRC

- Railroads
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- Previously Proposed Natural Surface Trails
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- Previously Proposed Shared Use Trails
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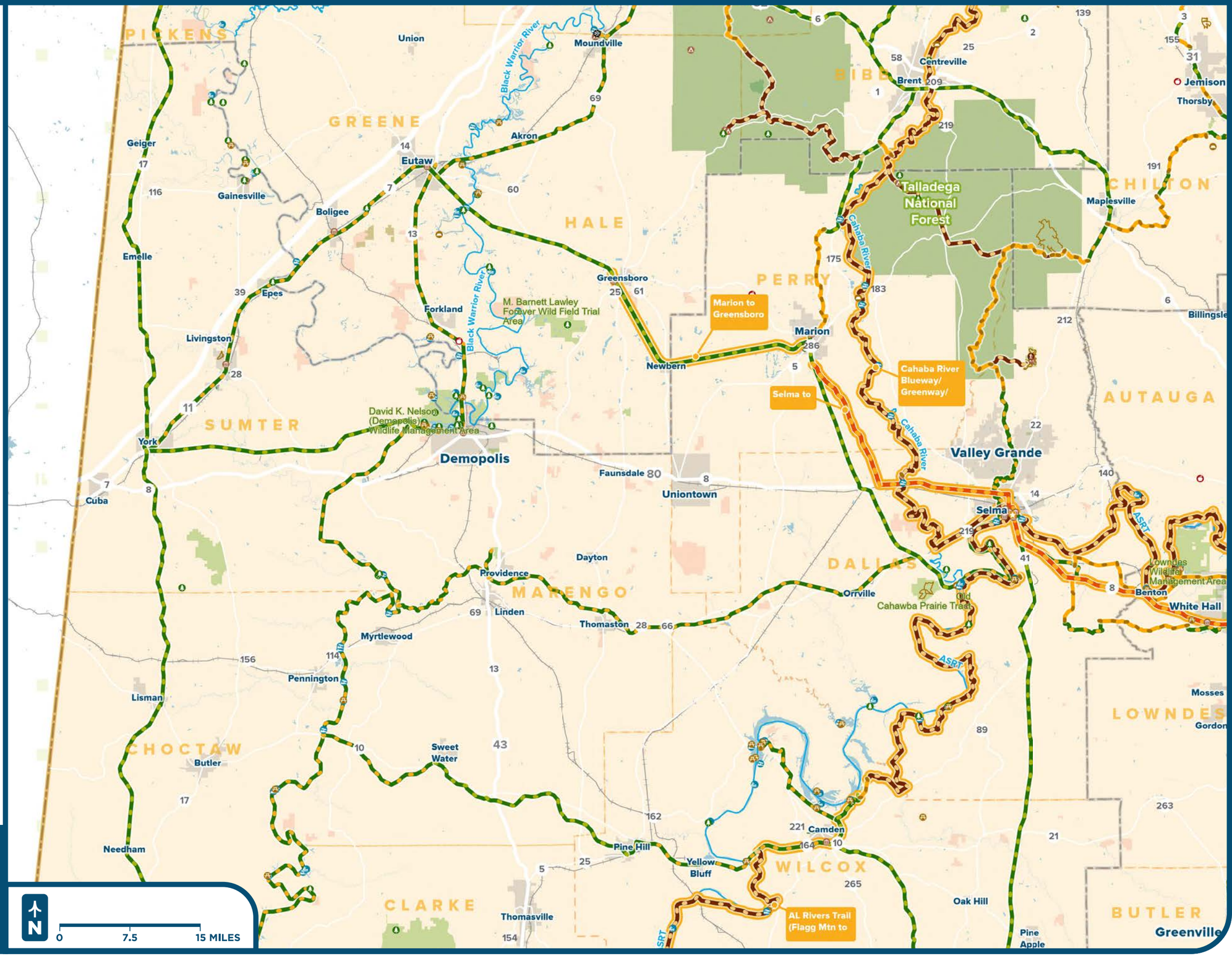

REGION 6B

ATRC

- Railroads
- Existing Natural Surface Trails
- Previously Proposed Natural Surface Trails
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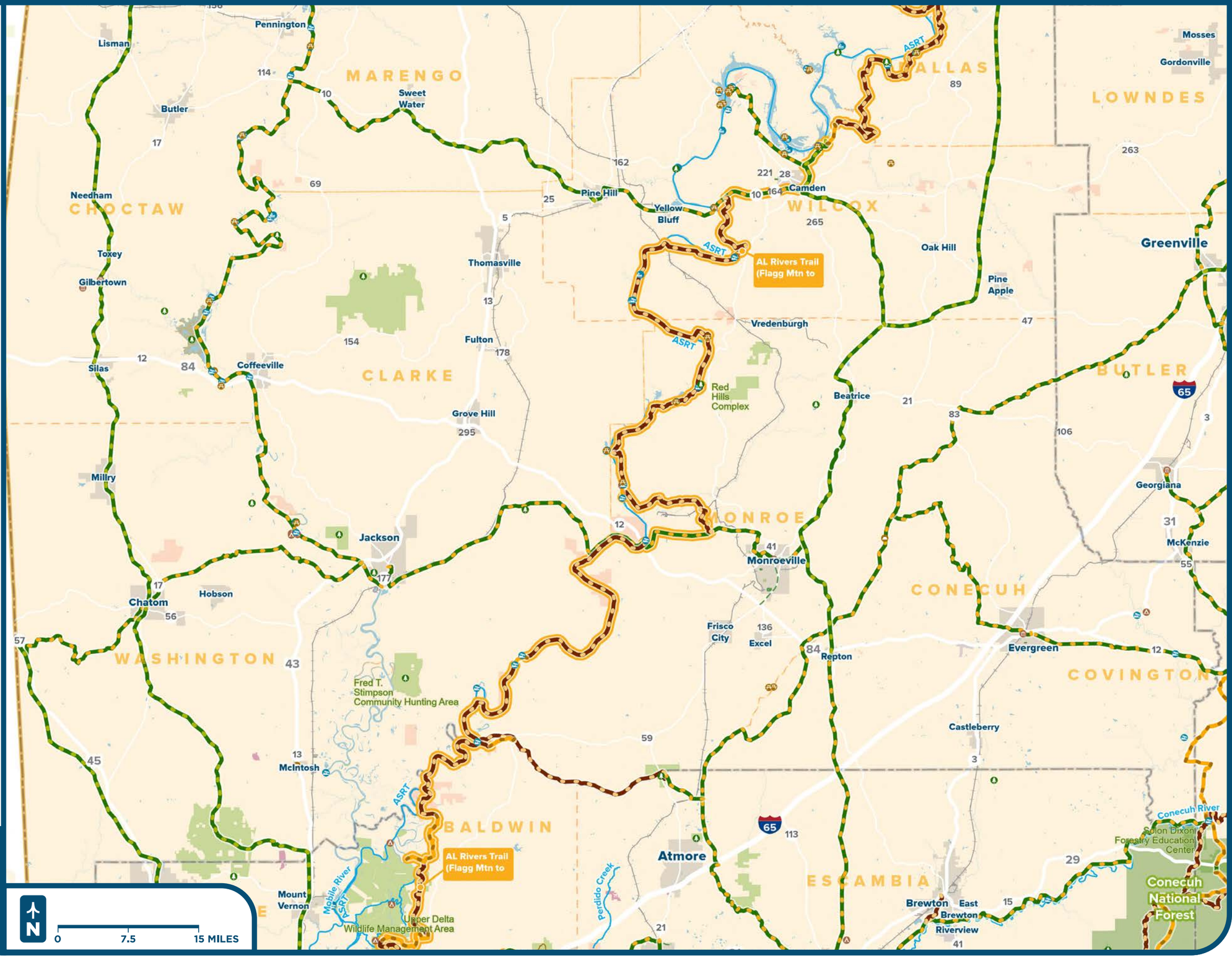

REGION 9

CARDDC

- Railroads
- Existing Natural Surface Trails
- Previously Proposed Natural Surface Trails
- Existing Shared Use Trails
- Previously Proposed Shared Use Trails
- Blueways / Rivers
- Previously Proposed Blueways

Draft Network

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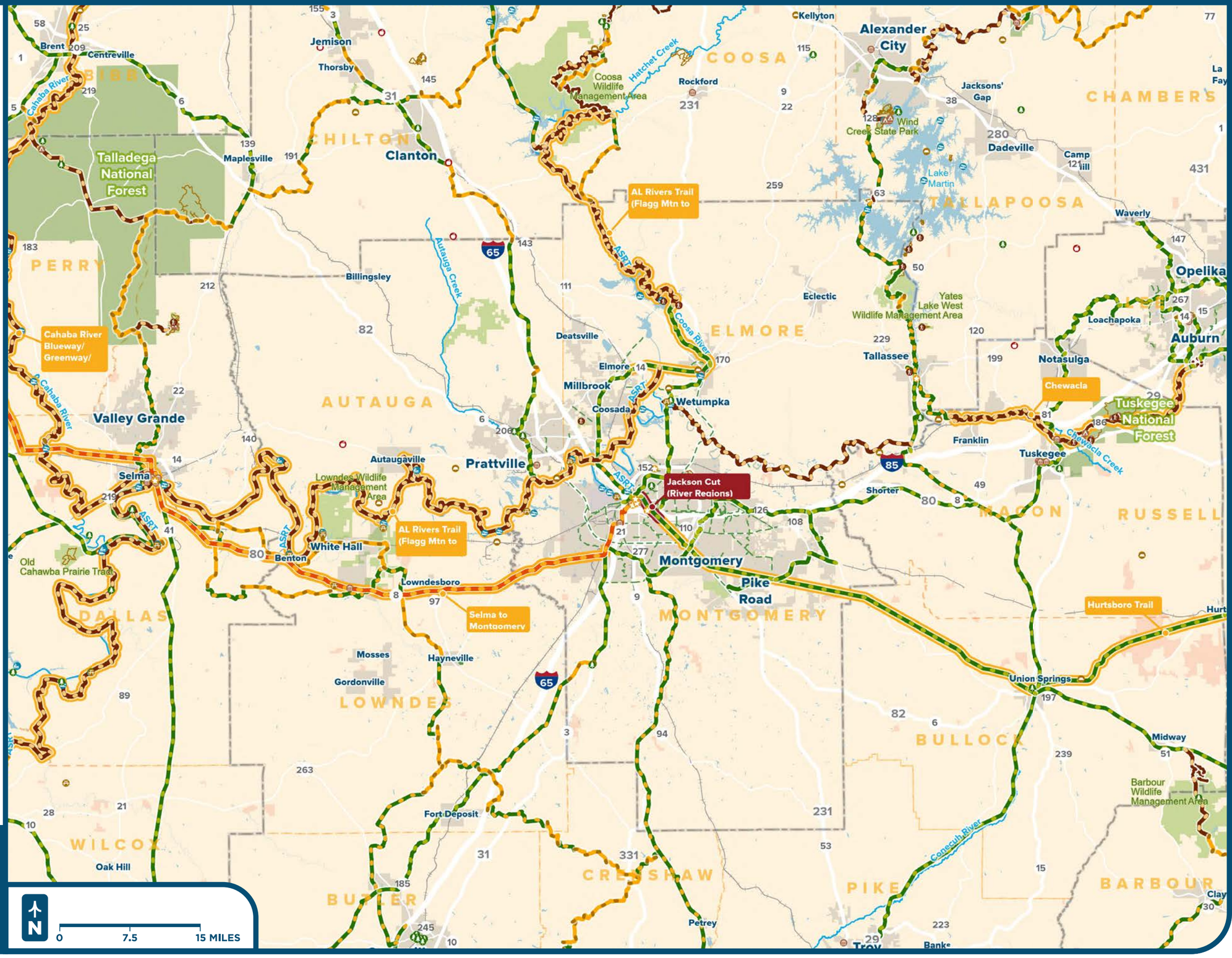

REGION 10

LRCOG

- Railroads
- Existing Natural Surface Trails
- Previously Proposed Natural Surface Trails
- Existing Shared Use Trails
- Previously Proposed Shared Use Trails
- Blueways / Rivers
- Previously Proposed Blueways

