

# A biking trail years in the making in Tillamook

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Oregon Public Broadcasting

On a chilly spring morning, Ryan McLane called out to a group of about 30 volunteer trail-builders and their dogs on a gravel road in the Tillamook State Forest.

They gathered in a circle flanked by pickup trucks with mountain bikes hanging off the tailgates.

"Thanks for coming out," McLane said. "Welcome to Fear and Loaming, if you haven't been here. It's been a long time coming."

McLane has spent the last two years organizing trail-building days like this with a core group of volunteers cutting through brush, removing logs and trees, and digging out a 4-mile path that drops 2,500 feet through dense Douglas fir forest, clear cuts and alders. But that's just the final push in his 16-year struggle to build a downhill mountain biking trail close to home.

He guided the trail-building crew toward one of the last unfinished sections of trail and offered digging tools and advice as he carried a chainsaw to a large downed log that needed to be cut and removed from the trail bed.

"This is all hand built," he said, walking past volunteers whacking roots with hoes. "It's not like we got a million-dollar grant and there's professionals coming out here with excavators building all this. It's a lot of work."

The completed black diamond trail opened to the public earlier this year. Its name is in homage to both Hunter S. Thompson's "Fear and Loathing" books and essay collections and to the fertile soil trail-builders spent countless hours digging through. The route winds its way down Larch Mountain with exhilarating 20- to 35-foot jumps and optional bypasses that McLane compares to a roller coaster with choices.

"Do I want to do the huge loops or do I just kind of want to get around this?" he said.

Two years of volunteer trail-building by hand is a lot, but it's nothing compared to the time McLane spent just getting to the point where he and his friends could start digging.

## 'Why aren't we going up there?'

When McLane was 25 years old, he and his friends were spending a lot of time and money just getting to the mountain biking trails they wanted to ride.

"We were driving two hours one way and two hours back and sometimes only riding for an hour," he said. "It was hugely inefficient and expensive."

It was 2005 when he started thinking about whether they could build a trail closer to where they lived in the Portland metro area — in the Coast Range mountains about 20 miles away.

"At that time, there was nothing in Portland. Nothing challenging," McLane said. "We'd look behind us at the hills as we were driving away and be like, 'Why aren't we



Katherine Donnelly

The Fear and Loaming mountain biking trail descends 2,500 feet on Larch Mountain in the Tillamook State Forest.

going up there?"

They did some homework and found an Oregon Department of Forestry recreation plan for the Tillamook State Forest from 2000 that identified a need for more advanced mountain biking opportunities and allocated 10 square miles to future trails.

So, McLane and his friends went to the forest and found a spot where they could drive up 3,300 feet on existing roads and build a trail with about 2,500 feet of vertical drop over about 4 miles of terrain.

"Almost quite literally we show up with shovels and say, 'Alright! We're ready. We want to build,'" McLane said. "We're in our mid-twenties. We're thinking this should be easy. Just go build a trail, right?"

But it wasn't that easy. The Oregon Department of Forestry had a whole process for planning and approving new trails that the group had to follow.

"They're like, 'Whoa, wait. We got to think about this. We got to plan it,'" McLane said.

## A huge crash

Randy Peterson, recreation program manager with the Department of Forestry, said there are numerous factors his agency has to consider before approving a new trail. The agency tries to minimize stream crossings and environmental impacts, stay off major roads and avoid conflicts with other forest uses like logging or mining, both of which are visible along the Fear and Loaming trail path.

"We went through a pretty detailed process, and created a fairly comprehensive plan," Peterson said.

McLane said he spent years touring existing trails with Department of Forestry managers and talking about risk mitigation, forming a

nonprofit with his friends to help organize the project and writing a 30-page planning document that he hand-delivered to the agency in 2009.

"And if you guys remember what happened in 2009, we had a huge crash," he said. "The market crashed, and people stopped building houses. Lumber and logging, Oregon Department of Forestry gets a huge chunk of the revenue from that."

Peterson said the recession hit right as they were wrapping up the original trail plan.

"That really changed priorities for the program and for the agency," he said. "We downsized. We laid off staff. We significantly reduced our funding, our expenditures."

That meant the agency didn't have the staff to support a new mountain biking trail.

"We're chomping at the bit to get a trail in," McLane said. "And they say, 'Sorry, we're under orders. No new trails.' It was a heartbreaker."

McLane said after that, a lot of his original group of friends gave up on the project and moved onto other trails. Eventually, they dissolved the nonprofit they had formed to help fund the effort.

"We put five years of our lives into this," he said. "It's kind of like why keep getting our hearts broken?"

But McLane kept checking in with the Department of Forestry as the years went by.

"I kept knocking on the door because, I don't know, I hate being told no," he said.

Peterson hadn't abandoned the idea either. About a decade after the project was set aside, he managed to get it back into the agency's operations plan.

"Two years ago, I got a call on my cell," McLane said. "It's Randy, and he's saying we

got the green light. And I broke down. Like, I lost it."

Peterson said his agency partnered with McLane and his crew of volunteers rather than bringing in a consultant to manage the trail project.

"For a trail like this, they're truly the experts," Peterson said. "We have a lot of design and trail planning skills within the Department of Forestry, but we don't ride like these guys ride."

## 'No dig, no ride'

Toward the end of the trail-building effort, Liz Lachmar sat on the ground clawing at a tangle of roots in the dirt with gloved fingers.

"My hands are working better for this one 'cuz all these roots are getting stuck on the shovel," she said.

Lachmar said the tedious work will be worth the effort later when she gets to ride the trail.

"There's a phrase mountain bikers have," she said. "They say no dig, no ride. It means nobody would be mountain biking if we weren't building the trails. It's a great service, and it also pays us back because we get to ride it after, and we can build it how we want."

While everyone on the volunteer crew takes some credit for the finished trail, they all recognize that their investments pale in comparison to all the years McLane spent making the whole thing happen.

"Ryan's the one who stuck with it and kept the vision alive and eventually made it a reality," said volunteer Ian Donnelly. "He's definitely been the man with the vision."

McLane said all the volunteers are like his brothers and sisters now.

"Without them, we wouldn't be anywhere," he said.

McLane said there's nothing like watching the whole crew ride the trail they just finished building.

"You've got all these people that are just railing through the forest and they come out to the bottom and everybody's got this ear-to-ear grin and they're all slapping high fives," he said. "That's amazing."

Volunteer Eric Soetanto said trail-building has offered a much-needed sense of community and outdoor activity during the pandemic and the chaos of the last two years. And now he has an awesome place to ride close to Portland.

"I just still have this feeling of disbelief that this type of trail does exist literally less than an hour from where I live," he said.

McLane said it is hard to believe what it took to build a trail close to home.

"When I started with this project I was 25 years old, and now I'm 41 years old," he said. "So here we are 16 years later, and we're just about ready to open the trail. It's pretty exciting. It's one of the biggest things that's happened to me."

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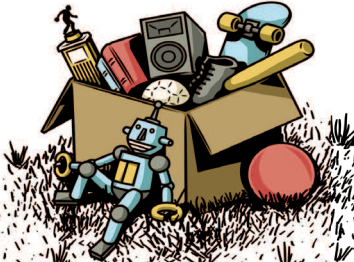
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