

UNCERTAIN PATH AHEAD

Questions surround Rocky Top's future after DTG closure

Luke Thompson Yakima Herald-Republic
Feb 8, 2023



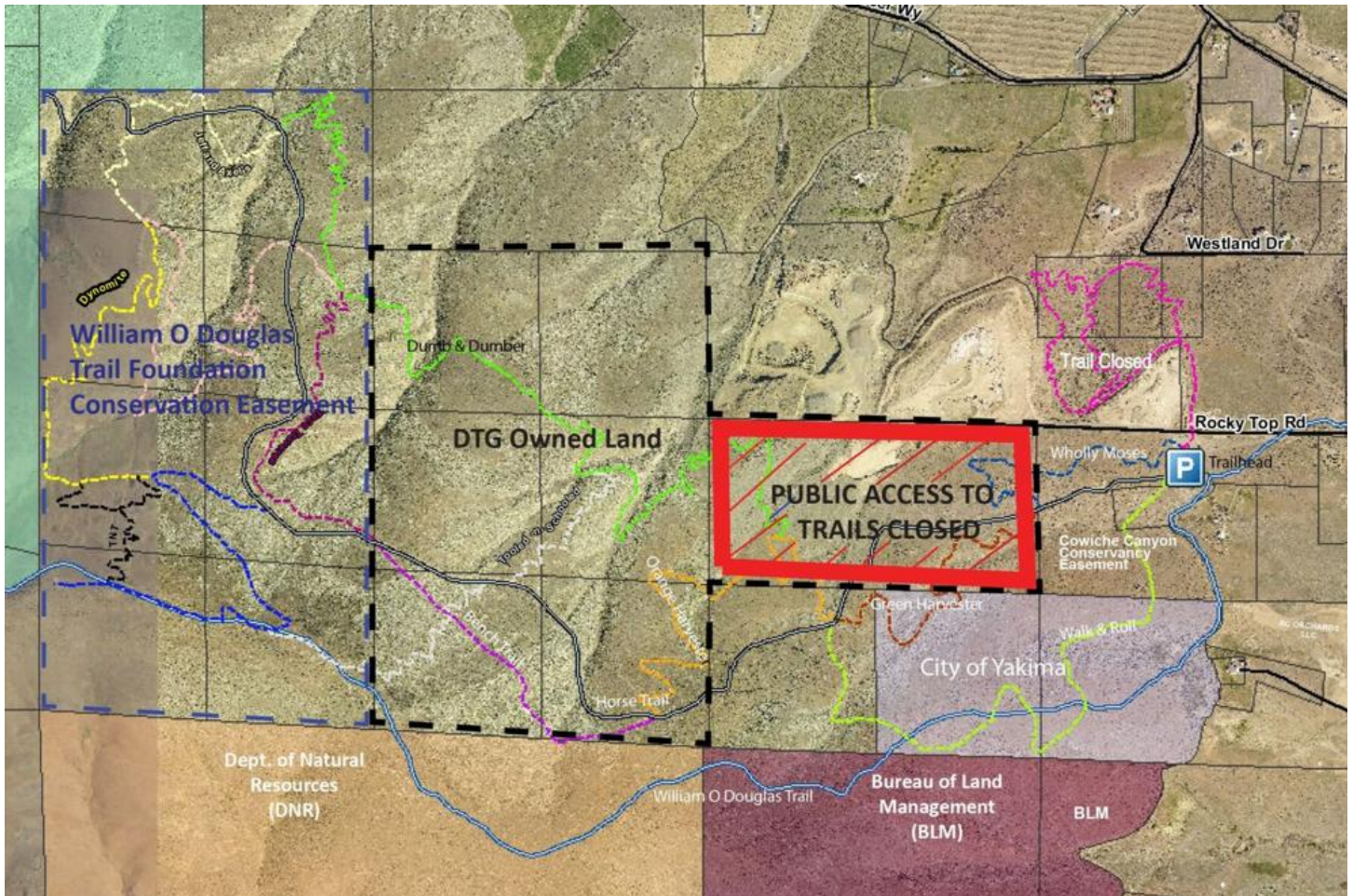
Members of the mountain bicyclists ride on Rocky Top trails on April 18, 2019, in Yakima.

Evan Abell, Yakima Herald-Republic file

Last week's permanent closure of 80 acres at Rocky Top left an uncertain future for the trail system geared towards mountain bikers and also enjoyed by hikers, trail runners and horseback riders.

DTG Recycle's news release announcing the decision came as a surprise to the three nonprofits responsible for public recreation on DTG's land — Cowiche Canyon Conservancy, Single Track Alliance of Yakima and the William O. Douglas Trail Foundation.

Despite taking away some key trails and connections from the system STAY created, DTG said it "understands the importance of recreational access and is working with the William O. Douglas Trail Foundation to maintain safe access to this historic trail."



This map from the Cowiche Canyon Conservancy shows new DTG closure areas at Rocky Top.
CCC

CCC executive director Celisa Hopkins said a fence and eventually a perimeter road will keep recreational users out of DTG’s planned expansion area for its limited purpose landfill. She’s working with Ray Paoella, the head of the William O. Douglas Trail Foundation, to see if STAY could reconnect its trails using the foundation’s easements.

