



April 3, 2020

Honorable David Bernhardt
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Honorable David Vela
Deputy Director
National Park Service
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Honorable Victoria Christiansen
Chief
U.S. Forest Service
201 14th Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20227

Honorable Secretaries Bernhardt and Perdue,
Honorable Chief Christiansen and Deputy Director Vela,

On behalf of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC or Conservancy), the undersigned Appalachian Trail Maintaining Clubs, and our members and volunteers, we respectfully urge that the Department of the Interior and National Park Service close the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (ANST or “Trail”) and that the Department of Agriculture and the United States Forest Service close the management areas and amenities within National Forests, as identified in the Forest Management Plans, as being directly connected to the ANST, effectively immediately until April 30, 2020. By April 30th, we request that the ANST National Park Service (NPS) office convene the relevant and necessary federal, state, and non-profit co-managers of the ANST to make a determination as to whether the ANST should be re-opened and to do so every two weeks thereafter if the decision is for the ANST to remain closed. The six independent NPS units should continue to decide as to the prudence and safety of access to those units, and the eight National Forests the Trail traverses should also continue to retain their authority to manage evolving visitor use.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a threat to the entirety of American society and we are concerned that the continued operation of the ANST represents an unacceptable threat to NPS and United States Forest Service (USFS) employees as well as the gateway communities that supply most of our volunteers and are essential partners in our cooperative management system. We are alarmed at the incredible increase in usage at many of the ANST’s most popular sites and believe that uniformity in access (i.e. none) is the only way to provide the proper safety for our gateway communities, Trail users,

and federal employees. It is now clear to us that the lack of uniformity across our connected units is causing confusion and preventing appropriate social distancing in addition to continuing to allow for the potential contamination of physical structures such as privies and shelters with no Service, Conservancy, or Club staff or volunteers available to keep them sanitized.

The ANST is the longest hiking-only footpath in the world, measuring roughly 2,193 miles in length. The Trail travels through 14 states (and 88 counties) along the crests and valleys of the Appalachian Mountain Range, from its southern terminus at Springer Mountain, Georgia, to the northern terminus at Katahdin, Maine. The Trail traverses six other units of the National Park System, eight National Forests, and 74 parcels of state forest, park, and game land. Pursuant to the National Trails Act, the Trail is managed cooperatively between the federal and state governments and 32 non-profit organizations, with the ultimate responsibility for the administration of the Trail residing in the Secretary of the Interior. The Conservancy and the undersigned Appalachian Trail Clubs have been responsible for the day-to-day maintenance and management of the Trail since before construction was completed in 1937. Our urgent request to formally close the Trail we built and carefully manage does not come lightly.

Two weeks ago, the Conservancy requested all those planning a long-distance hike to postpone or cancel. Last week, the Conservancy requested all Trail users stay home. All ATC staff and volunteers, as well as the maintaining staff and members of all the undersigned Clubs have been recalled from the Trail. Current users of our public lands and of the ANST may not have realized that no one is maintaining the footpath, trailheads, shelters, and privies that may be heavily (or permanently) impacted by increased visitor use during this crisis. In only the past two weeks, popular spots along the Trail, like Blood Mountain in Georgia, the McAfee Knob area in Virginia, and Annapolis Rocks in Maryland, have seen day use reach record-breaking levels. Cars line the highways leading to popular day-hiking spots on the Trail.

This past Saturday, March 28th, the ANST closed all shelters and privies in Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Maine. We are thankful that these closures have occurred. As of the writing of this letter, the States of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina have all issued blanket or targeted stay-at-home orders or advisories, including prohibitions on overnight camping on state lands. Individual counties and towns in Georgia have also issued targeted stay-at-home guidance. Further as of the writing of this letter, the Great Smoky National Park and Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area National Park System (NPS) units have closed. The Blue Ridge Parkway, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, and the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park NPS units have closed all buildings to public access; Shenandoah National Park is seeking approval of a total closure order. We support the closure of these units as pursued by their superintendents.

