



**SWEET**  
*Alabama* Trails



# STATEWIDE TRAILS PLAN

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DECEMBER 2024

# Contents

01. The Plan	1
02. Why This Plan and Why Now	2
03. Vision and Goals	3
04. The Process	4
05. Engagement Summary	5
06. Existing Conditions	6
07. The Recommended Statewide Trails Network	8
08. Statewide Trail Network Map	9
09. The Action	10



# Welcome to Sweet Trails Alabama

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



## 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.

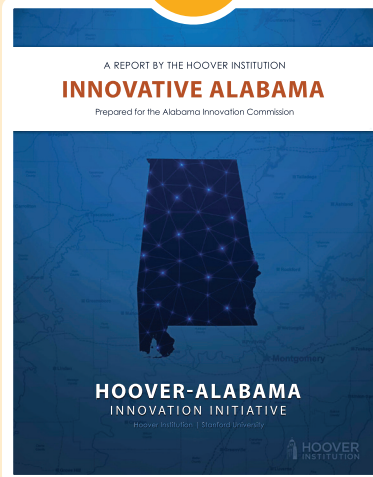
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## WHY THIS PLAN AND WHY NOW?

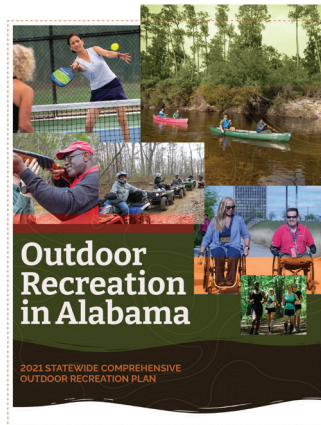
This Plan largely stemmed from the work of the Hoover Institution in their Innovative Alabama report to the Alabama Innovation Commission in which one of the main takeaways and recommendations is for the State to expand its outdoor recreation industry, enhancing the state's

attractiveness to high-skilled workers and yielding substantial returns for both rural and urban communities. Trails are a critical, desired, and unmet need in Alabama outdoor recreation that are needed to keep Alabama competitive.



### INNOVATIVE 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

## VISION AND GOALS

### 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.



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

## GOALS



### Funding

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



### 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.



### 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.



### Connectivity

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



### Conservation and Stewardship

Promote conservation and stewardship of natural and cultural resources.



### Promotion

Enhance public awareness of (and engagement in) trails.



### Partnerships

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

## 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 - March 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 2024 - August 2024

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



### PLAN FINALIZED!

Summer/Fall 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.