Draft Network

- Conceptual
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- Existing Natural Surface Trail
- Existing Shared Use Path
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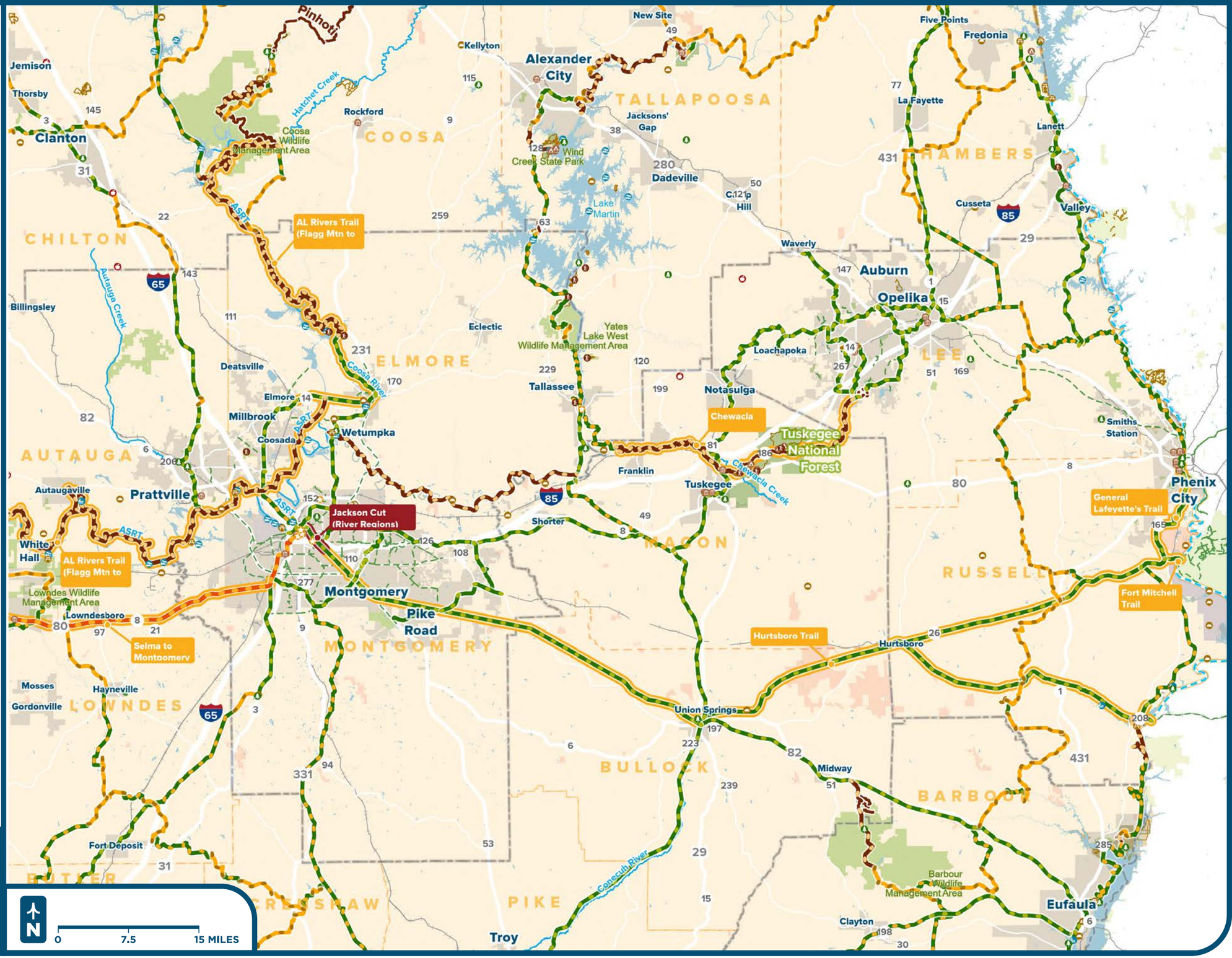

REGION 5

SCADC

- Railroads
- Existing Natural Surface Trails
- Previously Proposed Natural Surface Trails
- Existing Shared Use Trails
- Previously Proposed Shared Use Trails
- Blueways / Rivers
- Previously Proposed Blueways

Draft Network

- Conceptual
- Natural Surface Trail
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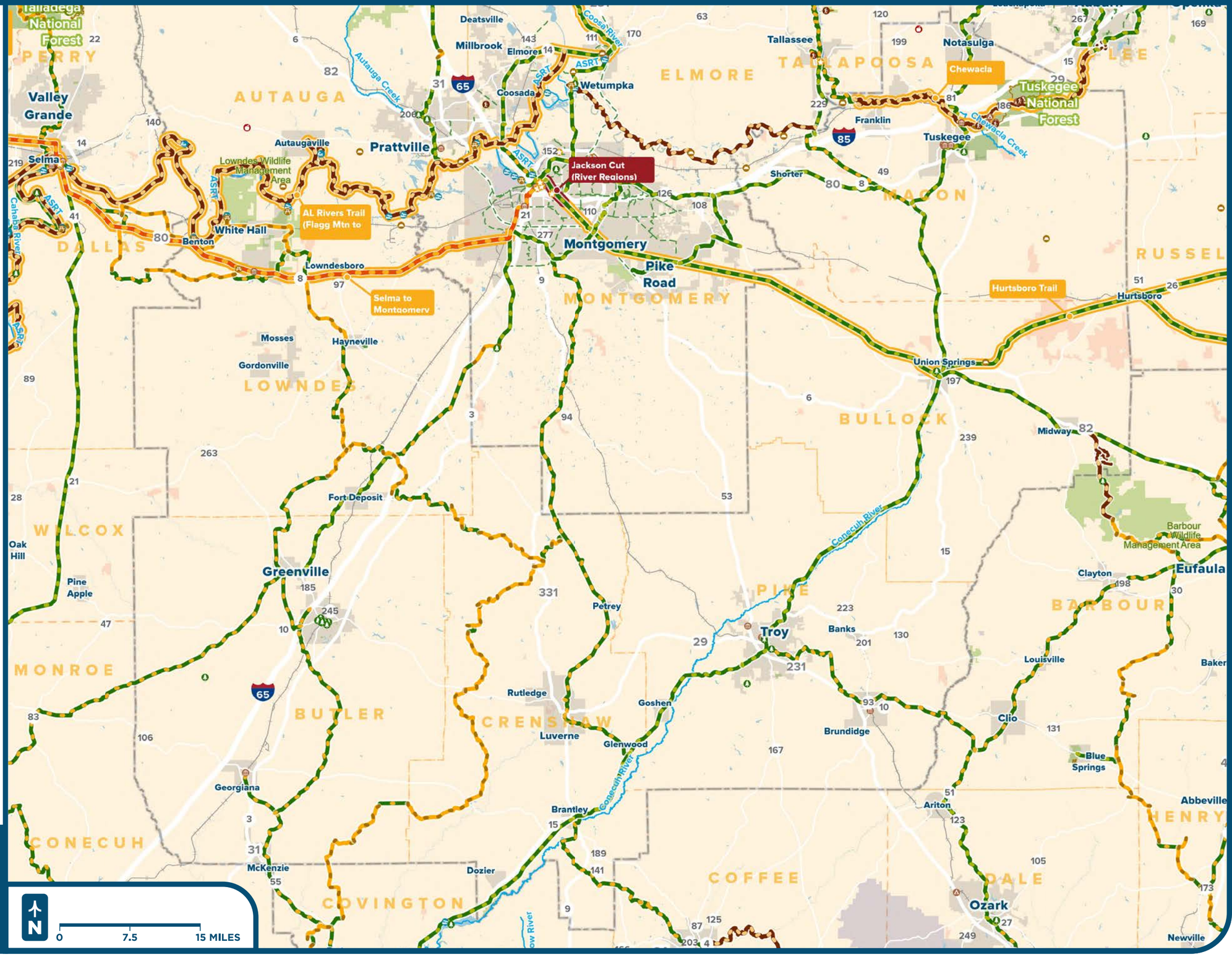
See page 37 for a description of trail types.



REGION 7

SEARPDC

- Railroads
- Existing Natural Surface Trails
- Previously Proposed Natural Surface Trails
- Existing Shared Use Trails
- Previously Proposed Shared Use Trails
- Blueways / Rivers
- Previously Proposed Blueways

Draft Network

- Conceptual
- Natural Surface Trail
- Low Traffic Road
- Shared Use Path
- Thematic
- Existing Natural Surface Trail
- Existing Shared Use Path
- Proposed Feasibility Studies
- Trail Design, Construction, or Acquisition

Boundaries

- Easements
- State and City Public Lands
- Military
- Federal Lands
- Municipalities
- County Boundaries
- AL Council of Governments

Destinations

- Farms, Farmers Markets, and Wineries
- Blueway Access
- Boat Launch
- Campground
- Historic Native Townsite
- Historical
- Landmark
- Trailhead
- Scenic Overlook
- Recreation / Park
- Multipurpose or Day Use Area

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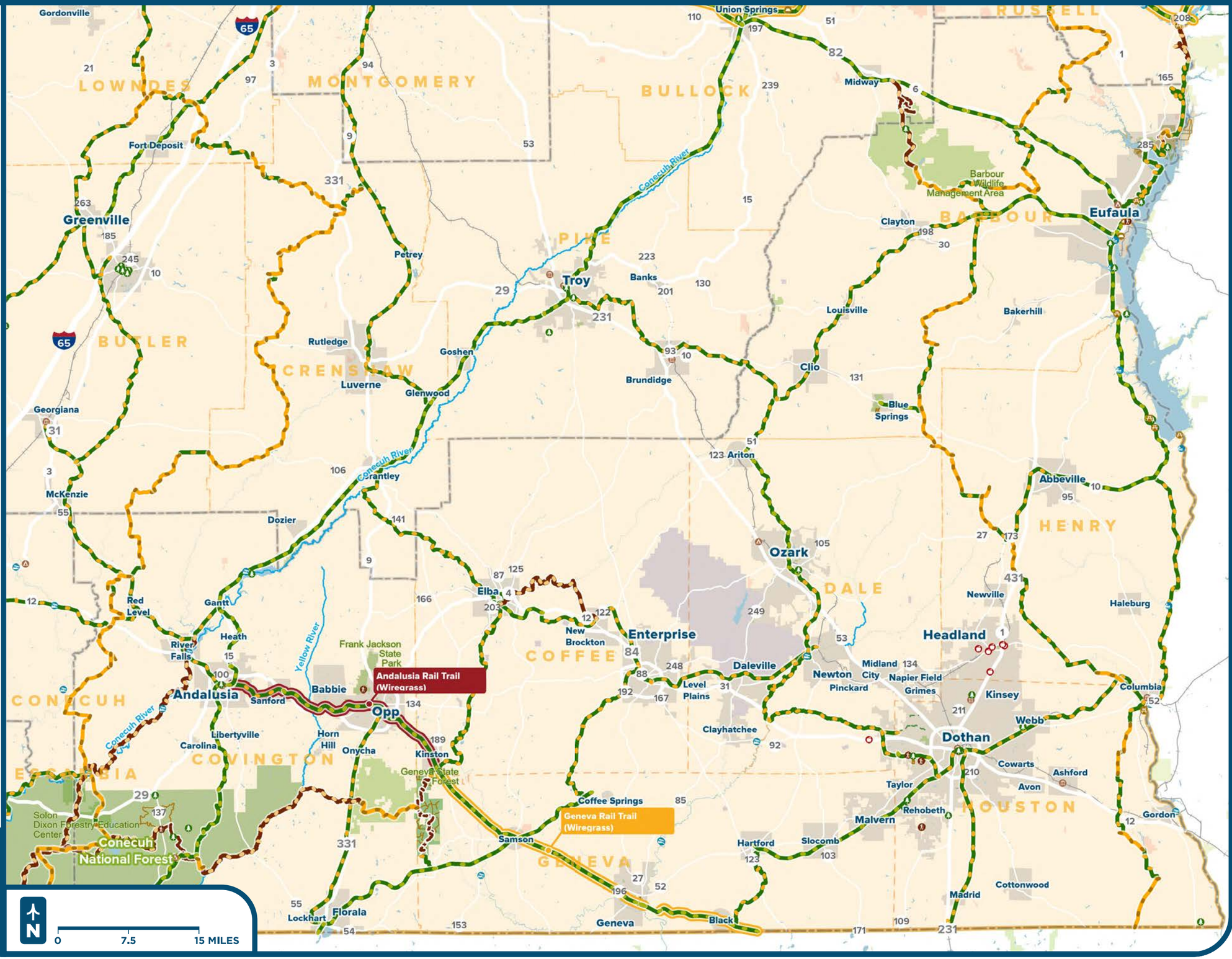

