

**State of Vermont****Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation**

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Hello All,

As the days begin to lengthen and our minds turn towards the summer season ahead, we wanted to take a moment to provide an update on where things stand with FPR's management of Hamilton Falls.

It has become clear that the increase seen in outdoor recreation over the last two years is here to stay. Nationwide, the number of people recreating outdoors has reached unprecedented levels and management agencies are working hard to accommodate these new levels of use while still ensuring natural resources are protected and site character is maintained. We expect another busy summer at Hamilton Falls, and all the swimming holes managed by FPR around the state and are gearing up to be ready.

Read on for a recap of what was accomplished last summer, our short-term plans for this summer and some good news on the status of future planning efforts! As always, please reach out if you have any questions or comments.

Best,

Brian, Tim &amp; Hannah

**Summer 2021 Recap**

- A Recreation Ranger was hired for the first time at Hamilton Falls. While on site, the Ranger was largely successful in curtailing some of the most unwelcome and damaging behavior. This was the first time FPR has hired someone specifically to be present at a remote, water-based site.
- Trail counters were installed to monitor use at various locations around the falls. This effort is ongoing and the results help inform management decisions and will aid in future planning. Average daily traffic from July – September 2021 was 95 visitors per day for the lower pool and 31 visitors per day for the upper pool (likely some overlap where individuals visited both the upper and lower pools). Of those visitors, 53 per day likely accessed Hamilton Falls from the state park. We hope this reflects our efforts to promote walking access from the park versus driving in.
- In addition to the trail counters, the Recreation Ranger also administered 124 visitor use surveys. The survey results provide insight on visitor demographics, patterns of use and visitor satisfaction. The results will be used in long-range planning.
- A significant effort was made to curtail online information and radio ads leading visitors to access the site via West Windham Road. Survey results from those who did access the falls via West Windham Road show that only 35% of them learned about the site online. The majority learned of it through word of mouth or local area knowledge.
- Two sensitive and highly erodible areas were closed with rope and educational signage (the “goat path” from top to bottom of the falls along the edge as well as the area directly below Switch Road near the

staircase). While not 100% effective, these closures significantly reduced traffic in those areas.

- Additional signage was installed clarifying the designated parking area and creating ‘emergency vehicle only’ areas. A sign detailing the history of the Switch Road was also installed as were more permanent signs highlighting the dangers around the falls.
- We collaborated with other land management organizations across the state to share notes about effective “swimming hole steward” job duties and management approaches. This collaboration has helped us learn about the effectiveness of other possible management strategies, it has also helped us put the trends in visitor use that we are observing at Hamilton Falls in context.

### **Summer 2022 Short term plans**

- Funding has been secured to hire a Recreation Ranger again, and the hiring process has begun. The tight labor market has presented some challenges, and recruitment efforts are ongoing. We hope to have a Ranger onboarded and ready to introduce to you by mid May.
- We will continue monitoring levels of use with the trail counters deployed in summer of 2021.
- The Recreation Ranger will continue administering visitor use surveys.
- The situation with human waste will be monitored, if it becomes a persistent problem a temporary portable toilet may be installed to protect water quality and human health.
- A temporary kiosk is in the final stages of development. We hope to have it installed this season.
- We will continue to maintain the modest public parking provided between the two designated parking signs on FPR land.
- We continue to engage with the Vermont River Conservancy, the US Forest Service and other local organizations in a collaborative manner to develop solutions and learn from each other in managing a variety of similar water access sites throughout the State.
- We will continue our efforts to address inaccurate web and radio information about Hamilton Falls.

### **Long Term Planning Efforts**

- The new long-range management plan (LRMP) for Jamaica State Park is closer to completion, but not ready for public comment. To ensure the issues at Hamilton falls are addressed sooner rather than later, the decision has been made to begin the master planning process for HFNA this summer. These planning efforts will continue in parallel.
- The Master Plan, focused on the Falls area, will assess current site conditions, public and local concerns, develop solutions, and provide preliminary designs for improvements.
- Through a competitive process, we applied for funds to support the Master Planning process. We were successful and will contract a firm to lead the process. The process of selecting a firm to complete this work is anticipated to begin within the next few months. We are discussing how to best select a firm that supports both the public interest and the Hamilton Falls community.
- Throughout the master planning process there will be opportunities for public input and the Department will communicate those opportunities to the community.
- FPR’s goal is to have solutions outlined with the Master Plan and be ready for fund sourcing and implementation for calendar year 2023.