## 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:



### PUBLIC INPUT Oct 2023 - May 2024

1,501

citizens of Alabama took the survey

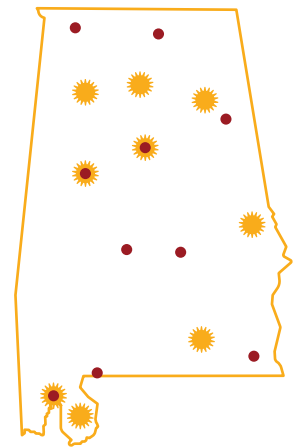


### PUBLIC AWARENESS

- \* Over **1,200** 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



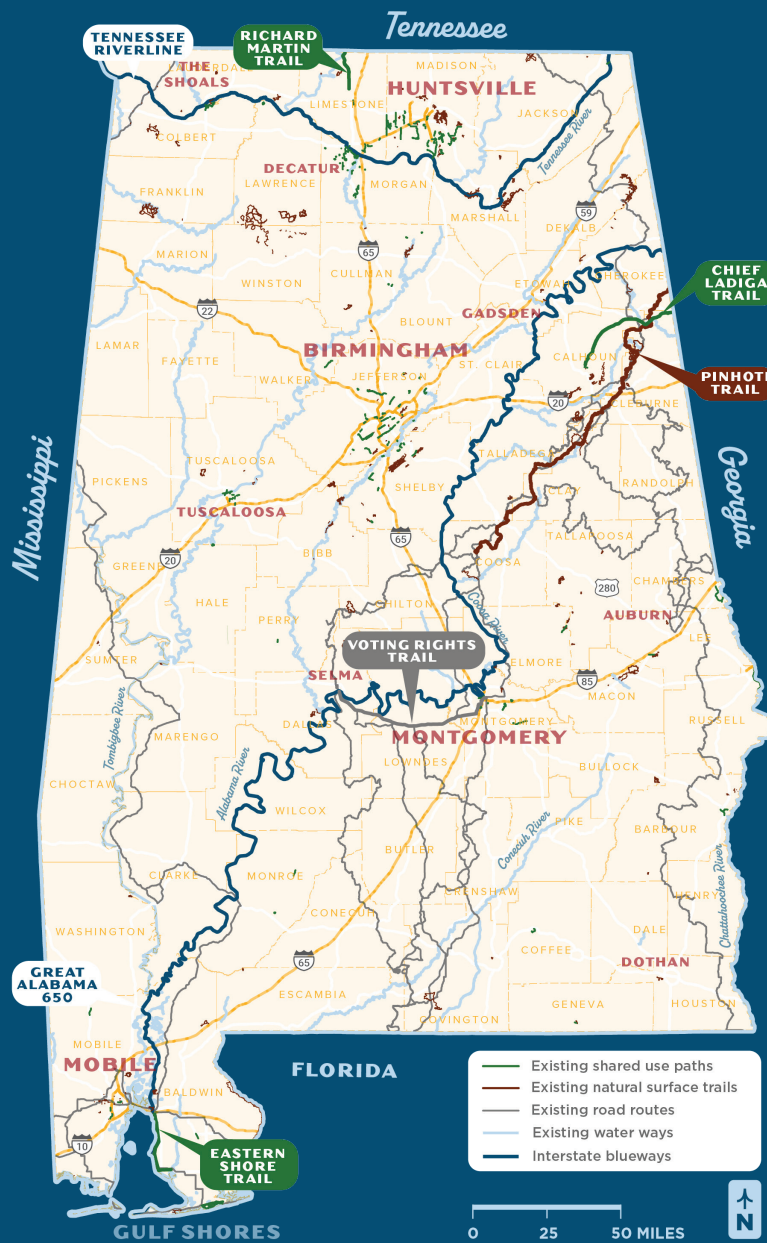
Stakeholder Meetings  
 Tour of Alabama

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



## EXISTING CONDITIONS

The project team conducted an extensive analysis of existing conditions, gathered from existing plans, regional stakeholder and trail user group meetings, and GIS data collection/analysis. An organized single GIS database of existing and planned trails for Alabama was developed. This laid the groundwork for understanding Alabama's trail resources, opportunities, and challenges.

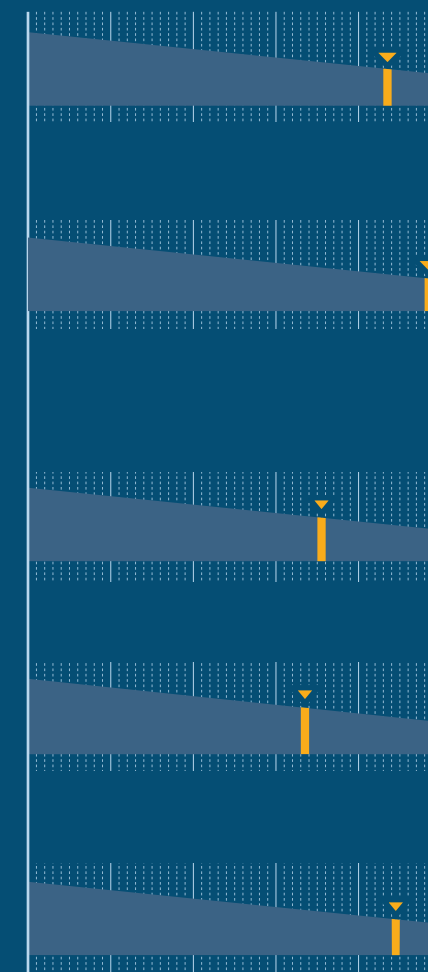


## State Comparisons

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:

1ST → 50TH



**44<sup>TH</sup>** in bike friendly state ranking<sup>1</sup>



**2<sup>ND</sup>** most dangerous for pedestrian commuters and **2<sup>ND</sup>** most dangerous for bicycle commuters (2<sup>nd</sup> highest rates per 10,000 commuters)<sup>2</sup>



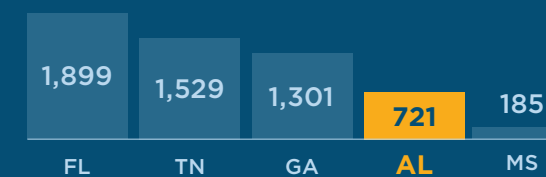
**36<sup>TH</sup>** in total trail miles<sup>3</sup>