REGION 8

SARPC

- Railroads
- Existing Natural Surface Trails
- Previously Proposed Natural Surface Trails
- Existing Shared Use Trails
- Previously Proposed Shared Use Trails
- Blueways / Rivers
- Previously Proposed Blueways

Draft Network

- Conceptual
- Natural Surface Trail
- Low Traffic Road
- Shared Use Path
- Thematic
- Existing Natural Surface Trail
- Existing Shared Use Path
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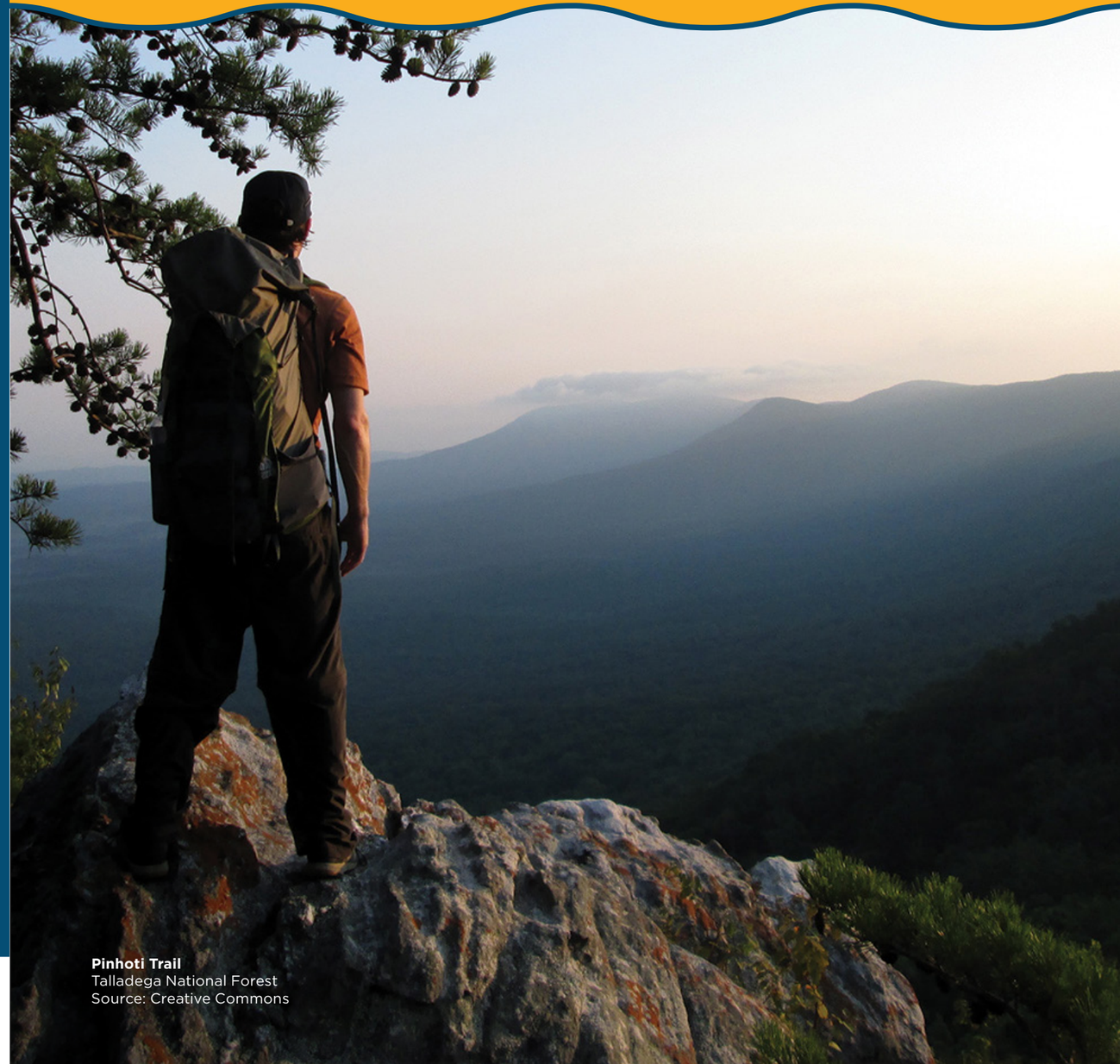
04 The Action



Pinhoti Trail
Talladega National Forest
Source: Creative Commons

Introduction

This chapter identifies the key next steps for taking this plan's vision and goals and making them a reality. This is the action plan for Sweet Trails Alabama.

Chief Ladiga Trail connects Anniston, Weaver, Jacksonville, and to Atlanta via the Silver Comet Trail in Georgia

CONNECTIVITY

Build it so they come.

Connect all 67 counties and major destinations with a publicly accessible trail network for transportation and recreation uses.

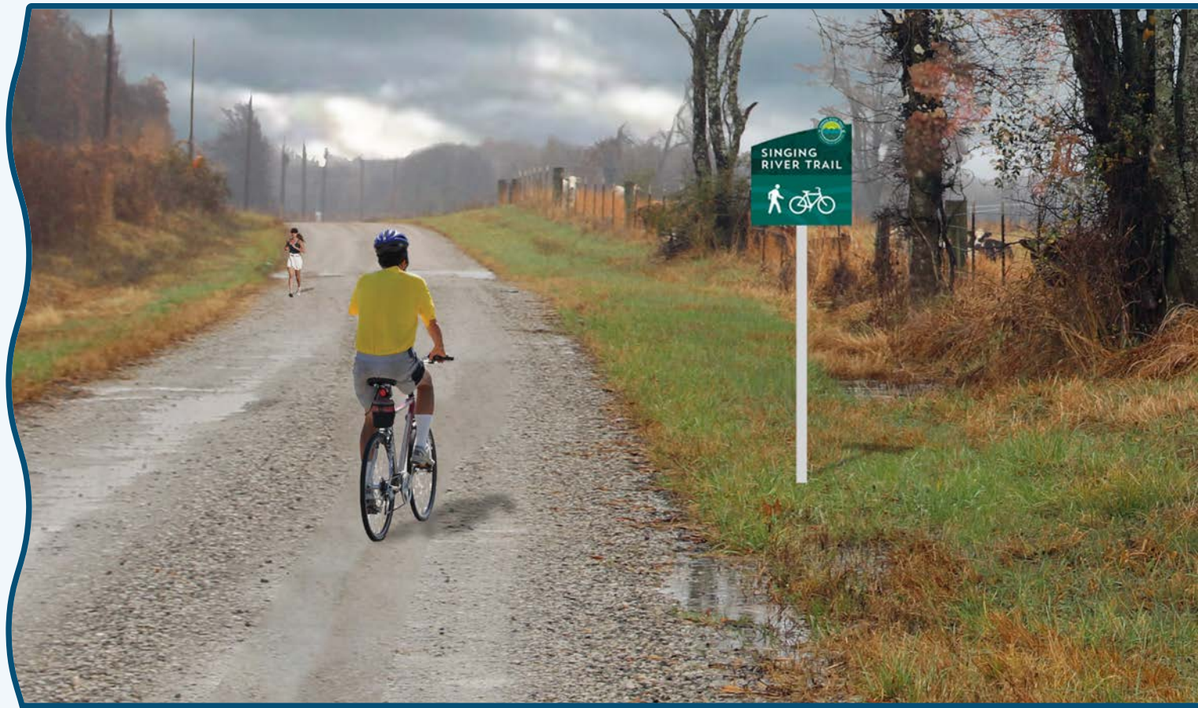
Actions

- **Provide no-match competitive state grant for regional, county, or local trail plans.** The awarded jurisdictions will build off the recommended statewide trail network, refining it, and planning for connections into the system. This will be most useful where planning has not yet occurred.
- **Provide funds to develop trail feasibility studies that define alignments and costs for priority projects that need further study.** This targets projects that have had some degree of planning and can make an immediate impact on communities and the economy of the state.
- **Provide design and construction funding to push shovel-ready projects forward, giving them a boost to complete implementation.** This targets trail partners who have been doing the work and can get projects built quicker.
- **Maintain and update state database of existing and proposed trails** as new planning, design, and construction occurs.

Feasibility studies are prioritized where one or more of the following situations apply

- Planning has already occurred.
- Project partners are in position to deliver.
- Project has significant influence on the overall statewide trail network, making a critical connection or extending existing trail.
- Project provides a trail in an area that lacks trails.

Perspective Rendering of Potential Trail Design for Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail. Montgomery, AL



Perspective Rendering of Potential Designated Dirt Road Route along Singing River Trail: Lawrence County, AL

Three featured projects described below identified for trail feasibility studies include:

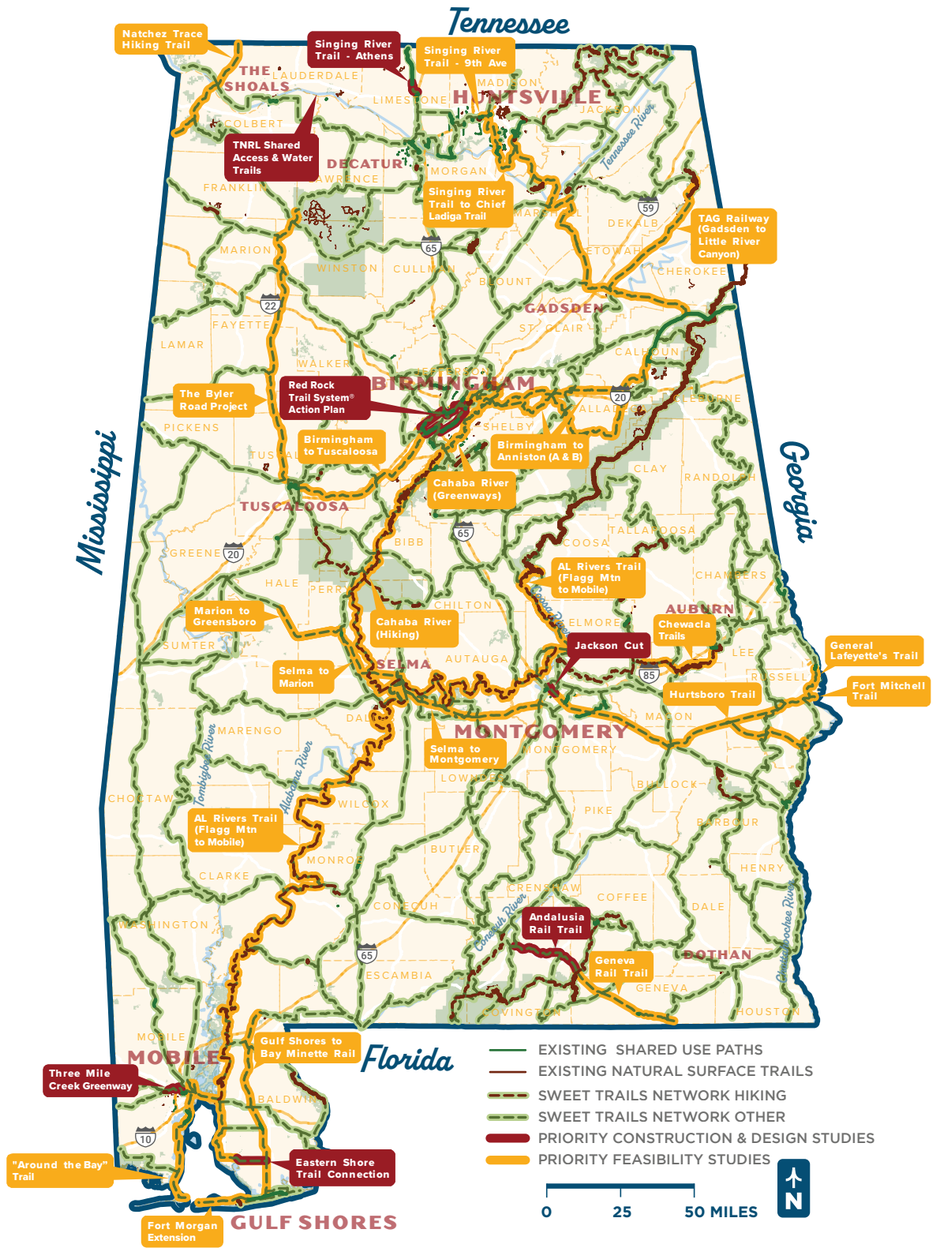
Birmingham to Anniston – This project would connect the Red Rock Trail System in Birmingham to the Chief Ladiga Trail in Anniston, generally following an old railroad corridor and allowing trail users complete a journey from Birmingham to Atlanta. This can and should be the catalyst for a southern version of a cross-country trail similar to the "Great American Rail Trail" found in the northern tier of the country. (Need a cool graphic idea to thrust forward the idea of a great southern route across the US, with this as a first section/ push - with graphic, use text "This is the start of the vision of the Great Southern Trail, connecting the Atlantic to the Pacific.")

Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail – This project would connect Selma to Montgomery along the already National Park Service designated route that marks the 1965 54-mile Voting Rights March led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1965. Hundreds of thousands visit this Trail; however, there are no separate pathways for walking or biking, and; the route is commonly visited by driving. With an interest already by the City of Montgomery and other regional partners, this trail could easily be the most visited trail in Alabama in the future.

Dirt Roads – Hundreds of miles of low-traffic dirt roads were mapped as part of a potential future trail network that traverses beautiful landscapes, forests, and farmlands. These may could fairly immediately be established as trails, but there should be local desire and support. A feasibility/ planning and feasibility study for sections will determine the path forward, including design standards to address safety with any roadway user conflicts with vehicles. In addition, the study would determine the allowed trail uses and identify locations for trailheads, rest stops, and needed amenities across undeveloped Alabama.

As part of the Singing River Trail planning effort, dirt roads serve as lower-cost sections to sign as multi-use paths. The image above demonstrates a potential dirt road the provides a rural experience between Pond Spring, the General Wheeler Home and the town of Hillsboro in Lawrence County.

PRIORITY PROJECTS



Priority Trail Projects for Funding Discussion

1	**Operations & Year of the Trail Funding**
	Continued / Increased Support for Trail Nonprofits Doing the Work on the Ground
	Set-Aside to Prepare for and Launch Year of the Trail 2025
2	**Trail Enhancements Funding**
	General Trail Enhancements Funding - Pinhoti
	Alabama Scenic River Trail Wayfinding Plan
	Tennessee RiverLine Planning & Design Standards
3	**Regional Trail Plan Funding**
	Regional Trail Plans for up to 12 Regional Councils
4	**Trail Feasibility Study Funding**
	Montgomery to Selma (Civil Rights Trail)
	Birmingham to Anniston (Chief Ladiga Extension)
	Singing River Trail to Chief Ladiga Trail
	Marion to Greensboro Rail Trail
	Cahaba River Blueway/Greenway/Hiking Trail
	Rail-to-Trail between Foley, Summerdale, Robertsdale, Loxley, and Bay Minette
	TAG Railway (Gadsden, Weiss Lake, and Little River Canyon corridor)
	Fort Morgan Trail Extension
	The Byler Road Project
	“Around the Bay” Trail
	Natchez Hiking Trail
	Alabama Rivers Trail – Flagg Mountain to Mobile Bay
	Chewacla Creek Trails
	Andalusia Rail Trail (Wiregrass Region)
	Birmingham to Tuscaloosa Rail Trail
	Hurtsboro Trail
	General Lafayette’s Trail
	Fort Mitchell Trail
5	**Trail Design & Construction Funding**
	Birmingham – Red Rock Trail System® Action Plan
	Mobile Project – Three Mile Creek Greenway
	Singing River Trail – Athens
	Eastern Shore Trail Connection to Town of Magnolia Springs and Foley
	Tennessee RiverLine Shared Access Enhancement & Local Water Trail Development
	Jackson Cut - Montgomery

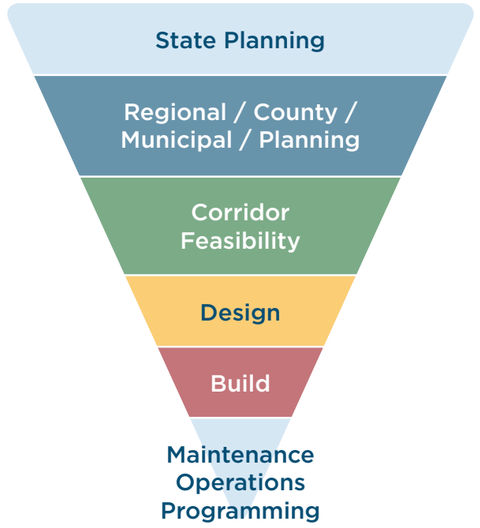
There are fewer projects across the state that are “shovel-ready,” and in most cases, they exist where planning and feasibility studies have already occurred. Design and construction projects should be selected and /prioritized where one or more of the following situations apply(and not all are required):

- Feasibility, pre-design, 30% design, or full design has occurred.
- Right-of-way (ROW) acquisition is secured or not considered a constraint.
- Project has significant influence on the overall statewide trail network, making a critical connection or extending existing trail.

Projects that fit this criteria that need funds to advance include (but are not limited to) the projects in the list on the previous page.

Projects were identified using the following criteria:

Planning Towards Trail Development



PROJECT PRIORITIZATION

FACTORS THAT INFORMED THE DECISIONS

- **Connection** to existing trails
- Community **momentum**
- **Feasibility**
- Connects major **destinations** or communities
- Provides multiple **benefits**: recreation, transportation, economic

PROJECT TYPES

- Feasibility studies
- Trail design and construction
- Acquisition

ECONOMY AND INNOVATION

Ignite the Alabama trail-based economy.

Create ribbons of economic opportunity and innovation ecosystem hubs along the trail system that provide outdoor recreation tourism and focal points for new business development.

The Singing River Trail Launch Tank is a “Shark Tank”-style competition for new and existing North Alabama entrepreneurs with a focus on the outdoor economy. The event started in 2022 with and held its third annual event in April 2024. The number of applicants jumped from 25 to 80 between 2022 and 2023. Winners receive $25,000 and business coaching. In its first year, a minority-owned glamping business won while an E-bike business won in the second year.

42 APPLICANTS

9 WINNERS

237 ATTENDEES

$25K REINVESTED INTO NORTH ALABAMA

Actions

- Partner with Innovate Alabama to **position trails as the number one opportunity** in the growing outdoor recreation market.
- **Launch first annual State Launch Tank** to attract and benefit trail-related entrepreneurs across the state, supporting grassroots economic development in the outdoor recreation sector. This is a high-visibility opportunity to advance trail-oriented businesses and development and spawn off additional ideas.
- **Collaborate with the Alabama Pinhoti Trail Association initiative to advocate for trail tourism through an expanded Trail Towns program.** Build on this initiative to bring best practices from around the country to advance towns along Alabama trails to reap the benefits of trail tourism.
- **Pilot a program with major Alabama-based business** or corporation and university that utilizes trails and outdoor recreation to attract and retain talent.

CONSERVATION AND STEWARDSHIP

Promote Alabama's world class biodiversity and cultural heritage.

Promote conservation and stewardship of natural and cultural resources

Gulf State Park Educational Trail Signage
Orange Beach, AL

Actions

- **Use trails for natural and cultural resource interpretation.** Natural and historic resource agencies should work with trail groups to identify educational, interpretation, and key storytelling opportunities, as well as ways to use technology to educate and tell stories along trails.
- Work with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, land trusts, and other groups to **use trail corridors as conservation corridors to protect and connect habitat.**
- Work with the Alabama Historical Commission to **use trails to protect and promote the experience of historic corridors.**
- **Partner with Civil War Preservation Trust** to create Civil War Trails following the three largest campaigns of the war in Alabama: Streight's Raid, Wilson's Raid, and the Battle of Mobile Bay.
- **Collaborate with Alabama Wildlife Action Plan Team** to leverage habitat conservation corridors as low-hanging fruit trail opportunities, focusing on educating people on the importance of conserving our threatened and endangered flora and fauna, and providing an example of sensitive recreational development.

FUNDING

Bolster trail development and take care of what we have.

Bolster trail development and take care of what we've got.

2024 State Trail Funding

NORTH CAROLINA
$54.9M
($5.20 per capita)

VIRGINIA
$89M
($10.30 per capita)

FLORIDA
$50M Annual
($2.30 per capita)
+
$200M
one-time allocation
($9.18 per capita)
=
$250M for 2024
($11.48 per capita)

In order to be competitive with trail-leading states in the Southeast, Alabama would need to fund trails to the tune of:

$26.2M to match **NORTH CAROLINA**

$51.9M to match **VIRGINIA**

$57.8M to match **FLORIDA**

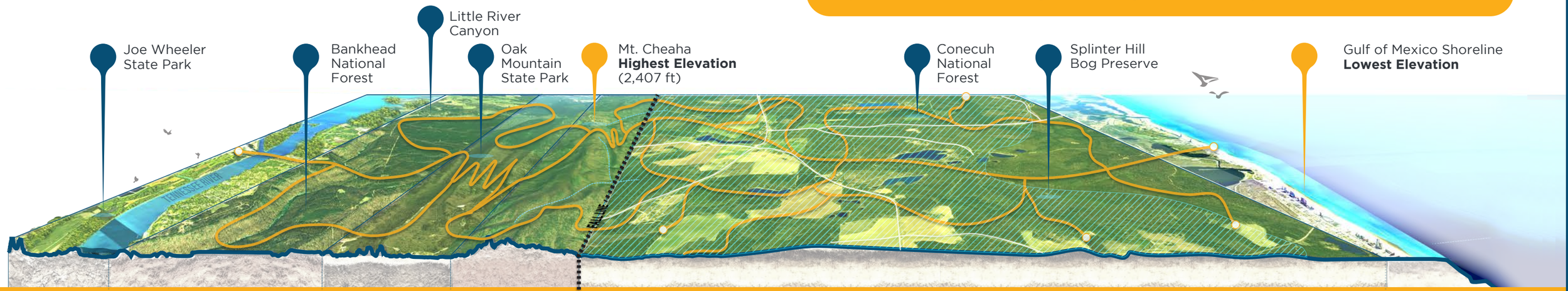
on a per capita basis.

Actions

- **Provide state funding for trails for the first time in history,** following in the recent footsteps of Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia. Provide sustained and increasing sources of revenue that can be used to help communities move forward with projects. Funds may be used as a match for smaller communities that struggle to find match dollars. See "Connectivity" goal and "Promotion" goals for the first round of significant funding needs —trail development and wayfinding signage.
- **Create a Trail Enhancements and Maintenance Fund that will fund trail improvements and maintenance, not just new trails.** The State of Alabama can be a leader in providing opportunities for maintenance funding that will help communities and agencies care for the trails that will keep residents and visitors coming back. General and specific recommendations for trail improvements, enhancements, and/or maintenance can be found in the user group cutsheets.
- **Provide educational resources to inform communities of available trail funding.** The funding landscape changes, and it is challenging to remain current. This will be part of the trails toolkit, the beginnings of which are included in the appendix of this Plan.

ECOREGIONS OF ALABAMA

As a stark contrast to Alabama's low rankings illustrated on page 28, Alabama ranks number 4 in the United States in terms of species diversity and first among states east of the Mississippi River. These species live within the 64 different types of terrestrial ecosystems of Alabama, including 25 forests and woodlands, 11 wetlands, and seven glades and prairies. By planning an interconnected trail network across the state, we can educate visitors about the importance of conservation and biodiversity while providing for a truly diverse recreational experience of our state's six ecoregions, something that would not be possible with only local trail networks.