“I believe the answer is yes that there’s a strong possibility that we can do that so that the public will continue to have full access to the general area,” Paoella said. “I’m really optimistic for the future that the community’s going to have a wide range of wonderful recreation opportunities out there for years to come.”

Historical access

Less than 20 years ago, members of the public couldn’t hike or do anything else on the shrubsteppe near the landfill.

Paoella, a former Cowiche Canyon Conservancy member who Hopkins called “instrumental” in securing access, said the landfill’s original owner wanted to develop the area. Eventually, CCC convinced Ron Anderson — not to be confused with the former Yakima County Commissioner of the same name — public access and conservation would provide a greater community benefit.

Anderson graded and graveled the public parking lot for the trailhead in 2005 when hiking in the area became legal. Over the next three years, city and county officials passed legislation to allow the William O. Douglas trail to move forward, and in 2009 Anderson granted a 40-acre conservation easement that included the trailhead and parking lot.

Hopkins said CCC began its dedicated presence in 2010 and STAY started building trails on the property when it formed the following year. Rocky Top quickly grew in popularity and even became one of two main practice sites for a mountain biking team started in 2018, which coach Gordon King said will have more than 15 riders next season.

“The trails at Rocky Top, they’re a little different than the trails at the (Cowiche) Uplands,” King said. “Some of them are a little more difficult, a little more technical, which was good for the kids.”

Paoella left the CCC’s board but kept working to develop the William O. Douglas trail, which stretches a total of 80 miles from Yakima to Mt. Rainier. He acquired two more conservation easements in the Rocky Top area — 240 acres in 2018 and 80 in 2021.

Meanwhile, DTG bought the landfill from Anderson in late 2019 and began to eliminate access in September 2020, when it closed the Gus’s Gully trail loop north of the parking lot. More closures followed as DTG’s rapid expansion of the landfill infringed on the Wholly Moses trail, always without warning, forcing STAY vice president Will Hollingbery to reroute the trail several times.

But according to Hollingbery, DTG told STAY it wouldn’t expand operations into any other parts of the trail system for another 20 years. In its release, the company noted the new fill area requiring last week’s closure was expected to “not be active for decades.”

Concerns moving forward

DTG blamed “neighbor complaints” for its change in plans, which Hollingbery was told happened too fast to give any advance warning.

Nancy Lust, a leader of the neighborhood group Friends of Rocky Top said last week’s closure will only steel the resolve of nearby homeowners to do what they can to ensure DTG complies with local and state regulations. Recent emails from the Yakima Health District and the Washington Department of Ecology, sent to the *Yakima Herald-Republic* by Scott Cave, show serious concerns regarding poor air quality.

Ecology’s Luke LeMond visited the site on Jan. 19 and observed evidence indicating more reason to believe the long-held concern of a subsurface fire on the west-to-northwest side of the landfill. He recorded soil temperatures 25 degrees higher than the road next to it and thermal images of cracks in one previously documented “hot spot” indicated temperatures of roughly 90 degrees, or 73 degrees warmer than the surrounding soil, according to Rivard’s report.

He also noted odor in several areas, corroborating an increased amount of neighbor complaints in recent months. In accordance with Ecology’s recommendations, the Yakima Health District sent a letter to DTG’s Mike Sheldon on Feb 2 that requires the company to develop a plan within 14 days for continuous monitoring of the air below and above the surface.

Those air quality concerns for neighbors and trail users alike worry Hollingbery as he tries to plan his next move. The closure left Walk N Roll as the only intact trail from the parking lot, leaving no alternatives for lost connections from the wider Horse Trail, as well as single track trails like Green Harvester and Orange Harvester.

Several trails on the west side of Rocky Top, including Tooled-n-Schooled and most of Orange Harvester and Dumb and Dumber remain open, but much more difficult to reach. That's especially true until April 1, when the higher elevation William O. Douglas trail generally reopens.

"I could have created a plan for working around it," Hollingbery said. "If they would work with us and tell us what they're doing and allow us to plan around it, we could have this be, from a trail user perspective, a thing of the past."

Instead, Yakima's mountain bikers in particular have fewer options, at least for now, and Hopkins, Hollingbery and others worry it will lead to increased biker-pedestrian conflicts at the nearby Cowiche Uplands trail system. King said that's where the mountain bike team plans to hold all of its practices, so they'll work with the kids to ensure they're taking adequate trail safety measures.

Hollingbery said STAY's continuing efforts to secure more permanent trails elsewhere, along with a City Council-approved pump track by the Randall dog park that could be built as soon as next summer if the group can raise \$1.2 million. But Hollingbery acknowledged it would be impossible to replace the Rocky Top trails and especially the memories and relationships created there by so many community members.

"The Wholly Moses trail is named after my dog and my dog's outlived it," Hollingbery said. "That's a little hard to swallow. The thing that hurts me the most is that the community's losing a resource."

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Luke Thompson

I'm Luke Thompson, a reporter in my seventh year at the YH-R following stints at seven publications in the preceding seven years. My primary focus is covering the many great prep sports stories in the Yakima Valley, as well as the sports at Yakima Valley College and Central Washington University. I also cover Pippins baseball and Outdoors features. After spending my childhood in Kansas followed by college at the University of Missouri and jobs at various papers in the South/Midwest, I've tried to make up for all those years without mountains by spending a lot of time in the Cascades skiing, hiking, camping, or just exploring on my own or with my wife and our dog.