**34<sup>TH</sup>** in country in mileage of trails on state land<sup>4</sup>



**45<sup>TH</sup>** in country in mileage of trails on federal land<sup>5</sup>

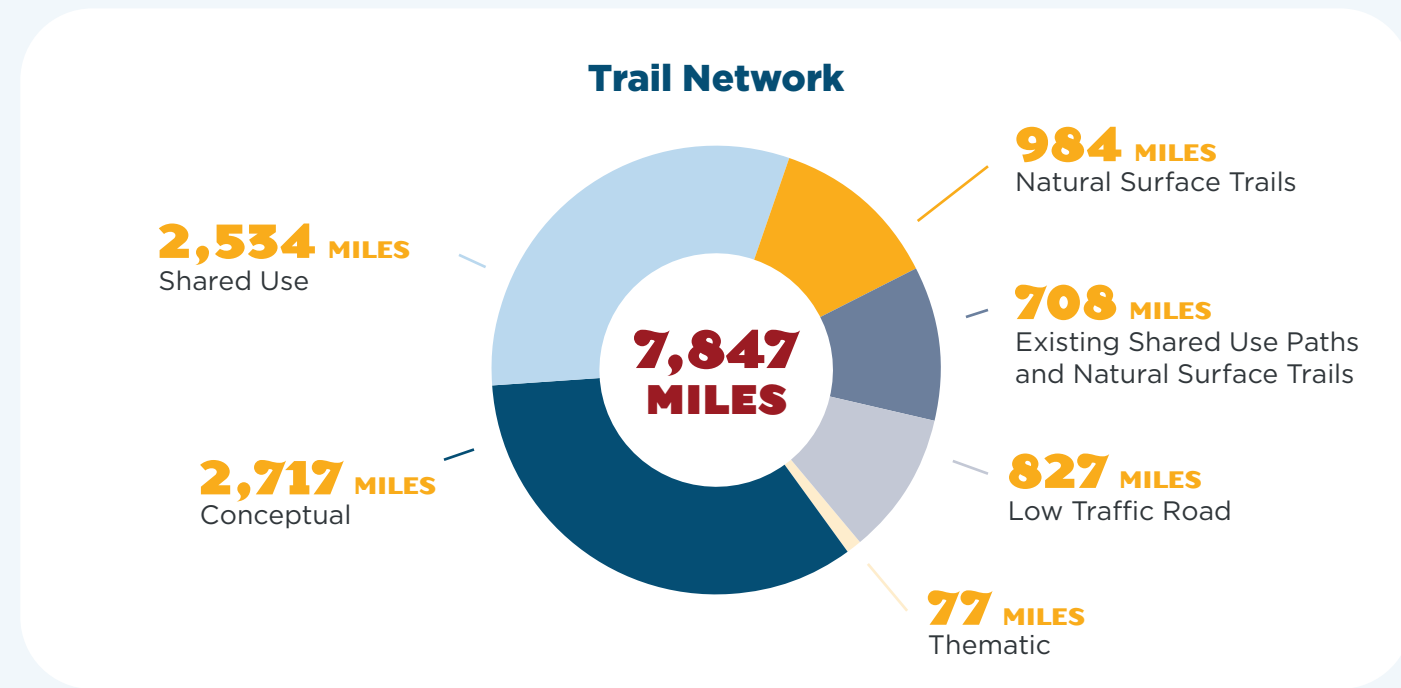
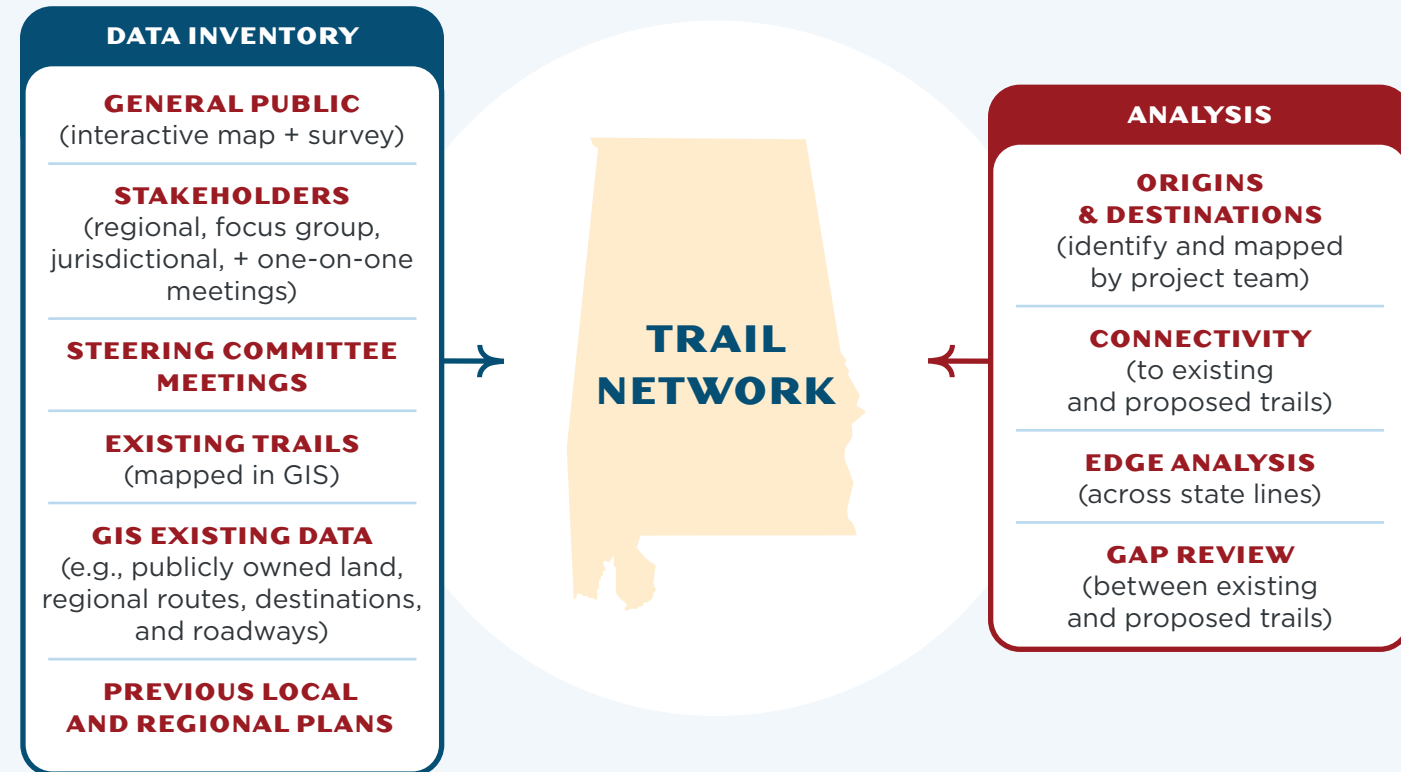