INTERIOR PLATEAU
7% of state

Flat with hills and deeper valleys along streams

SOUTHWESTERN APPALACHIA
15% of state

Flat topped plateaus that are separated by steep cliffs and gradual valleys

RIDGE AND VALLEY
9% of state

Tall crested ridges and steep, deep valleys

PIEDMONT
9% of state

Rolling plains and steep ridges. Higher elevations and mountainous in the northern part of the region

SOUTHEASTERN PLAINS
59% of state

Mostly flat with rolling hills. This ecoregion includes the floodplains of the Alabama River, Tombigbee River, and Black Warrior River.

SOUTHERN COASTAL PLAINS
1% of state

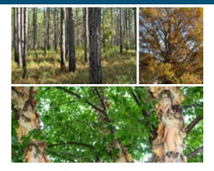
Mostly flat with swamps, lakes, and marshes

FLORA

Oak and Hickory Forests Little Bluestem Prairies Tall Thistle Plant

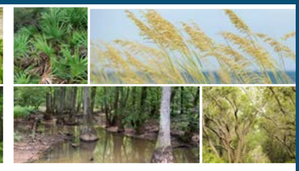
Mixed Oak Forests American Beech, Tulip Poplar, Sugar Maple, Buckeye

Mixed hardwood and mixed oak and pine forests Cahaba Lily



Pine forests and mixed deciduous forests

Mix of cropland, pastures, wetlands, woodlands, and forests, wiregrass prairies, oak, hickory, and pine forests, and cedar trees grow in the Blackbelt.



Oak, gum, and cypress forests, river swamp forests populated by bald cypress trees

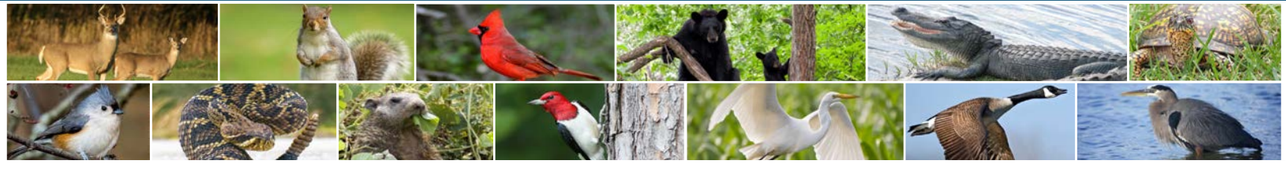
FAUNA

Swamp Metalmark butterfly, Bell's Roadside Skipper, northern cavefish

Mink, pine vole, big eared bat, red-eyed vireo, scarlet tanager, hooded warbler, northern copperhead, chorus frog

Mink, pine vole, big eared bat, red-eyed vireo, scarlet tanager, hooded warbler, northern copperhead, chorus frog

Bobcat, gray fox, raccoon, eastern wild turkey, northern cardinal, prairie warbler



Red-cockaded Woodpecker, gopher tortoise, eastern indigo snake, white-tailed deer, black bear, bobcat, gray fox, raccoon, gray squirrel, swamp rabbit, eastern chipmunk, pine vole. Birds include eastern wild turkey, northern cardinal, Carolina wren, wood thrush, tufted titmouse, hooded warbler, summer tanager, waterfowl birds (geese, swans, and ducks), American alligator, eastern box turtle, common garter snake, copperhead, eastern diamondback rattlesnake

Bobcat, marsh rabbit, manatee, egret, blue heron, indigo bunting, scrub lizard, cottonmouth, alligator, tarpon

PROMOTION
Tell them what we have and get them here!

Enhance public awareness and engagement in trails.

Case Study:
North Carolina Year of the Trail

North Carolina designated 2023 as the "Year of the Trail," which was the largest celebration of state trails and outdoor recreation in North Carolina history. The goal of this effort was to boost awareness of trails and trail use across the state. The effort was led by the Great Trails State Coalition, which is a broad-based group of diverse organizations, agencies, and supporters advocating for increased state investment in all types of trails in North Carolina.

YEAR OF THE TRAIL 2023 ★ NC

Actions

- **Roll out Alabama's Year of the Trail 2025 to amplify** the message of trail tourism and economic development in Alabama.

Here are some accomplishments achieved during North Carolina's **Year of the Trail campaign**:

28,000+	followers on social media (Facebook + Instagram)
17,000+	newsletter subscribers
1,700+	Year of the Trail events in **94 counties**
400+	pieces of media coverage; **150+** online stories (national, statewide, regional, and local news outlets— even The Weather Channel!)
30+	blog posts
20	billboards
7	original videos
5	Year of the Trail artists
3	statewide radio ads (one with Richard Petty!)

- **Collaborate with the Alabama Tourism Department** and other partners to build off existing marketing platforms to increase visibility of existing statewide trail and outdoor recreation opportunities. This can come through web presence, collateral presence at visitor centers, and a variety of other programs. Continue the conversation about the best ways to communicate trail experiences whether it through a statewide app/ or website, and/or rolling into existing national trail apps.
- **Advance the wayfinding signage program in Alabama** to directing residents and visitors from major highways to significant trail locations, to and advance education about available trails. Work closely with the Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT) to create a consistent process and system.
- **Develop statewide events or competitions** like biking or running relays across the state, including events that allow participation from a wide variety of ages and abilities. Founded in 2019 with just three participants, the Great Alabama 650, America's longest paddle race, is an example of an event that is slowly growing with 11 participants in 2023.

2023 Great Alabama 650 Winner, Trey Reaves
Source: Alabama Scenic River Trail

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Help Alabamians be well and succeed.

Generate safe, accessible opportunities for healthy living and exercise for all ability levels to address the state's health challenges and provide quality of life improvements statewide.

Actions

- **Pilot enhancement of one state-owned and one locally owned trail or trailhead and associated amenities to create universally accessible spaces.** Work directly with persons with disabilities to help design the improvements and share best practices with state stakeholders at the new trails summit (described in the Partnerships section). Also, work in partnership with the federal government to identify a national forest location for similar enhancement.

Gulf State Park Universal Trail Assessment Process Sign
Gulf State Park, Orange Beach, AL
Credit: Image: Hersick & Webster Creative Partners.
Design: ArchitectureWorks.
Program Manager: University of Alabama Center for Economic Development (UACED)

- **Develop more comprehensive and legible trail education materials,** with information about level of difficulty and access.
- **Create robust information** about the **positive impacts on health and wellness** and develop materials to share with our State Health Department and local county agencies.
- **Identify at-risk health communities** and **prioritize communities with poor health indicators**. Collaborate with existing initiatives such as the **Live Well AL initiative** developed by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System at Auburn University.
- **Expand ongoing and develop new** statewide, regional, and local trail **programs and challenges** to encourage Alabamians to get outdoors. Expand reach of successful statewide and local programs and events such as:

→ **100 Alabama Miles Challenge**
The 100 Alabama Miles Challenge is a statewide program designed to inspire all Alabamians to kick-start an active, healthy lifestyle while exploring our beautiful state and connecting with fellow participants. Alabamians can walk, run, hike, bike, swim, paddle, ride, or roll the 100 miles.

→ **Cheaha Challenge Gran Fondo**
This event is geared towards all ages and abilities and also includes a safety campaign for bicyclists. The ninth annual cruise offers distances of 12, 25, or 50 miles on the Chief Ladiga Trail.

PARTNERSHIPS

We will accomplish more working together.

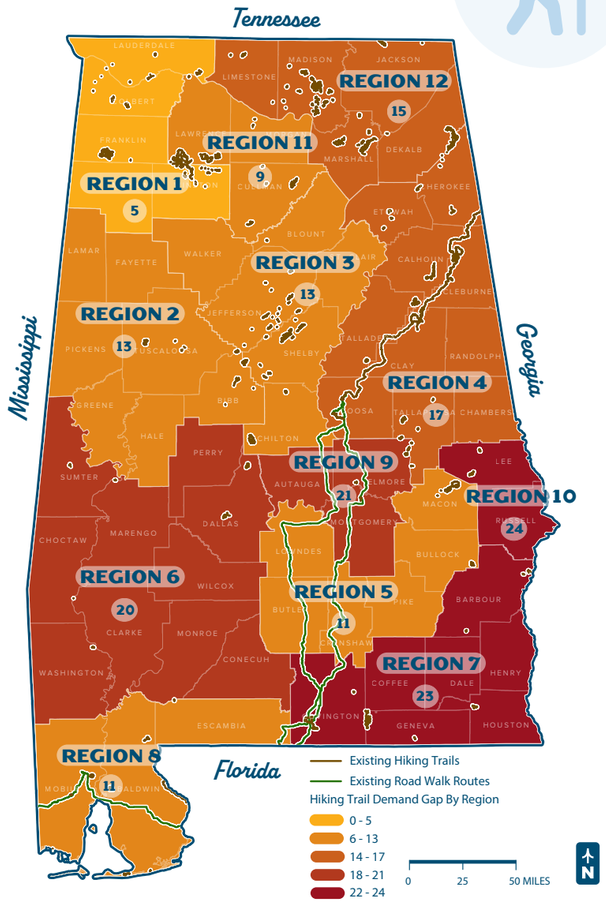
Improve collaboration across Alabama to develop, maintain, and promote trails.

Tennessee RiverLine & Singing River Trail Partnership
North Alabama

Actions

- **Support trail nonprofits** and universities that provide regional and local commitment and technical assistance across the state. **Increase current state support for existing capacity-building organizations** doing the work on the ground and help to build up new initiatives.
- **Begin an annual statewide trails summit** to expand the reach of Sweet Trails Alabama, and share best practices and lessons learned. The summit will allow for annual celebration and updates on the progress of Sweet Trails Alabama. Trail experts and novices will have the opportunity to develop relationships and assist one another. Coordinate with any future summit initiatives developed by **Innovate Alabama's Outdoor Recreation Programs**.
- **Partner with established organizations to provide trail toolkits** to help communities plan, design, build, and promote trails, building off existing resources from allied partners. This will build off the appendix in this Plan.
- **Maintain the advisory/steering committee from the Sweet Trails Alabama planning process** to foster inter-agency communication and momentum for the development of the statewide trails network and the actions described in this chapter. This committee would meet quarterly to discuss strategy around the programs, policies, and funding priorities at the state level. They would ensure progress is being made, foster communication and networking, and oversee and guide any Plan updates.
- Create a **Trails Consortium** across state agencies, led by Innovate Alabama to include, but not be limited to ALDOT, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and others.

The following pages are the result of Focus Group meetings with trail users from a variety of backgrounds. The recommendations contained in this section were driven by stakeholder comments.



1,487
MILES OF EXISTING TRAILS

Regions with the Most Unmet Demand

- Region 10
- Region 7
- Region 9
- Region 6
- Region 4
- Region 12

Other Hiking Destinations:

Most state parks, Turkey Creek Nature Preserve, Cheaha State Park, Lake Martin/Wind Creek, Land Trust of North Alabama, and Wheeler Wildlife Refuge

User Group
HIKING

Top 5 Existing Trail Destinations

01 **The Pinhoti Trail, Near Weogufka, Alabama**

This iconic long-distance hiking trail runs 335 miles and serves as a connector to the Appalachian and Benton MacKaye Trails, spanning Alabama and Georgia. The trail is known for its rugged and challenging sections, providing a diverse and rewarding hiking experience.

02 **Walls of Jericho Trail, Estillfork, Alabama**

This 6-mile trail is a moderate to strenuous challenge that travels through a gorge and has waterfalls. Hikers can expect varied terrain, including wooded areas, creek crossings, and rocky sections. Popular area for birding, camping, and hiking.

03 **Bankhead National Forest**

This forest boasts over 90 miles of trails for recreation. These trails are great for horseback riding, hiking, bicycling and all-terrain vehicles. Includes the Sipsey Wilderness Area.

04 **Oak Mountain State Park, Shelby County, Alabama**

100 miles of trails ranging from beginner to advanced hikers with elevations from 62 to 2,145 feet. The state park offers camping, picnic areas with restrooms, hiking, mountain biking, BMX, equestrian trails, and golf courses.

05 **Cheaha State Park, Clay County, Alabama**

This is the oldest park in Alabama, established in 1933, and is also the highest point in Alabama with an elevation of 2,407 feet above sea level. Cheaha has a 30-mile trail loop with scenic overlooks.

