

ATC Approval of Proposed Management Actions

Issue: ATC approval of local management plans; changes in trail club maintenance assignments; and proposals for overnight facilities, bridges, side trails and timber harvest operations.

Background: In the 1980s and 1990s, ATC adopted policies addressing a range of projects (overnight facilities, bridges, side trails, timber harvest operations) that may be proposed by Clubs or other local partners, as well as adoption of local management plans and changes in club trail maintenance assignments. These policies were developed within the framework of the A.T. Cooperative Management System (CMS), as defined in the 1981 A.T. *Comprehensive Plan*. Relevant characteristics of cooperative management include:

- partnerships exist between local trail clubs and agencies;
- there is a strong volunteer role;
- management decisions are made by mutual agreement of the cooperating partners whenever possible;
- management is decentralized to the extent possible;
- ATC is responsible for assuring that the AT is satisfactorily managed and serves in a back-up capacity to trail clubs.

Prior to its 2005 reorganization, ATC has fulfilled its “guarantor” role, as described in the last item, by requiring the Board of Managers or Regional Vice Chair to approve final proposals under the six policies noted above. In 2006, the board adopted minor changes to the relevant policies to reflect the new organizational structure and avoid delays in approving proposals. Since the three regional vice chairs had been eliminated in the reorganization, the Regional Partnership Committees (RPCs) were added to the process to provide a regional perspective and ensure volunteer involvement in the review. The responsibility for ~~issuing~~ issuing approvals on behalf of ATC was shifted to the chair of the Stewardship Council.

The Stewardship Council discussed this issue at its May 2008 meeting and shared a proposal with clubs and RPCs soon after. After receiving early feedback from some clubs, the proposed process has been revised to the form described below.

~~Having two full years of experience under the new structure to inform our thinking,~~ The Stewardship Council is proposing two, somewhat independent, changes to the existing processes:

1. Delegate *most* ATC approvals from the Stewardship Council chair to the Regional Director; and
2. Add a new step that will provide the RPC with an opportunity to provide comments ~~Initiate review by the RPC~~ earlier in the process, while retaining RPC review and approval of the final proposal.

The process in place prior to 2006, the current process and proposed changes are shown diagrammatically in Attachment A.

These changes will achieve several goals:

- increase the efficiency and timeliness of ATC approvals;
- move ATC’s decision-making to the regional level;

- actively involve local volunteers early in the decision-making process;
- ensure that the three partners of the Cooperative Management System – clubs (through the RPC), ATC (through the regional office) and agencies (through the appropriate agency official) – concur before management actions are taken.

These goals support the direction established in the A.T. *Comprehensive Plan*: there will be a strong volunteer role (through the RPCs, which represent trail clubs in the region), the objective will be consensus among the partners (clubs, agency, ATC), decision-making will be decentralized, and ATC will fulfill its “guarantor” role. Further, ATC’s 2003 strategic plan direction is also supported by separating policy (handled by the Board of Directors and Stewardship Council) from management and moving management decision-making to the regional level.

More detailed explanations of the two proposed changes follow.

Delegation of ATC Approval to Regional Director: Since ATC reorganized in 2005, members of the Board of Directors and Stewardship Council are not involved in day-to-day management of the trail to the extent the members of Board of Managers had been. ATC’s strategic plan envisioned that local A.T. management decisions, within existing policy, would fall to the regional level. Regional staff are charged with seeking advice from local A.T. managers, both volunteers and agency partners, to make fair, effective and appropriate decisions. In most cases, the knowledge and experience on regional issues and local trail projects lie within the volunteer base and staff at the regional level. Consequently, the Regional Director is in the best position to engage local volunteers, encourage dialogue, and make timely decisions on behalf of ATC.

With more decisions now made at a regional level, there is a need to maintain consistency among the regions. To that end, the Regional Directors will be encouraged to consult with their colleagues in the other regions, as well as ATC headquarters staff, agency partners, and volunteers (including members of the Stewardship Council).

It is also possible, for any number of reasons, that a Regional Director may not be comfortable making a particular decision. In that instance, the director can request that the decision be made at a higher level. The steps up the chain would be, in order: Director of Conservation, Chief Operating Officer, Executive Director, Stewardship Council and Board of Directors.

Likewise, a trail club or other partner may be dissatisfied with a Regional Director’s decision. In that case, the partner may request that the decision be reviewed at a higher level. The levels of review are those noted above. However, it is anticipated that the strength of our volunteer-based and regional staff structure will result in consensus among the partners at the local level in the vast majority of situations.

Early Involvement by RPC: When minor approval process changes were made in 2006, Regional Partnership Committees were incorporated into the new process. The intent was to ensure that a regional, volunteer perspective was included in the review and approval of project proposals and local management plans. In practice, the RPC has generally become involved late in the approval process, following extensive agency and ATC staff review and comment.

The proposed change would add a step to the process to involve the RPC at an earlier stage. The intent is to increase the benefits of ~~getting~~ feedback from trail club colleagues when it is easier to incorporate changes based on that feedback. The purpose of this initial review is to provide feedback on the plan or proposal. Following additional work on the proposal and review and comment by ATC and agency staff, the RPC would conduct a final review and approve the proposal before it receives final approval from ATC and is implemented. ~~is may change the RPC role from “review and approval” to “peer review.” RPC and club feedback on the potential benefits and drawbacks of this proposed change will be most valuable.~~

~~Whether or not the timing of RPC involvement is changed, the RPCs will continue to play a role in all instances, ensuring club volunteer involvement in the approval process. As noted earlier, there will be close collaboration among the RPC, agencies, and ATC staff, with the goal of reaching consensus.~~

Policies affected: The six policies described below are affected by this proposal.