**721** trails constructed and marked

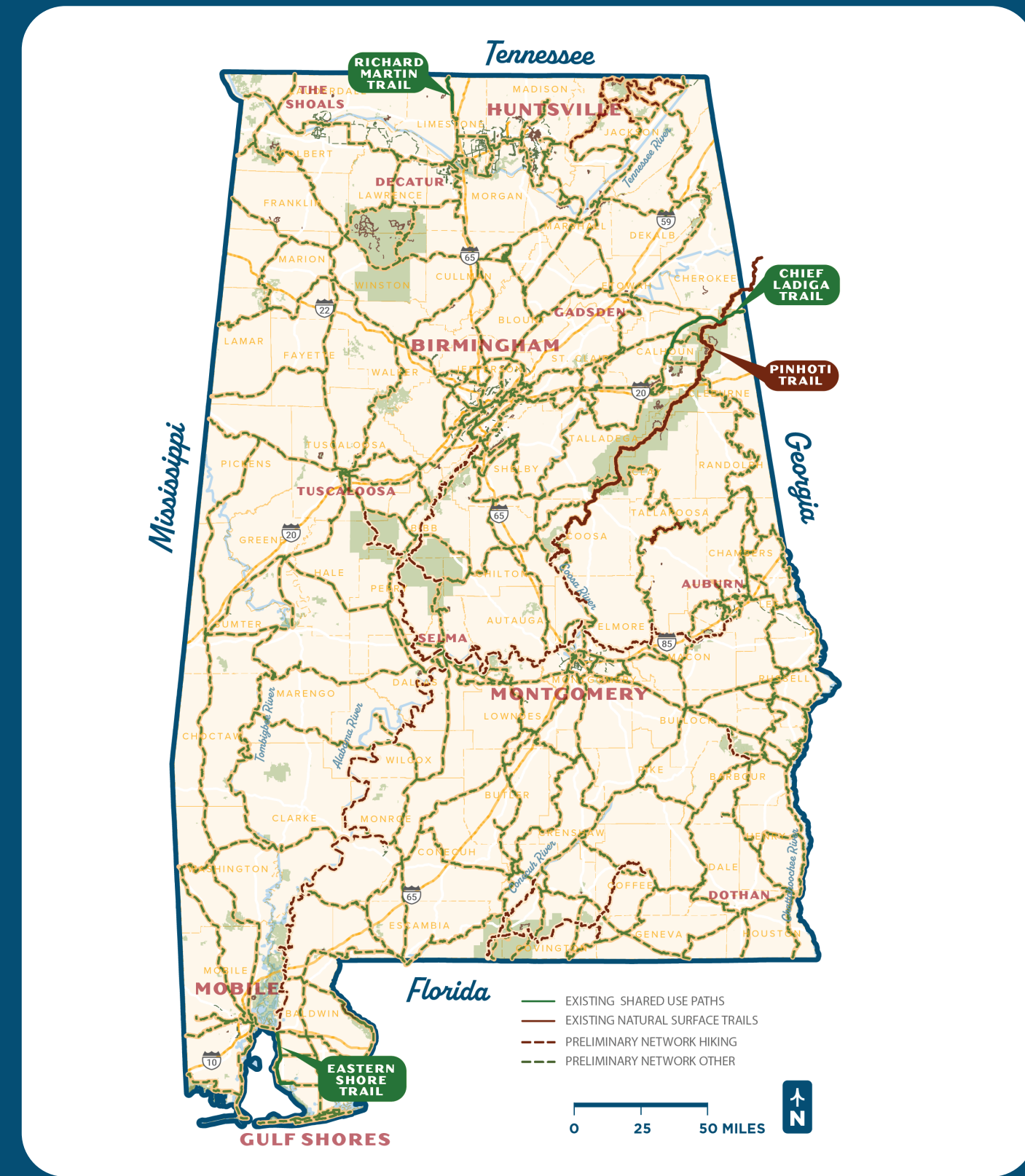
compared with Georgia's 1,301; Tennessee's 1,529; and Florida's 1,899. Alabama surpasses only Mississippi, which has 185 trails listed (using AllTrails as data source).<sup>6</sup>

## THE RECOMMENDED STATEWIDE TRAILS NETWORK

The trail network represents a long-term vision of trail connectivity across Alabama. Individual segments of the network will serve local communities, providing local recreation and transportation opportunities.



## STATEWIDE TRAIL NETWORK MAP



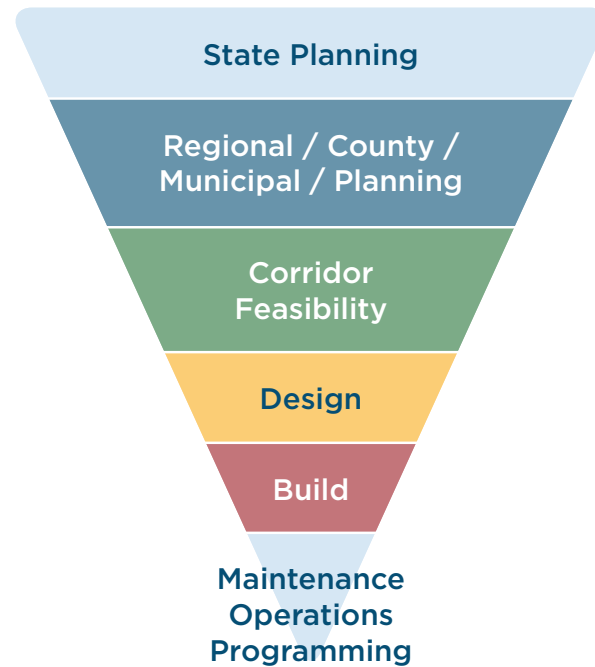
## THE ACTION

Implementing the Sweet Trails Alabama vision will require collaboration and coordination between entities and bold commitment to building,

maintaining, and promoting trails. The specific action steps are shown below:

### Planning Towards Trail Development

The planning completed during the development of the Sweet Trails Alabama plan, while critical, is limited in scope and scale. For many of the proposed trail segments across the state, additional planning, feasibility analysis, and design will be necessary prior to implementation. For other trail segments, much of this work has been completed prior to this planning effort. For those projects already ready for implementation, funding for design and construction is much more critical. The infographic to the right represents the incremental process of planning, feasibility, design, construction, and maintenance, operations, and programming. In future state funding efforts, each of these categories should be considered.