Top Needs of this User Group

Note: the following input came from the focus groups:

Policy

- Expand statewide trails construction and/or maintenance training, including trail design and trail difficulty rating standards—expand State Parks trail trainings, or other trainings throughout the state
- Organize a statewide National Trails Day event, whether trail work or a cleanup
- Market better a definitive guide on hiking information across the state for major and iconic trails in
- Work with AllTrails and other crowd-sourcing trail apps to ensure rogue trails or other social trails are not being promoted
- Consider designating official state trails, or one statewide trail called the “Alabama Trail”
- Consider a statewide policy on ebikes that can be shared among public agencies
- Consider developing a statewide Youth Corp program, or expand and support existing organizations like Wild Alabama, Americorps, Southern Appalachian Wilderness Stewards, Student Conservation Association, and others

#1 Action Item:

Organize efforts across state to promote and cleanup/maintain trails, including returning an annual Trails Summit to further develop ideas.

Physical

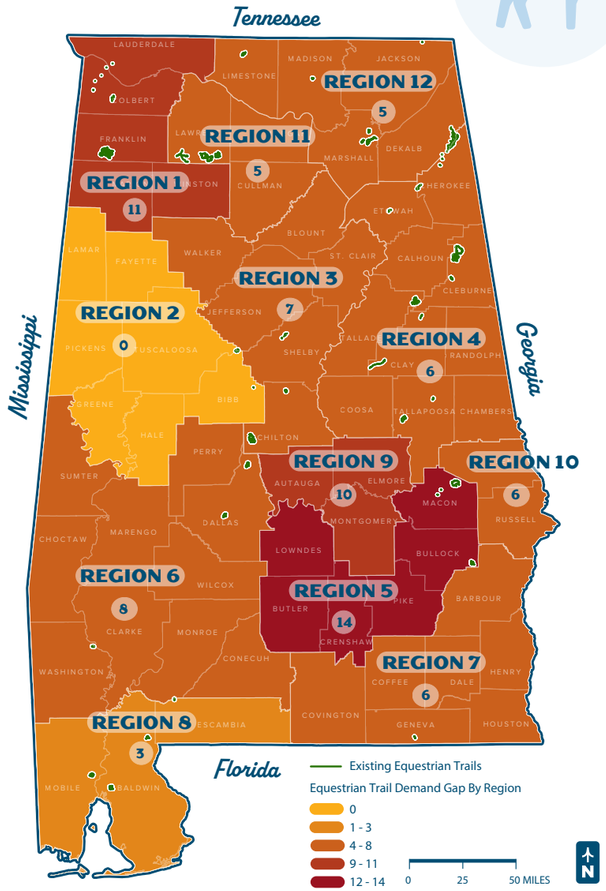
- Explore a state trail loop, connecting long distance trails across the state, with the goal of connecting the Pinhoti Trail in northeast Alabama to the Florida Trail
- Build more trails close to where people live
- Expand hiking trails that allow for more universal access, or trail-adapted wheelchair access
- Provide more Leave-No-Trace and interpretative information so that users appreciate the environment they are in
- Provide more wayfinding signage for trails

Best Practices for Trail Development

- Trail Fundamentals and Trail Management Objectives, US Forest Service
- Sustainable Trail Development: A Guide to Designing and Constructing Native-surface Trails, International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA)

Organizations That Provided Input

- Auburn University
- Alabama State Parks - Trail Crew
- Friends of Turkey Creek Nature Preserve
- Vulcan Trail Association
- Bankhead National Forest
- Wild Alabama
- American Perimeter Trail Conference
- City of Hoover Parks & Recreation
- The Nature Conservancy and Chattahoochee Fall Line Conservation Partnership
- Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham
- City of Montgomery
- Alabama Scenic River Trail
- Pinhoti Outdoor Center
- Alabama Hiking Trail Society
- Pinhoti Experience Foundation
- Alabama Birding Trails
- Alabama RC&D



581

MILES OF EXISTING TRAILS

Regions with the Most Unmet Demand

- Region 1
- Region 8
- Region 9
- Region 5
- Region 3

Other Equestrian Trail Destinations:

Faye Whittemore Farms, Hodges Equestrian Park, Shoal Creek Preserve, Wind Creek State Park, Chapman and Wade Mountains, and TVA lands

User Group

EQUESTRIAN

Top 5 Existing Trail Destinations

01 **National Forests: Bankhead and Talladega National Forest, Heflin, AL**

The Shoal Creek Ranger District has 2 developed campgrounds, a horse camp, 35 miles of horse trails, 70 miles of hiking trails, hunting, fishing, scenic driving, mountains, lakes, streams in forested setting.

02 **Camp McClellan Horse Trails**

Camp McClellan offers equestrians 30 miles of trails and roads among acres of pristine forest. The property includes 50 campsites, RV sites, a 31-stall barn, and a 75' x 150' enclosed arena.

03 **Rock Bridge Canyon Equestrian Park, Hodges, AL**

The park has 50 miles of winding trails through woodlands and canyons. It offers challenging trails for experienced riders and trails for a more leisurely ride or hike.

04 **State Parks: Lake Guntersville, Oak Mountain, and Paul Grist State Parks**

Lake Guntersville offers over 18 miles of equestrian trails. Oak Mountain State Park has 25 miles of equestrian trails and is the state's largest park with many amenities. Paul Grist Park has 23 of trails that are open to multiple trail users.

05 **St. Stephens Historical Park, Stephens, AL**

This privately run historical park has a 70-acre quarry lake, cabins, camping, and over 15 miles of hiking and equestrian trails. St. Stephens Historical Park also offers cabin rentals and RV sites for camping.

Top Needs of this User Group

Note: the following input came from the focus groups:

Policy

- Increase camping options
- Provide more water access for horses
- Improve and increase amount of wayfinding and interpretive information
- Consider equestrian access to the Alabama portion of the Pinhoti Trail (only open to horses in Georgia currently)
- Develop maintenance standards
- Protect equestrian use of existing trails
- Fund/provide more opportunities for equestrian trails
- Promote and provide more readily available information on where equestrian trails are located in the state
- Improve and increase parking access to equestrian trails
- Provide education and information on available grants

#1 Action Item:

Improve existing equestrian trails and better promote them. Begin with performing a full inventory and evaluation of equestrian trails and their amenities. The evaluation would identify needed improvements, engage equestrian user groups, and develop a phased, priority list of projects.

Physical

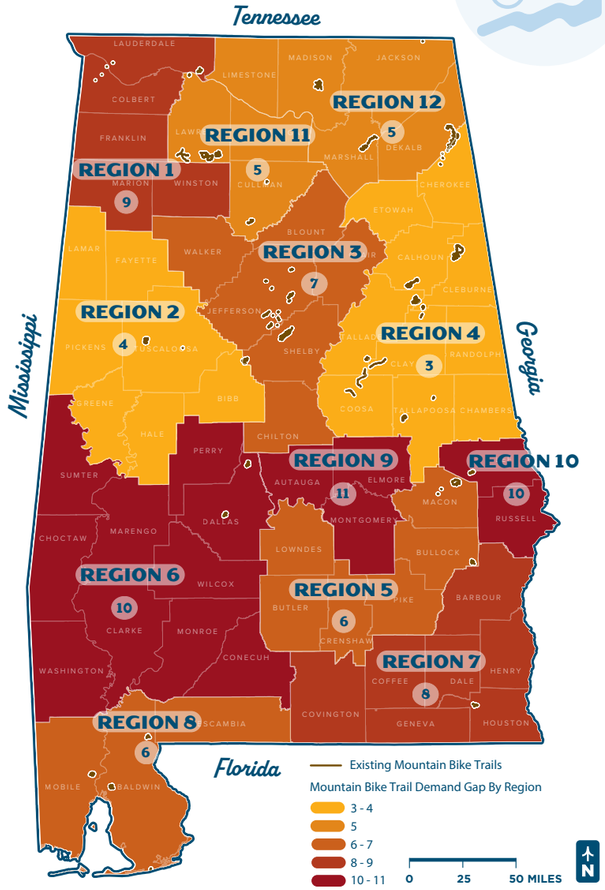
- Increase equestrian trails across the state, including a focus on long distance trails for backcountry packing
- New trails at Cheaha State Park
- Explore opening more trails in National Forests, especially Bankhead National Forest
- Finish ongoing work at St. Stephens Historical Park and Camp McClellan
- Improvements needed at Wade Mountain, Walls of Jericho, and other locations

Best Practices for Trail Development

- Equestrian Design Guidebook for Trails, Trailheads, and Campgrounds, US Forest Service

Organizations That Provided Input

- North Alabama Trails & Recreation (NATR)
- Cleburne County Chamber of Commerce
- Region 5 Trail Riders Association
- Back Country Horseman of America (BCHA) McClellan and Warrior Mountain Chapters
- Bankhead National Forest
- Alabama Horse Council
- City of Decatur
- Visit Tuscaloosa
- Heflin – Cleburne County



667

MILES OF EXISTING TRAILS

Regions with the Most Unmet Demand

- Region 10
- Region 3
- Region 4
- Region 12
- Region 8
- Region 11

Other Mountain Bike Trail Destinations:

Chewacla State Park, Talladega National Forest, Land Trust of North Alabama

User Group

MOUNTAIN BIKE

Top 4 Existing Trail Destinations

01 **Oak Mountain State Park, Pelham, AL**

This park has mountain biking, horseback riding, and hiking, a BMX course, water sports, a wildlife center, over 100 miles of trails that vary in levels that are suitable for all abilities.

02 **Coldwater Mountain, Anniston, AL**

Cold Mountain has 40 miles of trails from beginner level to experienced riders. There are 2 miles of gravel trails the majority of the trails are purpose built single-track with beginner to advanced difficulty,

03 **Ride Birmingham and Red Mountain Park, Birmingham, AL**

Ride Birmingham is a private mountain bike park that has over 18 trails that allow both new riders and experienced riders to enjoy the peaks at their leisure. Red Mountain has over 15 miles of multi-use trails winding through 1,500 acres of woodlands. Red Mountain also has tree houses and a dog park.

04 **Monte Sano State Park, Huntsville, AL**

The park has 34 miles of trails (20 miles of hiking, 14 miles of mountain biking) accommodating all hiking and riding experience levels. Monte Sano State Park also has campground, playgrounds, a planetarium, and more.

Top Needs of this User Group

Note: the following input came from the focus groups:

Policy

- Expand where ebikes are allowed to widen access to more users, like seniors or differently abled cyclists
- Collaboratively promote mountain biking statewide, creating a go-to resource
- Work collaboratively with other groups outside of mountain biking to collectively advocate for funding
- There is limited funding in the state for mountain bikes currently; explore opportunities to expand public funding
- Expand protections for landowners and volunteer groups, including improving upon the recreational use statute and finding ways to insure volunteer trail crews
- Explore partnerships to expand mountain biking on Forever Wild Land Trust land and other state lands
- Provide balance of public trails as free amenities, public trails as revenue sources and private trails as businesses (need to protect free public access for users).

#1 Action Item:

Expand diversity of mountain bike trail types for a variety of users across the state. Begin with performing a full inventory and evaluation of mountain bike trails and their types and identify geographic and trail diversity gaps around state.

