



Pacific Crest Trail Association 2024-2026 Strategic Plan

Revised March 2025

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	i
Introduction	2
Mission, Vision, & Values Updates	5
Assets	5
The Strategy	8
<i>Pillar 1. Trail Maintenance, Management, & Conservation</i>	8
<i>Pillar 2. Resilience, Adaptation, and Preparedness</i>	9
<i>Pillar 3. PCT Community Partnerships & Engagement</i>	10
<i>Pillar 4. The Pacific Crest Trail Association</i>	10
Conclusion.....	11
Appendix A. Glossary of Terms & Acronyms.....	12
Appendix B. Photo Credits.....	13

Developed with support from:



Civic
Consulting
Collaborative



Introduction

The Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) was designated as a national scenic trail in 1968 and traverses 2,650 miles from the United States-Mexico border through California, Oregon, and Washington to the United States-Canada border. Considered a world class outdoor recreation experience and landscape-scale conservation project, people come from all corners of the globe to experience the PCT in some capacity. “Thru-hiking,” or hiking the trail from end to end in a single attempt, is popular and the most well-known way to hike the PCT due to the sheer length and difficulty of the journey and the incredible stories that come from the hiking community. However, most people experience the trail in a variety of other ways:

- Weekend, week-long, or day-hiking.
- Volunteer and Corps Crew trail maintenance.
- Section and other long-distance hiking.
- Equestrian and pack animal recreation.
- Other non-hiking recreation or outdoor activities such as photography, birding, fishing, hunting, running, skiing, snowshoeing, painting, etc.
- Supporting trail users, including as a trail angel, business owner, or trail town community member.
- Advocating for, learning about, and/or appreciating the trail and its surrounding habitats as a natural landscape and ecosystem.

The Pacific Crest Trail Association (PCTA) was incorporated in 1977 and is the only nonprofit organization tasked with conserving and connecting the PCT for the recreational enjoyment and benefit of all people, as well as working to protect wild and scenic lands along the trail. We accomplish our work in partnership and collaboration with federal land management agencies (primarily the United States Forest Service) and many other organizations, nonprofits, individuals, and business partners who help support our work. The PCTA is comprised of dozens of skilled and passionate staff, a dedicated Board, hundreds of volunteers, and over 10,000 members who are committed to the work of conserving the trail and supporting its communities.

PCTA’s Role

To understand this strategic plan, it is important to consider PCTA’s role. PCTA is just one part of a complex system supporting the Pacific Crest Trail. Federal, state, tribal, and private landowners manage the land the trail crosses. Numerous laws and regulations govern how the trail is protected and can be used. PCTA is a nonprofit organization primarily powered by volunteers that works in this complex system to conserve the trail and connect its community to the PCT. We do not have unilateral power over the trail.

In this system it is helpful to think about what PCTA can *directly control*, what PCTA can *influence*, and what is *beyond our control*. PCTA can *directly control* what our staff and volunteers



do – things such as trail maintenance, public communications, information, and what projects our staff work on. PCTA can *influence* (but not control) what other stakeholders in the PCT system do – such as ensure that USFS management plans carry out the intent of the National Trails System Act, seek federal funding for trail protection and maintenance, influence hiker behavior and safety (e.g., Leave No Trace education), and garner public support for the PCT. What is *beyond PCTA control* are broad conditions and trends that affect the PCT – things such as extreme weather events, population growth, and development pressures on the trail. In this final category, PCTA must be ready to react and adapt to these trends to best carry out our mission to conserve the PCT and connect our community to the trail. PCTA can use its direct efforts and influence to shape responses to these broad trends and conditions. This strategic plan works within the context of what PCTA can directly control, influence, or respond to.

Strategic Plan Development Process

The PCTA Task Force first met in August 2022, and soon after engaged the PCT community to be part of the planning process. PCTA engaged our communities throughout the process, resulting in the largest, longest, and most community-led strategic planning process PCTA has ever undertaken. There were listening sessions throughout the process to hear community feedback on our priorities as well as a survey opportunity for further input on a draft of the plan before it was finalized and approved by the board.

Plan Components

This strategic plan outlines the most important *new* initiatives PCTA will focus our efforts on over the next three years, addressing the challenges and building upon the opportunities in front of us. It's important to note that these new initiatives *will not* mean abandoning PCTA's essential core strategies, including trail maintenance, land acquisition and conservation, advocacy, fundraising, communications, and trail user information and support.¹ Rather, they indicate areas for PCTA to focus on so that we can more effectively deliver on our core work in the short- and long-term.