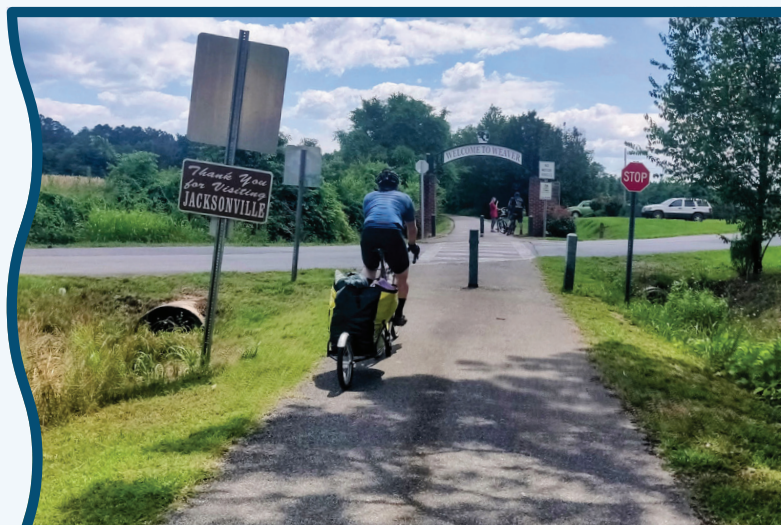


### Connectivity

*Build it so they come.*

#### Actions

- ★ Provide no-match competitive state grant for **regional, county, or local and/or college and university trail plans.**
- ★ Provide funds to develop **trail feasibility studies** that define alignments and costs for priority projects that need further study.
- ★ Provide **design and construction funding** to push shovel-ready projects forward, giving them a boost to complete implementation.
- ★ Maintain and update **state database** of existing and proposed trails.



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

### Economy and Innovation

*Ignite the Alabama trail-based economy.*

#### 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.
- ★ **Collaborate with the Alabama Pinhoti Trail Association** initiative to advocate for trail tourism through an **expanded Trail Towns program.**
- ★ **Collaborate with the Alabama Pinhoti Trail Association, the Alabama Scenic River Trail, and Tennessee RiverLine** to advocate for trail tourism through an expanded Trail Towns / River Towns program.



2022 Singing River Trail Launch Tank Event Decatur, AL

### Conservation and Stewardship

*Promote Alabama's world class biodiversity and cultural heritage.*

#### Actions

- ★ Use trails for natural and cultural resource **interpretation.**
- ★ Work with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, land trusts, the Alabama Wildlife Action Plan team, 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.**



Gulf State Park Educational Trail Signage Orange Beach, AL

## Funding

*Bolster trail development and take care of what we have.*

### Actions

- ★ **Provide state funding for trails for the first time in history**, following in the recent footsteps of Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia.
- ★ **Create a Trail Enhancements and Maintenance Fund** that will fund trail improvements and maintenance, not just new trails.
- ★ **Provide educational resources** to inform communities of available trail funding.

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.

## Promotion

*Tell them what we have and get them here!*

### Actions

- ★ **Roll out Alabama's Year of the Trail 2025 to amplify** the message of trail tourism and economic development in Alabama.
- ★ **Collaborate with the Alabama Tourism Department** and partners to build off existing marketing platforms to increase visibility of existing statewide trail and outdoor recreation opportunities.
- ★ **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
- ★ **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.



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

## Health and Wellness

*Help Alabamians be well and succeed.*

### Actions

- ★ **Pilot enhancements** of one state-owned and one locally owned trail or trailhead and associated amenities **to create universally accessible spaces.**
- ★ **Develop more comprehensive and legible trail education materials**, with information about level of difficulty and access.
- ★ **Expand ongoing and develop new** statewide, regional, and local trail **programs and challenges** to encourage Alabamians to get outdoors, prioritizing communities with poor health indicators.

## Partnerships

*We will accomplish more working together.*

### Actions

- ★ **Support trail non-profits and universities** that provide regional and local commitment and **technical assistance** across the state.
- ★ **Begin an annual statewide trails summit** to expand the reach of Sweet Trails Alabama, and share best practices and lessons learned.
- ★ **Partner with established organizations to provide trail toolkits** to help communities plan, design, build, and promote trails, building off existing resources from allied partners.
- ★ **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.
- ★ **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.



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)



Sweet Trails Alabama & Alabama RC&D Partnership  
Montgomery, AL  
Source: Mary Kendall Dixon





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