Physical

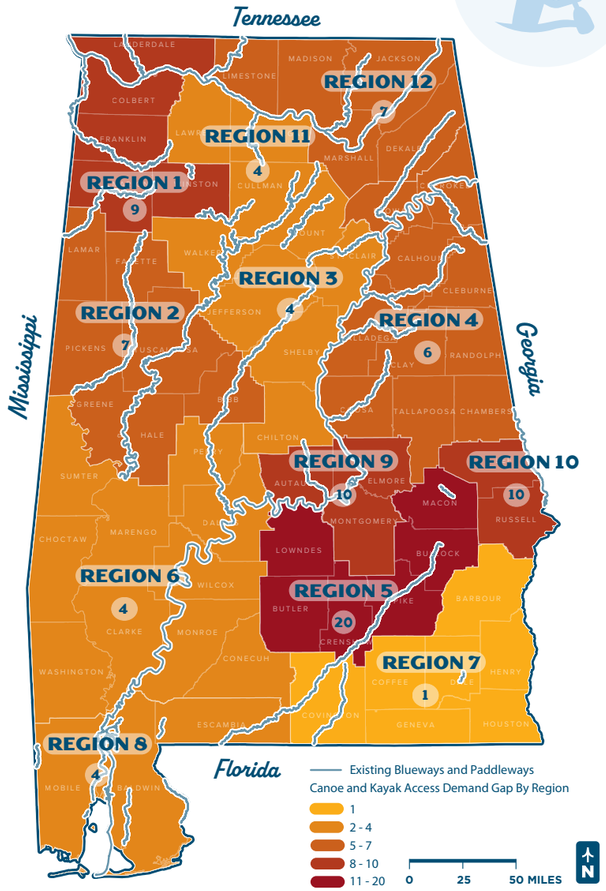
- Develop a greater diversity of trail types, as most are traditional cross country, including:
  - → Gravity trails, with downhill trails that are one directional
  - → A variety of trails with progression levels focused on different abilities
  - → More entry level trails
- Build infrastructure for races, as there are few destinations that can support large national/international mountain biking races that would bring a significant impact to local economies
- Build trailheads, restrooms, and larger parking lots, as many of the more popular places are heavily visited
- Explore opportunities to open more mountain biking in National Forests in Alabama
- Build more trails within communities, not just in natural areas:
  - → Incorporate mountain biking/trails into developments, more developers are beginning to embrace outdoor living as an amenity, and this is a great way to incorporate trails within communities (example being Belcher with Signature Homes in Hoover, AL)

Best Practices for Trail Development

- For models of urban mountain biking networks, look to Bentonville/Oz Trails and Knoxville's Urban Wilderness for how to integrate parks, trails system, neighborhoods—as a major tourist destination and economic driver
- The national standards for mountain biking have been defined by Trail Solutions: IMBA's Guide to Building Sweet Singletrack, International Mountain Biking Association

Organizations That Provided Input

- Cullman County Parks and Recreation
- Bike Link of Hoover
- Oxford Mountain Bike Foundation and Oxford High School Mountain Bike Team
- Huntsville Area Mountain-bike Riders (HAMR)
- City and County of Cullman
- Bankhead National Forest
- City of Tuscaloosa
- River Region Mountain Bike Alliance in Montgomery
- Alabama Cycling Association
- City of Birmingham
- Shelby County
- City of Hoover Parks & Recreation
- Southern Off-Road Bicycle Association (SORBA)
- Cahaba Cycles
- Jacksonville State University
- Spring City Cycling ClubCity of Hoover Parks and Recreation
- Huntsville Bicycle Advisory Committee
- Baldwin County Trailblazers Inc
- Alabama Bicycle Coalition



3,068
MILES OF EXISTING BLUEWAYS

Regions with the Most Unmet Demand

- Region 5
- Region 10
- Region 9
- Region 12
- Region 2
- Region 4

Other Blueway Destinations:

Cypress Creek, Locust Fork, Smith Lake, Sipsey Wilderness, Walker County, Bear Creek

User Group

BLUEWAYS / PADDLE TRAILS

Top 5 Existing Trail Destinations

01 The Tennessee RiverLine

The Tennessee RiverLine is a planned and existing 652-mile system of outdoor recreation experiences on and along the Tennessee River in Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, and Mississippi. This initiative aims to transform the Tennessee River as a quality of life amenity for area residents and an international destination for outdoor recreation experiences, tourism, and economic development.

02 The Alabama Scenic River Trail

This trail is one of the longest continuous river trails in the United States, covering over 600 miles of waterways in Alabama. It is a diverse paddling experience, from serene flatwater to challenging whitewater sections.

03 The Perdido River Trail

The trail is around 19 miles long and has 2 launches and is a great trail for beginner canoeists and kayakers. There are also 6 camping shelters and various spots to pitch tents along the river.

04 The Flint River

The Flint River flows south from Tennessee through Alabama's Madison County to the Tennessee River in Madison County. The 65-mile span is great for beginners and is suitable for floating tubes, canoeing, and kayaking.

05 The Cahaba River

The Cahaba River is 191 Miles and is the longest uninterrupted stretch of river in Alabama. The Cahaba Blueway is a designated "water trail" and mapped information about access to the blueway is available.

Top Needs of this User Group

Note: the following input came from the focus groups:

Policy

- Provide best practices for design, operations, and maintenance of access points
- Develop partnerships to work together to amplify blueway efforts such as with national refuges and TVA
- Provide conservation and educational opportunities and information with blueways
- Develop process and materials for working with landowners to provide water access donations
- Develop standardizations/certifications around blueway development
- Designate Cahaba River a National Wild and Scenic River

Best Practices for Trail Development

- A Guide to Sustainable River Recreation Management Planning, American Rivers
- Logical Lasting Launches: Design Guidance for Canoe and Kayak Launches: National Park Service-Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program
- River Management Society Planning Guide
- NCGrowth's Field Guide to Blueways: Leveraging Natural Assets for Economic Development, NCGrowth SmartUp
- WEDG (Waterfront Edge Design Guidelines): Resilience, Ecology, and Access at the Water's Edge, Waterfront Alliance.
- Amenity Inventory and Gap Analysis Tennessee RiverLine.

Organizations That Provided Input

- Bankhead National Forest, District Ranger
- Friends of the Locust Fork River
- Bankhead National Forest.
- City of Hoover
- Decatur Area Metropolitan Planning Organization
- Alabama Rivers Alliance
- Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area
- Tennessee RiverLine
- North Alabama Trails & Recreation (NATR)
- Cleburne County Chamber / Cleburne County
- Tennessee Valley Authority

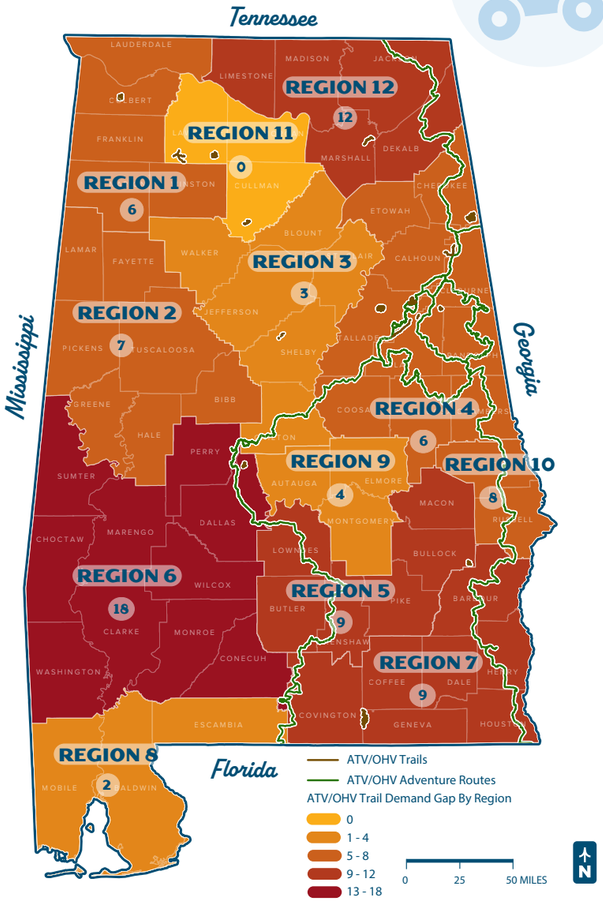
#1 Action Item:

Promote existing blueways and provide funding support for the organizations doing the work such as Alabama Scenic River Trail and Tennessee RiverLine.

Physical

- Build infrastructure to support blueways—a lot of blueways lack basic infrastructure like good put-ins that are easily accessible and have restrooms
- Develop statewide mapping so that more people know where to go and what infrastructure supports the blueway, from outfitters to access
- Build more universally accessible blueway put ins, as very few exist in Alabama
- Work with partners to help expand blueway access in National Forests, by planning, and exploring opportunities where the best access may be, and work with National Forests to build capacity where it is lacking
- Expand wayfinding signage for blueways across the state, one of the biggest opportunities to increase safety and bring visibility to the blueways
- Work with partners like American Rivers and others to remove low-head dams, which can be a danger on blueways, or at minimum sign for users to exit waterways before dams
- Expand the statewide system to have a diversity of experiences including:
  - → Flatwater, swift water, and fishing areas
  - → Allowing for more watercraft outside of motorized boats, which can often be at conflict with non-motorized watercraft, or consider ways to optimize for shared use
  - → First time user experience waterways and access, where users can learn and advance

User Group
OHV/ATV



1,544
MILES OF EXISTING ROUTES

Top 5 Existing Trail Destinations

01 **Stoney Lonesome OHV Park, Bremen, AL**
Stoney Lonesome OHV Park features amenities across 1450+ acres, such as trails for ATVs, Mountain bikes, equestrians, and hikers and full RV hookups. The park is open year-round and is the state's first public OHV park

02 **Minooka Park, Chilton County, AL**
Minooka Park has approximately 22 miles of trail, from intermediate to experienced skills levels, and a loop for beginners that 3/4 of a mile long. This park also has RV campsites that have water, power, and sewage hookups.

03 **Grand River OHV Park, Baldwin County, AL**
This private motorsport park spans 2,000 acres and is between the Gulf shores of Alabama and Pensacola, Florida. Current amenities are being upgraded to include Pavilions, bathhouses, and trail expansion.

04 **Kentuck Trail, Talladega National Forest, AL**
At Kentuck, riders from beginner to Moderate expertise can experience over 23 miles of trails with mixed terrain ranging from smooth surfaces and a gentle grade to steeper grades with rocky terrain.

05 **The Ridge Outdoor Adventure Park, Springville, AL**
The Ridge Outdoor Adventure Park is an off-road riding park with over 35 miles of one-way OHV trails each marked for all range of riders. Ridge outdoor park offers other activities such as hiking, camping, ziplining and more.

Regions with the Most Unmet Demand

- Region 6
- Region 12
- Region 5
- Region 7
- Region 9
- Region 10

Other OHV/ATV Destinations:
Indian Mountain, Bucks Pocket, Lakepoint, Bankhead

Top Needs of this User Group

Note: the following input came from the focus groups:

Policy

- Explore ways to expand insurance options statewide, as there is a lack of insurance available to volunteers and employees for maintenance—Tennessee has stronger insurance opportunities, allowing for more facilities to be insured
- RTP funds will pay for trail construction, but need more funding opportunities to pay for land, liability insurance, maintenance for OHV/ATV trails
- Explore policies that provide for expanded OHV/ATV trail networks in concert with maintenance and conservation strategies to improve the perception of OHV trails and users.

Best Practices for Trail Development

- Designing Sustainable Off-Highway Vehicle Trails, US Forest Service

Organizations That Provided Input

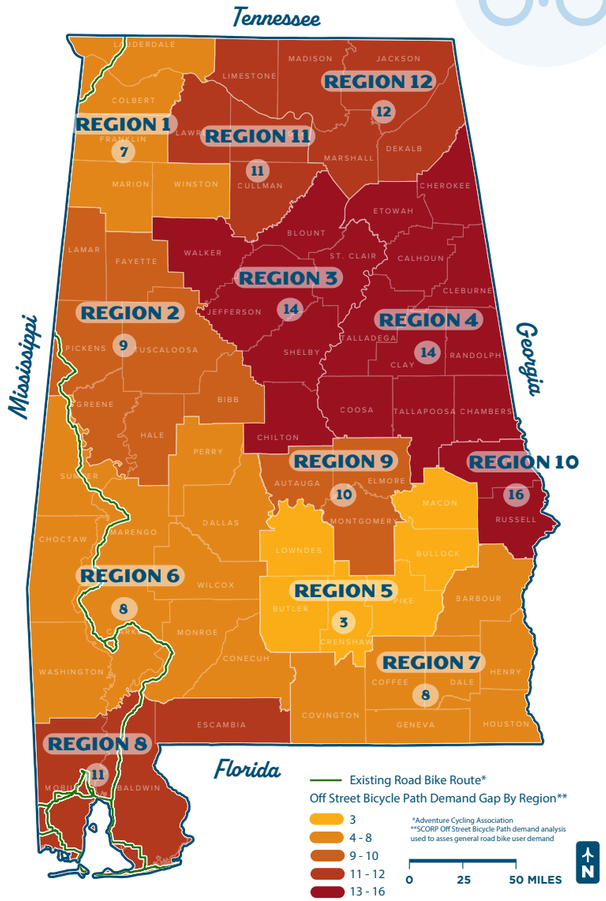
- National Off-Highway Vehicle Conservation Council (NOHVCC)
- Alabama State Parks
- Auburn University
- Cheaha Trail Riders Association
- North Alabama Trails & Recreation (NATR)
- Cleburne County Chamber
- North Alabama Trail Riders
- Fields Land Management Inc
- 8 Acorns
- Bankhead National Forest
- Alabama Trail Commission Advisory Board
- Covington County Economic Development Commission

#1 Action Item:

Conduct forum with state agencies and OHV/ATV groups to discuss challenges and develop strategic plan for expanding and enhancing OHV/ATV opportunities.