¹ A simple way to think about this is that approximately 80-85% of our effort will still be devoted to these core tasks while the remaining 15-20% will address the new initiatives outlined in this strategy.



PCTA's Core Strategies

The design of this strategic plan is future focused. The four Strategic Pillars encapsulate the breadth of PCTA's work, and particularly how our work needs to adapt to current and emerging conditions on the trail and in our communities. Given the focus of this plan, it's important to acknowledge that **PCTA's core work as an organization has not fundamentally changed**. Below are eight aspects of our work that will continue.

Trail maintenance, construction, and infrastructure. Continue to work with volunteers to maintain and conserve the PCT, and provide new tools to assess and report trail conditions and maintenance needs; continue to support local volunteers to maintain the PCT at a level that meets standards agreed upon between PCTA and our agency partners; support the Crest Runner and Trailhead host programs, as well as partner with agency staff and researchers to understand and address the physical and social impacts associated with trail use along the PCT corridor.

Land acquisition for conservation of the PCT corridor. Continue to strategically acquire land to ensure that the PCT corridor and viewshed are permanently protected, including completing Optimal Location Reviews to inform strategies on these acquisitions.

Working with volunteers. Continue to support regional volunteer groups. Volunteers are the lifeblood of trail maintenance activities, and the PCTA would be unable to do our work without their support.

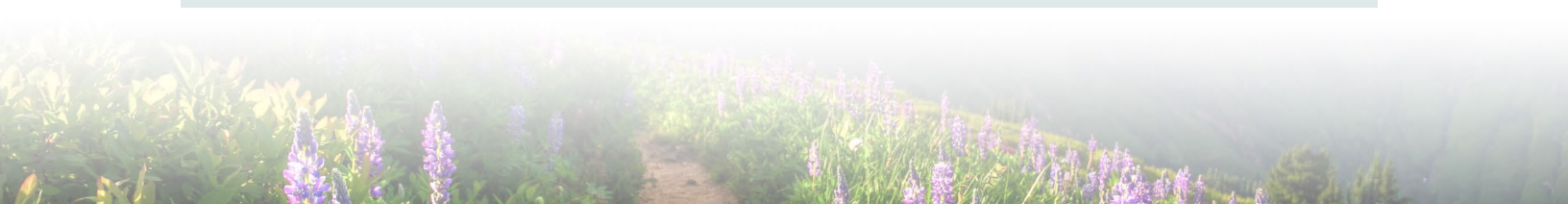
Land and trail management. Collaborate with relevant federal, state, and local agencies on planning processes to ensure the PCT is protected from threats that could negatively impact the trail user experience, viewsheds, and/or natural resources along the PCT that are integral to the trail experience.

Partnerships. Continue to grow our work in partnership with others to expand the ability to care for the trail with our partners.

Communication and education. Continue to provide storytelling about the trail, the volunteers, and trail users to increase engagement with PCTA and the PCT. Continue to provide educational opportunities for trail users and volunteers to protect the trail and its resources.

Fundraising. Continue to expand and target our fundraising to best meet the needs of the organization and build capacity needed to implement this strategic plan.

PCTA's staff and infrastructure. Continue to support and improve our technology systems to sustain the work of staff and volunteers; maintain staffing levels and provide staff training opportunities to support our core programmatic work and strategic initiatives.



Mission, Vision, & Values Updates

Mission & Vision

As part of the strategic planning process, staff and board members evaluated PCTA's mission, vision, and values to ensure they accurately reflect the culture shift the organization is undertaking. **PCTA's core mission hasn't changed through this process** – we are still here to work with our volunteers and community to ensure that the trail is well cared for today and for future generations. However, we have updated the wording in our mission and vision to better reflect our current work and align with our updated values.

UPDATED MISSION

The Pacific Crest Trail Association's mission is to advocate for the Pacific Crest Trail as an inspirational outdoor experience, to connect people to the PCT, and to conserve the trail.

UPDATED VISION

A Pacific Crest Trail for all that:

- Connects land, people, and communities;
- Supports healthy ecosystems;
- Inspires current and future generations.

