

Del Norte Trail Alliance clears the way for region's first bike trail through Smith River Recreational Area

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The Del Norte Trail Alliance has rallied volunteers the past 2 1/2 years to help the Six Rivers National Forest maintain their trails.

Last weekend, the group refocused their efforts to start clearing the way for an 11-mile mountain bike trail.

"It will be the first mountain bike trail built on National Forest land in Smith River Recreational Area," said Joe Gillespie, president of the Del Norte Trail Alliance.

"This will be a great opportunity for Del Norte County to show its support for mountain biking as part of its recreation infrastructure," he added. "If the community comes forward and supports the project, it has the greater potential for us to win new mountain bike trails on national forest but also in our state and national parks."

Gillespie started the Alliance to build mountain bike trails in Del Norte County and build a bike park in Crescent City. Their proposal made it into one of the final three designs for the Master Plan for Beach Front Park currently being developed by the city.

Gillespie worked with District Ranger Jeff Marszal to get the Smith River National Recreation Area (SRNRA) project approved, dubbed the Hurdygurdy Mountainbike Bike Trail.

The bike path will be built partly along existing old logging roads through the SRNRA, starting up Haden Gulch working its way uphill before dropping down a challenging ridge ride, then travel 2.3 miles back to the Big Flat Campground.

Before the volunteers began clearing the trail path and delineating the course, the Del Norte Trail Alliance had to secure funding to proceed to phase two — paying for contractor Trail Labs from Mt. Shasta to design the course. To pay for the contractor, Gillespie said the Alliance kicked off the drive chipping in \$5,000 of its own, raised nearly another \$7,500 in an online fundraising campaign, and got a matching \$10,000 grant from Coast Central Credit Union, which it gave to the Alliance's fiscal partner Redwoods Parks Conservancy.

Then, Forest Service Specialists will be brought in to walk the route and develop an assessment for an National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) study.

Once the NEPA is approved, Gillespie said they can start building the trail.

"There are potentially 200 mountain bikers in the community," Gillespie estimated. "Mountain bike trails also draw people from all over the region to try the trails — the Rogue Valley, Humboldt County and as far as San Francisco — just to ride trails on the north coast. Many premier trails are frozen out during the winter. Mountain bikers throughout California would like to come up to Humboldt, Del Norte and Curry counties throughout our season."

But to get to the building phase, the Alliance will need deep pockets to fund the project. Gillespie figures the cost to develop the trail could be between \$20,000 to \$25,000 per mile.

"Depending on the funding we get, to accomplish the build and hire a contractor, we're looking at \$200,000 to start," Gillespie said.

He said potential funds exist from the Forest Service Region 5 Office or maybe Prop. 68 funding, which the California State Coastal Conservancy pays to create parks, enhancing river parkways or protecting coastal forests and wetlands.

"If everything went incredibly well, we could open a year from this fall. But, realistically, it probably would not debut until the fall of 2022," Gillespie said.

In the meantime, he invites volunteers to join them this Saturday, Oct. 31 at 10 a.m. to help clear more of the Hurdygurdy trail. While tools will be provided, Gillespie is especially looking for anyone with their own chainsaws. Meet the group 2.3 miles up French Hill Road from the South Fork Road. For more information, contact Gillespie at (707) 954-1641 or go to the Del Norte Trail Alliance Facebook page.

