

New mountain bike trails help Oregon find flow, tourism



Zach Urness, Statesman Journal 9:33 p.m. PDT June 19, 2014



(Photo: Photo courtesy of IMBA)

Oregon's newest system of mountain bike trails is set to open this weekend southwest of Corvallis, and perhaps as much as anything, the inauguration demonstrates how far the sport has come.

[Alsea Falls Trails System \(/story/travel/outdoors/2014/06/18/ride-woods/10802413/\)](/story/travel/outdoors/2014/06/18/ride-woods/10802413/) showcases six new miles trail — with 10 to 12 miles planned — including stretches of specially designed "flow trails" that allow riders to swoop, drop and jump down the mountain in an experience best described as a roller coaster in the forest.

The project, which will cost \$200,000 to \$240,000 to complete, is courtesy of the Salem Bureau of Land Management, which during the past half-decade has discovered one key to connecting with recreation users of the next generation — especially in the Willamette Valley — is building high-quality mountain biking trails.

Related story: [New mountain bike trails brings fun, flow to Alsea Falls \(/story/travel/outdoors/2014/06/18/ride-woods/10802413/\)](/story/travel/outdoors/2014/06/18/ride-woods/10802413/)

With the number of Oregonians hunting and fishing at their [lowest levels in 30 years \(/story/news/2014/06/05/hunting-fishing-license-fees-need-go-odfw-says/10044673/\)](/story/news/2014/06/05/hunting-fishing-license-fees-need-go-odfw-says/10044673/) — and many campgrounds sitting empty over half the year — mountain biking is making a gradual ascent from afterthought to priority for state and federal agencies.

"Mountain biking is a growth area," said Adam Milnor, outdoor recreation planner for Salem BLM. "When you look at the surveys and gauge the level of interest, especially in metro areas like Portland, Salem, Corvallis and Eugene, mountain biking is right at the top.

"And the response to developing high quality trails has been tremendous."

That tremendous response can be measured in the number of riders, tourism dollars and volunteerism from community-based biking groups.

Sandy Ridge

A watershed moment for how federal agencies in Oregon view mountain biking might be the BLM's creation of [Sandy Ridge Trail \(http://www.blm.gov/or/resources/recreation/site_info.php?siteid=395\)](http://www.blm.gov/or/resources/recreation/site_info.php?siteid=395) system in 2009.

Salem BLM bought 3,000 acres of old timber land between Portland and Mount Hood to create the largest trail system built specifically for mountain bikes on federal land in the United States.

The response has been overwhelming. The project, which cost \$1.6 million, has doubled its attendance every year and is expected to lure 120,000 visits in 2014.

"People have asked, 'Why mountain biking? Why build these flow trails?' " Milnor said. "And the truth is that we're just responding to what we see. The mountain bike community is coming out in numbers, and the lack of high-quality trails is a void we're trying to help fill."

Tourism and business

While the popularity of mountain biking has skyrocketed in Oregon, so has the state's bicycle-based tourism.

A 2012 [Travel Oregon survey \(http://www.deanrunyan.com/doc_library/bicycletravel.pdf\)](http://www.deanrunyan.com/doc_library/bicycletravel.pdf) found bicycle travel accounts for \$400 million of Oregon's annual \$9 billion tourism industry.

Salem resident and Linfield College professor Jeff McNamee [published a study \(http://www.cyclingnews.com/news/mountain-bike-races-bring-big-bucks-to-local-economies\)](http://www.cyclingnews.com/news/mountain-bike-races-bring-big-bucks-to-local-economies) that looked more closely at mountain biking — in particular, three mountain bike events in Bend and Oakridge in 2012.

He found that three events — the High Cascades 100 Endurance Mountain Bike Race, Mountain Bike Oregon and the USA Cycling Marathon Mountain Bike National Championships — brought in 1,727 participants from 28 states, along with Canada, Austria, Australia and New Zealand. Sixty-five percent of the visitors were from outside Oregon.

The three-day Mountain Bike Oregon event was held in Oakridge, a small former logging town in the Central Cascades that built one of state's best systems. The event brought in 725 people, creating 26 jobs and resulting in \$1.6 million in sales for the Oakridge economy.

"Mountain biking is taking off in Oregon and across the world, so it makes sense that communities are beginning to see the value of mountain biking events," McNamee said.

The potential for money has grown so fast that Mount Bachelor Ski Area got into the game this spring, installing [chairlift-served mountain bike park](http://story/travel/outdoors/2014/04/10/bachelor-on-a-mountain-bike-its-a-thrill/7579743/) with flow trails down the mountain. A single day bike park ticket currently goes for \$34.