Many of our National Forests are closing sections and breaking up gatherings as the visitor use becomes overwhelming. Region 8 Forests, beginning in the Chattahoochee and into the Cherokee, Nantahala, Pisgah, and George Washington and Jefferson have all closed access trails to the ANST. Our two Region 9 Forests, the Green Mountain and White Mountain National Forests, are closely monitoring visitor use. We have received reports from United States Forest Service (USFS) employees that they are unable to follow the Center for Disease Control (CDC's) best practices for maintaining safe and hygienic amenities, and that they are resorting to—when possible—using HAZMAT suits to clean recreational facilities. These employees, who lack sufficient cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE), are concerned that insufficient social distancing is occurring on NFS lands to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Several of these Forests have closed access to sections thereof within the management area for the ANST. We support these line officers exercising their best judgement as to employee and visitor safety.

Beyond the direct impacts to NPS and USFS employees, we are seriously concerned about our gateway communities along the ridges and notches of the Appalachian Mountain range. Those seeking some kind of serenity in the great outdoors amidst this pandemic present as much of a threat to these rural, healthcare-insecure communities as they do to the employees throughout our state and federal public land systems. After recreating outdoors, where they may have eaten lunch at a picnic table, taken a break in a shelter, used a privy, or shared a map or food with someone unknowingly infected with COVID-19 (or themselves unknowingly transmitting the virus), these individuals may need to stop for gas or eat and will inadvertently and unknowingly carry this highly contagious virus back to Pigeon Forge, TN, or Hot Springs, NC, or Blacksburg, VA, or Wind Gap, PA, or Pawling, NY, or North Adams, MA, or Hanover, NH.

These Trail users—often not as familiar with the Trail and how to avoid congregating in larger groups—may not be aware that the rural communities adjacent to the Trail may not have the healthcare resources to help a sick hiker or volunteer, or to manage a COVID-19 outbreak. Many day hikers see the outdoors as an escape from the stresses of these difficult times. But with crowding from day hikers reaching unmanageable levels and the lack of any staff or volunteers to funnel or redirect this traffic, it is necessary that all hikers avoid accessing the Trail. The A.T. is not a separate reality from the communities in which hikers live. Until the risk of spreading COVID-19 has reduced significantly, hiking on a heavily trafficked trail like the A.T. potentially increases rather than reduces harm.

The Conservancy and undersigned Clubs' first and foremost responsibility is to ensure the proper management and maintenance of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and access to some of the most significant recreation lands in the eastern United States. That extends to our hundreds of villages, towns, and cities along the Trail and the millions of people who reside in them. We respectfully urge you to officially close the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, including the ANST management areas in National Forests through April 30th, and continuously review appropriate closures or re-openings until the

current public health crisis has ceased. At that time, we can all welcome the more than three million visitors who step foot on the Trail to safely summit again.

If you have any questions, please contact ATC's Director of Federal Policy and Legislation, Brendan Mysliwec, at bmysliwec@appalachiantrail.org or 207-370-0450. Thank you.

Signed,

Appalachian Trail Conservancy

Allentown Hiking Club
Appalachian Mountain Club
Batona Hiking Club
Blue Mountain Eagle Climbing Club
Carolina Mountain Club
Cumberland Valley Appalachian Trail Club
Dartmouth Outing Club
Georgia Appalachian Trail Club
Green Mountain Club
Keystone Trails Association
Maine Appalachian Trail Club
Mountain Club of Maryland
Old Dominion Appalachian Trail Club
Outdoor Club at Virginia Tech
Piedmont Appalachian Trail Hikers
Mount Rogers Appalachian Trail Club
Nantahala Hiking Club
Natural Bridge Appalachian Trail Club
New York-New Jersey Trail Conference
Randolph Mountain Club
Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club
Smoky Mountains Hiking Club
Tidewater Appalachian Trail Club
Tennessee Eastman Hiking and Canoe Club
Wilmington Trail Club
York Hiking Club

CC: ANST Superintendent Wendy Janssen
Director DOI Region One Gay Vietze