Physical

- Develop promotion map of facilities across the state
- Build more miles of trail to attract out of town riders, and include with trails other recreation activities to access for a full package of experiences (visitors needs 25 miles of trail and for a full weekend visitors need 100+ miles of trail)
- Build facilities in regions that are lacking—many northern Alabama trail riders are going to Tennessee because of lack of facilities and southeast Alabama also lacks facilities
- Build facilities designed for beginning levels and youth and engage more youth in safety and education
- Improve current facilities to ensure they are not impacting natural resources (especially near water)
- Build more purpose-built trails specific for OHVs
- Built trail connections between OHV facilities to build longer networks (like from Buck's Pocket to Lake Guntersville State Parks), and use OHV trails as connector trails that serve as a major stem for all trail user types, serving as emergency access for public lands
- State Parks need OHVs to help with enforcement for OHV trails
- Develop provisions for state road crossings of OHV trails



522
MILES OF EXISTING ROAD ROUTES

Regions with the Most Unmet Demand

- Region 10
- Region 4
- Region 3
- Region 12
- Region 11
- Region 8

User Group
ROAD CYCLING

Top 3 Existing Trail Destinations

01 **Chief Ladiga Trail, Anniston, AL**
The Chief Ladiga Trail begins in Anniston, Alabama, and extends eastward for approximately 33 miles, connecting with the Silver Comet Trail in Georgia. This beautiful trail is paved and well-maintained, providing an easy smooth surface suitable for various activities, including walking, running, cycling, and rollerblading.

02 **Gulf State Park (Hugh S Branyon Backcountry Trail), Gulf Shores, AL**
The Hugh S. Branyon Backcountry Trail in Gulf State Park covers approximately 28 miles and winds through various ecosystems, providing opportunities for walking, running, biking, and wildlife viewing. The trail offers a range of trail loops with varying difficulty levels and are designed to be accessible to individuals with varying levels of fitness.

03 **Bankhead National Forest (Gravel Riding) Lawrence County, AL**
Bankhead National Forest has over 180,000 acres of woodlands that provide riding opportunities for both bikers and equestrian riders. There are other activities that can be enjoyed too, such as fishing, swimming, boating and more. For experienced riders and trails for a more leisurely ride or hike.

Top Needs of this User Group

Note: the following input came from the focus groups:

Physical

- A very fast-growing recreation activity, but there are few useful resources showing you where to ride, so stronger promotion and marketing is crucial
- Designate more routes that are good for cyclists, including connections with existing trails, and work with ALDOT to have some of these routes designated—these are projects that can be led by MPOs. Explore U.S. Bicycle Route designation for low-hanging fruit routes.
- Bike-packing is also a growing sport and places like Talladega and Sipsey National Forests are places where routes and knowledge could be expanded, or even bike-packing races or routes could be developed

#1 Action Item:

Work with ALDOT on Statewide Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan to address policies for on-road bicycling and advancement of state on-road bike routes.

Policy

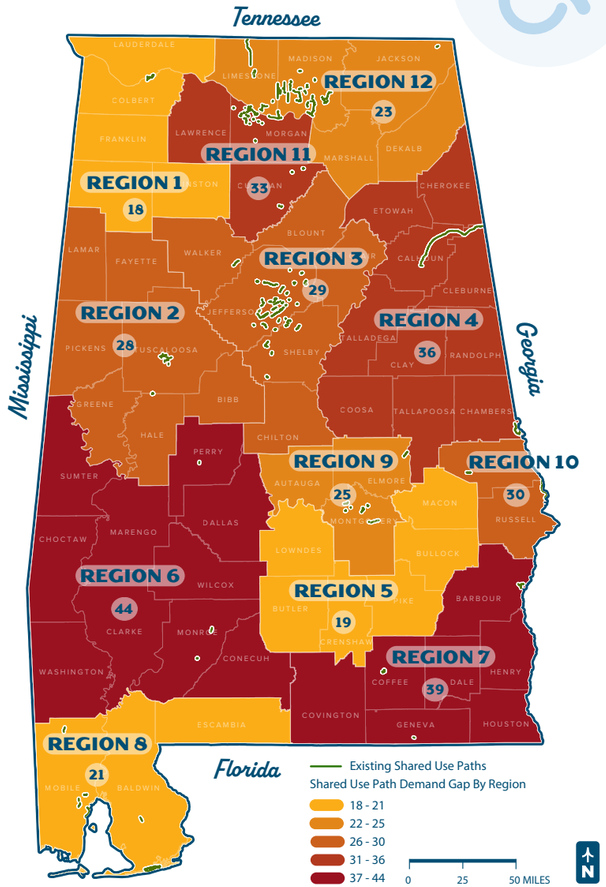
- Education of drivers about bicycle-driver safety
- Incorporate more bicycle lanes and bike infrastructure into future ALDOT projects
- A 3-foot passing of cyclist's law is in place, but amendments reduced its effectiveness and impact, consider strengthening the language to provide more protections

Best Practices for Trail Development

- Best Practices Guide to Developing Bike Routes, Adventure Cycling Association
- Bike-packing Routes: Factors to Consider, Adventure Cycling Association

Organizations That Provided Input

- City and County of Cullman; Cullman Area Chamber
- City of Tuscaloosa
- North Alabama Trails & Recreation (NATR)
- Cleburne County Chamber
- Shoals 3 State Ride
- Muscle Shoals Natural Heritage Area
- Bankhead National Forest
- City of Birmingham
- Visit Cullman
- Opelika Bicycle Advisory Committee
- Birmingham Bicycle Club
- City of Mobile
- Spring City Cycling Club
- City of Hoover Parks and Recreation
- Huntsville Bicycle Advisory Committee
- Baldwin County Trailblazers Inc
- Alabama Bicycle Coalition



348

MILES OF EXISTING TRAILS

Regions with the Most Unmet Demand

- Region 6
- Region 7
- Region 4
- Region 11
- Region 3
- Region 2

Other Trails with Accessibility Features:

Dublin Park, Rickwood Caverns, Oak Mountain, Deerlick Creek on Holt Lake, Ebeneezer Swamp, Beaverdam Swamp, Cheaha State Park, Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge, Tuscaloosa Riverwalk

User Group

ACCESSIBILITY

Top 5 Existing Trail Destinations

01 **Chief Ladiga Trail, Anniston, AL**

This trail begins in Anniston and extends eastward for approximately 33 miles, connecting with the Silver Comet Trail in Georgia. This beautiful trail is paved and well-maintained, providing an easy smooth surface suitable for various activities, including walking, running, cycling, and rollerblading.

02 **James D Martin Wildlife Park, Gadsden, AL**

James D Martin Wildlife Park is a beautiful bird sanctuary. The lakeside 3-mile walking trail and boardwalk system enables visitors to stroll onto the 300-acre lake and explore a sequence of wooded islands located at the mouth of Black Creek. This offers excellent views of the diverse bird life in this rich ecosystem.

03 **Lakeshore Trail (Homewood Shades Creek Greenway), Homewood, AL**

Lakeshore Trail is a paved trail that is 5.1 miles out and back and is great for all levels of experience. This trail is great for hiking, biking and bird watching.

04 **Eastern Shore Trail, Fairhope, AL**

The Eastern Shore Trail is 27 miles of paved sidewalks, elevated boardwalks, and low bridges. Most segments are suitable for walkers and riders of all ages and abilities.

05 **Centennial Trail, Gulf Shores, AL**

Centennial Trail is a 4.7 miles out and back trail and is considered an easy route. This trail is open year-round and is great for walking and hiking.

Top Needs of this User Group

Note: the following input came from the focus groups:

#1 Action Item:

Conduct a pilot accessibility study of a trail in Alabama, engaging persons with disabilities, to identify needed improvements and use this effort to create an Alabama trail accessibility guide that leads the nation.

Policy

- Develop more statewide guidance on best practices for accessible trails, encouraging design inclusion review towards the beginning of design and not at the end, best practices on surfaces and slope, and designing ease of access around trailheads (which is a common barrier to users)
- Promote existing available funding for accessible trails
- Grow “trail prescriptions” or Walk With A Doc” programs
- Use more walk/accessibility audits in communities, like AARP’s Park and/or Walk Audit
- Develop trail “grading” system based on slopes, surface type, and difficulty that provides information to users considering trail use
- Develop standard operational improvements such as communication etiquette when passing for hearing-impaired, and different colored markers for visually impaired
- Develop standard maintenance programs and standards for keeping trails accessible, free of debris, etc.
- Build a spine of connected, accessible trails across the state.
- Conduct a pilot accessibility study of a trail in Alabama, engaging persons with disabilities, to identify needed improvements and use this effort to create an Alabama trail accessibility guide that leads the nation.

Physical

- Develop and promote more public information about where accessible trails exist and what section of that trail is accessible, consider partnering with the Centers for Independent Living or other organizations to spread the work
- Design and build more trails for and invest in more off-road track wheelchairs, like the Alabama State Parks are beginning to invest in
- Build more accessible restrooms on accessible trails and parking accessibility with van access
- Design trail features that respond to all abilities: easy to read trail crossings, signage, non-visual signage, trail descriptions that explain trails challenges, and more seating

Best Practices for Trail Development

- Guide to the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) Accessibility Standards, US Access Board (includes information about trails, trailheads, and river/boating access
- Accessibility Guidebook for Outdoor Recreation and Trails, US Forest Service

Organizations That Provided Input

- Bankhead National Forest
- Disability Rights and Resources Alabama
- Alabama Disability Advocacy Program (ADAP)
- State of Alabama Governor’s Office on Disability
- University of Alabama Adapted Athletics
- Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services
- Lakeshore Foundation
- Alabama Birding Trails and Birdability
- Alabama Trails Foundation
- University of North Alabama DSS office
- Auburn University, Parks and Recreation Management
- Disability Resource Network
- Access For All, LLC
- Calhoun County Area Chamber & Visitors Center
- North Alabama Trails & Recreation
- United Cerebral Palsy of Huntsville
- City of Montgomery Economic and Community Development

Source: Lakeshore Foundation

Conclusion

Sweet Trails Alabama is a unifying vision that will catalyze trail development across the state. The Plan lays the groundwork for establishing a trail network, by expanding upon ongoing efforts across Alabama. The Plan inventoried, knit, and connected all known existing trails and initiatives across the state. The Plan, however, is just a starting point. It will take the commitment and resources from the federal government, state, counties, municipalities, trail groups, private entities, and others to make this plan a reality. It will also take a willingness to come together to achieve the lofty goals that the hundreds of residents, trail groups, and trail users expressed during the process.

Innovative Alabama, Stanford University's Hoover Institution Report, **identified outdoor recreation as one of the main areas of focus for the future economic success** of the state. Sweet Trails Alabama is one of the keys to unlocking that success, just as other states and regions across the country have already done through wildly successful trail initiatives.

Alabama is a spectacular state. Imagine being able to easily and accessibly bike, hike, horseback ride, kayak, or ride OHV/ATV across this great state, from the mountains to the coast, through big cities and small towns, through natural and human history, from the past to the future. Alabama is ready for more trails.

Let's get moving!

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Sweet Trails USA

EST. 2023

ALABAMA

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