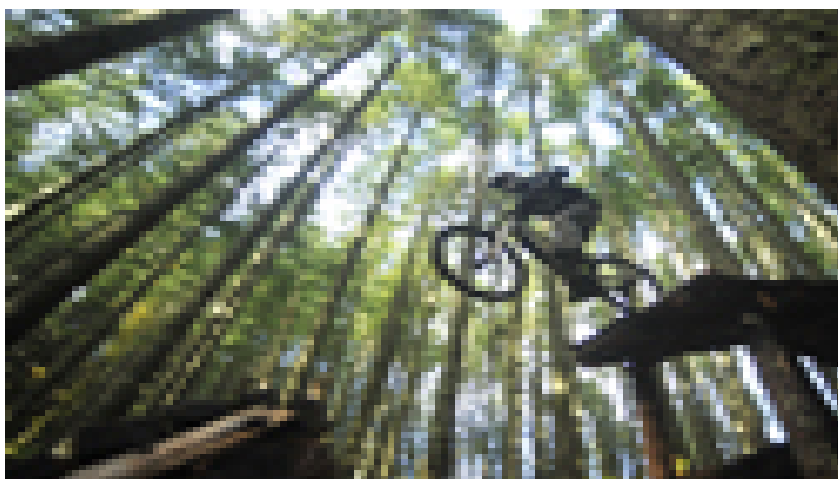


In this Sept. 4, 2013 photo, Tom Lomax rides around one of the wide banked turns on the Lava Flow Trail at the new Mount Bachelor downhill bike park in Bend.
(Photo: Joe Kline / The Bulletin)

Grassroots support

If the numbers of mountain bikers flooding into trail systems and the economic impact of tourism isn't enough, there is also this: in many cases, mountain bikers are the ones volunteering to build the trails.

The movement to build trails has been a bottom-up phenomenon. Local groups, in many cases, have taken matters into their own hands to build places like [Black Rock Mountain Bike Area](http://archive.statesmanjournal.com/VideoNetwork/49613105001/Black-Rock-Shuttle-Day) (<http://archive.statesmanjournal.com/VideoNetwork/49613105001/Black-Rock-Shuttle-Day>) west of Salem.



Muddy. Exhilarating. Fast-paced. That describes the Black Rock Shuttle Day.

"I've been building for 15 years now, and in the beginning it was a pretty rag-tag operation," said Eric Emerson, advocacy and trail coordinator of Corvallis-based group [Team Dirt](http://teamdirt.org/) (<http://teamdirt.org/>). "I learned a lot working on Black Rock and even went to trail building school with IMBA (International Mountain Bicycling Association), to the point that right now, we're the experts on how to build these trails."

Emerson said federal agencies have been willing to build more mountain bike trails in large part because they can count on volunteers for building and maintenance.

"Right now doing the volunteer work is kind of the buy-in," Emerson said. "You have to be able to say, 'These are our numbers. This is what we bring to the table.' "

That's exactly what happened at Alsea Falls. Viewed as a rarely visited, under-performing recreation site, Salem BLM partnered with Team Dirt to revitalize the site's trail system.

The group put in 1,700 hours of volunteer work. Since BLM typically pays \$22.14 per hour for trail construction, that volunteer work brings a savings of \$37,500.

In an era of shrinking federal budgets, that free labor is no small thing, said Rich Hatfield, BLM field manager for the Marys Peak Resource Area.

"I've been just blown away by the amount of volunteer interest," Hatfield said. "This user group is so hungry for new opportunities that they'll not only show up with 30 to 40 people for monthly work parties, but you'll see them out there working on the weekends too. I'm stretched to think of another situation where you have that kind of support.

"As a federal land manager, with limited resources that you don't want to spend on a project that won't get used, that support goes a long way. We're excited to see where it goes next."



Home to flow trails and single track southwest of Corvallis, the Alsea Falls Trails System offers riders six miles of mountain bike routes. Zach Urness / Statesman Journal

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Oregon mountain bike 'flow' trail systems

Sandy Ridge: East of Portland off Highway 36

Black Rock: West of Falls City in the Coast Range

Alsea Falls: Southwest of Corvallis

Oakridge: East of Eugene

Post Canyon: Hood River

Mount Bachelor: Central Oregon

By the numbers

120,000: Number of expected visitors to Sandy Ridge Trail (http://www.blm.gov/or/resources/recreation/site_info.php?siteid=395) in 2014

\$400 million: Amount of bicycle travel brought 2012 Oregon tourism industry

1,700: Number of volunteer work hours given to Alsea Falls Trails System (</story/travel/outdoors/2014/06/18/ride-woods/10802413/>), saving \$37,500

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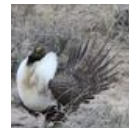


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