Values

PCTA's values are the guiding philosophy for the work we do. The following statements describe how the PCTA staff, board, and volunteers will live out these values through organization-wide commitments.

Connected

- We believe that the PCT provides connections between all people, communities, land, and ecosystems.
- We facilitate these connections between people and the natural environment.

Caring

- We care for the Pacific Crest Trail as a vital natural resource that significantly contributes to ecosystem resilience in the western United States.
- We care about the wellbeing of all PCT communities (staff, volunteers, partners, community at large), and act accordingly.
- We care for the trail, the trail experience, and the people who encounter it.
- We whole-heartedly listen to the community.

Authenticity and Accountability

- We are intentional and transparent in our actions and decisions.
- We respectfully give and receive honest feedback.



- We actively seek out and incorporate feedback and input from others whose work is impacted by our decisions.
- We have the courage to act from our values, even when it's hard.
- We embrace the growth that comes from both successes and failures.

Assets

Our public engagement focused on identifying important **assets** that the PCTA can utilize to make progress on this plan. Three overarching assets relevant to all of PCTA's work were identified:

- **Strong Existing Trail**

Conservation: Roughly 90 percent of the 2,650-mile long PCT is permanently protected.

- **Knowledgeable and Passionate**

Volunteers: Volunteers are one of the strongest PCTA assets – they are the lifeblood of trail maintenance activities. Internally, PCTA supports 12 regional volunteer groups covering a large percentage of the trail length. Externally, PCTA collaborates with many conservation corps and trail maintenance groups. Regardless of which group(s) people choose to participate in, there is an overriding sense that they are built from strong, knowledgeable, and passionate individuals who care deeply about the trail and the PCT community.

- **Experienced and Knowledgeable Staff:** There is a deep level of knowledge among staff about the PCT and what PCTA can do in support of trail conservation.

Asset: These are the things that are working, can be built upon, and/or have potential to do good. They come in many categories including natural, built, social/institutional, human/community, and economic/financial.

***Assets related to PCTA's network:** PCTA is part of a broad, strong network of people and organizations/agencies that support conservation of the PCT.*

- **Strong Trail-User Networks:** Trail user networks are a critical asset to PCTA, the most prevalent of which is currently among long-distance hikers of the PCT. This and related networks are already built out and can be more effectively engaged in the future.
- **Strong Relationships with Existing Partners:** Given the massive length of the PCT, regional partner networks focused on specific trail segments are critical building blocks that support the overall health of the trail corridor. PCTA has strong relationships with state and federal agencies and local organizations where the trail overlaps with other protected and high-use areas (e.g., John Muir Trail, Lake Tahoe area). These decades-long networks have barriers to overcome, but their strengths can be used as examples to strengthen weaker relationships and develop new partners.



***Assets related to existing plans, processes, and tools:** PCTA has developed or has access to a variety of plans (e.g., Forest Plans, General Management Plans); processes (e.g., fundraising, land acquisition); and tools (e.g., PCTA Communicator, FarOut app) that can be built upon and/or made more effective.*

- **Internal & External Communication Assets:** PCTA has a robust, internally managed system of communication in place for thru- and long-distance hikers in getting to the trail and comfortably recreating on it. While this current system lacks efficacy for many trail users (e.g., day hikers, inexperienced/new users, etc.), it can be improved upon to increase information availability and relevance for all. In addition, many trail users already use digital communication tools external to PCTA, such as Garmin Inreach and the FarOut app. Integrating PCT communications into digital tools can increase PCTA's reach.
- **Land Management Plans & Processes:** The collaborative management system of our national scenic and historic trails, established by the National Trails System Act, provides the PCTA the foundation to engage with federal and state land management agencies in the collaborative management and maintenance of the PCT and surrounding landscapes. PCTA actively engages with land management partners as they develop management plans and project level decisions, providing input about how those plans and projects may affect the PCT and surrounding corridor. In addition to management plans, many of these partners have established processes that PCTA may adopt or use. For example, the Bureau of Land Management's Assessment, Inventory, and Monitoring (AIM) Strategy is an established process to understand landscape conditions and trends, which is critical information for PCTA's land conservation and political advocacy work.