1. Trail Reassignment: Trail club maintenance assignments have traditionally been made by the ATC board. There are two circumstances where maintenance assignments can change. The first is voluntary and occurs when trail clubs agree to a change in maintenance assignments. This process can be relatively simple and the decision can be made at the regional level. The affected clubs and Regional Director can work out any changes in trail assignments within a region through the RPC.

The policy also addresses involuntary reassignments. This is a very significant issue related to a club's inability or unwillingness to meet its trail maintenance and management responsibilities. It has only occurred once in the last 25 years or so, and then only after a long period when the club's maintenance was clearly substandard and following a long process that focused on trying to build the club's capacity. In those rare cases where the RPC or Regional Director feel that all reasonable efforts to help a club meet its management responsibilities have not borne fruit, one or both may request that the ATC Board of Directors Chair appoint a special committee of volunteers to evaluate the situation and make a recommendation to the Stewardship Council. The council will review the committee's recommendation, develop its own recommendation, and forward both recommendations and supporting information to the Board of Directors for a decision.

2. Local Management Plan Approvals: Local management plans are the mechanism that ATC uses to fulfill its obligations under Memoranda of Understanding with federal agencies to ensure that the A.T. is managed in accordance with agency policy and that ATC policy has been considered. Drafts are developed by clubs in cooperation with ATC regional staff. There is an extensive staff review that includes both ATC regional and Harpers Ferry staff, ATPO and (where national forest lands are involved) the USFS. The extensive staff involvement in reviewing a draft is essential to ensure that all the necessary requirements are met, so this aspect of the process should not be changed.

The proposed changes would involve the RPCs in the process at an early stage to provide expert “peer review” and advice before the draft plan is at or near its final form. Final ATC approval of

the plan would be delegated to the Regional Director, following review and approval of the plan by the RPC.

3. Shelters and Overnight Facilities: Here again, the RPCs would be involved early to provide peer review and feedback of draft proposals for shelters and other overnight facilities. The RPC would use guidance in the club's local management plan, agency policy and ATC policy and guidance for overnight facilities in its review. ATC regional staff and perhaps the Regional Director will be involved in these early stages as well. Before approving a proposal, the Regional Director will be responsible for ensuring that all of the necessary agency and RPC approvals have been received, permits are in place, and the ATC shelter design guidance has been followed.

4. Side Trails: Proposals for new hiking trails that connect to the A.T. would also go to the RPC for peer review and feedback. The RPC would review the proposal using the criteria in ATC's side and connecting trail policy and suggest changes to conform to the criteria, if necessary. ATC approval would be delegated to the Regional Director, following approval by the RPC.

ATC's side and connecting trail policy also addresses the formal designation of side and connecting trails as part of the National Trails System. While there has never been a formal designation related to the A.T., it would involve an ATC recommendation to either the Secretary of Interior or Secretary of Agriculture. In this situation, the RPC would review the proposal as described above and forward its recommendation to the Stewardship Council. The council would review the recommendation and input from the Regional Director and develop a recommendation to the appropriate secretary.

5. Bridges: This policy has problems centered on the feasibility of securing engineering review and approval, and it is likely to be scrutinized in the future. Nonetheless, there is a current need to ensure that bridges are well-designed and safe, and current policy requires all bridges over 35 feet long be approved by ATC. This responsibility would be delegated to the Regional Director. Bridge design requires professional expertise and should be an agency responsibility, so ATC approval would be contingent on the bridge design having been approved by the appropriate agency and all necessary permits being in place.

6. Timber Management: In 1982, ATC adopted a policy that specifies timber management guidelines for NPS corridor lands. That policy requires extensive review at a regional and Board of Managers level. It is worth noting that this policy predates the local management planning process. Rather than address timber management proposals as separate actions, they should be incorporated into the local management plan and be reviewed under the LMP review process described above. Approvals aside, this policy is likely to receive additional scrutiny to determine if timber harvesting is appropriate on NPS corridor lands under any circumstances.

Summary:

Trail reassignment – voluntary: Review/approval by RPC, ATC approval by Regional Director
 Trail reassignment – involuntary: Review by special committee, decision by Board of Directors
 Local management plans: Review/approval by RPC, ATC approval by Regional Director
 Shelters and overnight facilities: Review/approval by RPC, ATC approval by Regional Director
 Side trails: Review/approval by RPC, ATC approval by Regional Director

Side trails – NTS designations: Review by RPC, ATC recommendation by Stewardship Council
Bridges – ATC approval by Regional Director

| Timber harvesting – Reviewed during development of Local Management Plan~~MP~~

| **RPC/Club Action:** Review and comment. Feedback on the desirability of adding the additional step to provide early RPC review and comment ~~timing and role of RPCs in the approval process~~ will be particularly helpful. Consideration of how RPCs will approach these reviews to ensure proposals and plans can be reviewed in a timely fashion would be worthwhile as well. Based on the feedback received, specific amendments to the affected policies will be developed for review by the Stewardship Council at its fall meeting.