The Strategy

The core of this strategic plan is made up of four strategic pillars. Each pillar focuses on one large aspect of PCTA's work, describes a long-term outcome to work toward, and lays out one to two specific goals and related strategies describing what PCTA will focus on in the next three years. The core aspects of PCTA's work aren't fundamentally changed by these strategies, but these strategies do help us become adaptable to current and emerging conditions on the trail and in communities. In addition to continuing core work, key to this plan's success are two important enabling conditions that describe *how* PCTA will do our work:

1. **Trail Conserved and Managed as a Corridor:** The PCTA aims to ensure that private lands are acquired and conserved and the PCT is managed to prioritize the trail experience, scenery, and biodiversity along the whole corridor.
2. **Mechanism for Community Feedback and Input:** PCTA is committed to engage and work with our communities in support of the PCT. As part of this, we will continue to engage and understand community feedback.

Pillar 1. Trail Maintenance, Management, & Conservation. The trail, corridor, viewshed, and healthy surrounding landscapes are maintained and conserved for current and future generations. Core strategies addressed in this pillar: trail maintenance, construction, and infrastructure; land acquisition for conservation of the PCT corridor; volunteer support; land and trail management.

Goal 1.1. Strengthen engagement in our volunteer program. By the end of 2026, we will effectively partner with volunteers to attract and retain new volunteers and develop leadership opportunities to foster the next generation of trail stewards.

Strategy 1: Develop and train volunteers committed to our values and create a system of accountability to resolve incidents when they occur.

Strategy 2: Expand the PCTA volunteer model to recruit, train, and retain a broader group of volunteers.

Strategy 3: Support maintenance crews by hiring and retaining highly skilled staff to better address technical or hazardous maintenance needs.

Strategy 4: Further engage volunteers through a variety of mechanisms to expand direct communication and partnership with PCTA.



Goal 1.2. Recommend permit improvements. By the end of 2024, the PCTA will collaboratively examine our role in administering the PCT Long Distance Permit; and by the end of 2026, PCTA will collaborate with the USFS to recommend improvements to reduce natural resource impacts, improve trail user safety and experiences, and adapt to extreme weather events and wildfire.

Strategy 1: Conduct internal PCTA conversations about our role in permitting.

Strategy 2: Conduct research into travel patterns, use levels, and resource impacts.

Strategy 3: Explore other models for the future of the PCT Long Distance Permit system.

Pillar 2. Resilience, Adaptation, and Preparedness. A resilient Pacific Crest Trail system and surrounding landscape. Core strategies addressed in this pillar: prepare for and respond to disasters, such as wildfires; support on the ground communication, closure, and evacuation.

Goal 2.1. Adaptation & resiliency to extreme weather events and wildfires. By the end of 2026, we will collaborate with partners and experts to develop a PCTA resiliency and adaptation plan for the PCT and begin plan implementation by initiating three high-priority, on-the-ground projects that address trail user and/or biodiversity needs. These on-the-ground projects could address infrastructure needs like bridges, water systems, pit toilets, or land acquisition needs for conservation of the trail.

Strategy 1: Collaborate with partners to develop a comprehensive PCTA plan to address resiliency and adaptation on the PCT, including identifying project opportunities, best practices, education, user behavior change, research, and monitoring.

Strategy 2: Develop a continuous improvement process where at the end of each trail season, PCTA documents trail closures, trail town impacts, and lessons learned, such as from high snow year or large wildfires. This internal report will inform our trail operations planning, advocacy, and communications efforts, as well as fundraising.

Strategy 3: Begin plan implementation by conducting high-priority active restoration, connectivity across jurisdictional boundaries, trail infrastructure, and proactive habitat improvement projects with partners and volunteers to build a more resilient trail corridor.



Pillar 3. PCT Community Partnerships & Engagement. PCTA is a trusted and valued partner. Core strategies addressed in this pillar: engage with members of the PCT community; work with partners, including federal, state, and local land managers; Educate and communicate about the PCT & its users

Goal 3.1. Engaging the PCT Community. By the end of 2026, we will identify and build up local trail champions to advocate for the PCT and connect communities to its benefits.

Strategy 1: Develop sustainable program funding and a staff plan for our advocacy work at the federal, state, and local government levels.

Strategy 2: Complete an economic impact study for the PCT to help us better communicate with elected officials, communities, and constituents.

Strategy 3: Through our advocacy and volunteer programs, engage local communities along the PCT through meaningful volunteer opportunities to share their knowledge and advocate for their local trail resources. Seek opportunities to engage with existing community groups, creating mutually beneficial partnerships that support each organization's mission(s).

Pillar 4. The Pacific Crest Trail Association. The PCTA is an effective , and sustainable organization that supports its staff, board, and volunteers. Core strategies addressed in this pillar: fundraise to meet the needs of the organization and the strategic plan; improve technology systems for staff and volunteers

Goal 4.1. Organization structure and capacity are more than sufficient to achieve a clarified and focused purpose. By the end of 2026, PCTA will clarify our priorities and align our organizational culture, structure, and management practices to achieve our mission.

Strategy 1. Clarify organizational priorities at the management level and effectively communicate them to staff and board.



Strategy 2. Assess PCTA's organizational structure and management practices to determine any gaps in its ability to effectively meet the clarified priorities.

Strategy 3. Align PCTA's organization structure and culture to clarified priorities, including capacity, decision making, roles, and mutual supports.

Goal 4.2. PCTA is a trusted organization that can gain public and financial support.
By the end of 2026, we will double our communications capacity to better build trust and engagement to support the exciting work of the PCTA.

Strategy 1: Build a stronger Marketing and Communications program to inform, educate, and excite the public about the PCTA's work.

Strategy 2: Broaden fundraising opportunities.

Conclusion

This plan is not just an iterative update. This planning process reflects the most that the PCTA has ever involved community listening in strategic planning efforts, allowing us to move forward together for the long-term wellbeing of the Pacific Crest Trail. The four strategic pillars identified provide us strategic focus to advance reasonably while keeping true to our core work. PCTA's updated mission, vision, and values help us reflect who and what we are in the moment and looking into the future—guideposts for how PCTA staff and board work with each other and the PCT community. In short, this plan marks an exciting turning point for PCTA. We are eager to get busy over the next several years to positively impact the trail, the corridor, and all trail users.



Appendix A. Glossary of Terms & Acronyms

Acronyms

PCT – Pacific Crest Trail

USFS – United States Forest Service

PCTA – Pacific Crest Trail Association

Strategic Planning Terms

Assets: Things that are working, can be built upon, and/or have potential to do good. They come in many categories including natural, built, social/institutional, human/community, and economic/financial.

Barriers: Things that are not working, are in the way of progress, and/or are causing problems. They are smaller in scale than Challenges and may only impact a specific region or group.

Challenges: Large-scale items that could hold PCTA back from achieving the ideal future state or are an area of unmet need. They are what the strategic plan is solving for.

Goals: Goals represent what we are going to accomplish over the next three years. They are predictive of long-term outcomes and are expressed as time-bound actions with measurable results.

Long-Term Outcomes: The impacts the plan aims to achieve. Each outcome reflects an ideal state for the trail, communities, and/or the PCTA.

Strategic Pillars: The overarching topic areas that organize this strategic plan. They emerged from discussions about the status quo and the ideal future state of the PCT and PCTA.

Strategies: The specific actions taken to make progress toward a goal and ultimately the long-term outcome the goal serves.

Other Terms

National Trails System Act of 1968:

<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationaltrailssystem/upload/National-Trails-System-Act-Amended-2019.pdf>

Trail Corridor: The landscape on both sides of a trail's centerline which contains the travel surface and the aesthetic (viewpoints, wildflower areas, etc.) and functional (switchbacks, stream crossings, etc.) control points. It may also include land that must be acquired to protect or buffer the trail from adverse influences, and to protect scenic viewsheds.²

Viewshed: The area visible from a certain location or vantage point.

² Adapted from *Developing Sustainable Mountain Corridors*, National Parks Service (1991).

Appendix B. Photo Credits

Location in Document	Photo Description	Credit
Cover (top R)	Students from Environmental Charter High School in trail crew attire.	Sammy Lyon, 2017
Cover (top L)	Silhouette of two hikers with large packs as the sun sets.	Rob Thwaites, 2019
Cover (bottom R)	Equestrian thru-rider crosses through the Kern River with her horse and pack mule.	Dylan Gordon, 2023
Cover (bottom L)	Sunrise and wildflowers near Iceberg Lake.	Thomas Piekunka, 2017
Footer (incl. page i)	Lupine at White Pass, Washington.	Ryan Weidert, 2021
Page 21	Purple flowers overlooking Sky Pilot col.	James Townsend, 2022

All photos were sourced from PCTA's annual photo contest, used with permission.

