FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: March 12, 2020

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RALLY AT IOWA CAPITOL CALLS FOR SUSTAINED INVESTMENT IN STATE’S TRAIL SYSTEM

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation release new data demonstrating $1 billion trail economy in Iowa

DES MOINES—Dozens of Iowans, trail supporters and business leaders gathered at the steps of the Iowa State Capitol today to send a clear message to the legislature: The time to invest in Iowa’s trails is now.

As the state legislature debates trail funding, including how best to leverage the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund (Trust Fund) to invest in trails, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) and Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) convened the rally with other partners across the state to release new data about the economic and health impact of Iowa’s trails.

A state-based analysis of RTC’s report, “Active Transportation Transforms America,” found that the net economic impact of trails and active transportation annually in Iowa is as much as $1.09 billion, including direct spending of up to $637 million and health costs avoided of $453 million. This analysis reveals Iowa’s role in contributing to the nation’s current annual trail and active transportation economy of $34.1 billion, which has the potential to grow to $138.5 billion each year as infrastructure connectivity improves.

“Iowa’s trail and outdoor recreation economy is an incredible asset. Like any asset, strategic investment is necessary for it to thrive,” said Brandi Horton, RTC’s vice president of communications. “As Iowa becomes a focal point of significant trail development in the nation, including more than 465 miles of the Great American Rail-Trail, there are powerful opportunities to leverage trails for economic development, rural resilience, tourism and health gains.”

According to RTC and INHF, millions of dollars are at stake, which could impact how Iowa’s trails are funded for the long term and the opportunity to deliver tremendous benefits to the state by moving forward significant projects such as the Iowa River’s Edge Trail and the Great American Rail-Trail, a 3,700-miles-plus cross-country route that traverses Iowa and will connect the state to the nation.

“Recreational trails bring an undeniable vibrancy to communities,” explained Anna Gray, INHF’s public policy director. “Our trail system is a valuable quality-of-life asset that can help address some of the state’s biggest challenges, such as recruiting workforce and retaining and attracting a new generation of Iowans.”

Earlier in the year, nearly a decade after Iowans overwhelmingly voted to create the Trust Fund, Gov. Kim Reynolds announced a commitment to investing in the program. This dedicated funding would provide as much as $171 million annually for clean water, healthy wildlife habitat and outdoor recreation projects—including significant and sustainable funding for trails.
At the rally, RTC and INHF called for the legislature to consider all of the opportunities to invest in Iowa’s trails, including supporting Gov. Kim Reynolds’ proposed Invest in Iowa Act that would fill the Trust Fund, and increasing funding for the state’s Recreational Trails Program, Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) program and Local Conservation Partnerships, which would be a new program funded by the Trust Fund.

RTC and INHF were joined at the rally by representatives from Iowa River’s Edge Trail, the Iowa Economic Development Authority, AARP Iowa, the Iowa Department of Public Health, the Iowa Bicycle Coalition and Bike World to highlight the many benefits and opportunities for trails across the state.

“Bicycling has a rich history in Iowa. Hundreds of thousands of people from around the world have ridden across our great state,” said Mark Wyatt, Iowa Bicycle Coalition’s executive director. “Our investments in trails have cemented our place in the world where people love to ride bikes. Greater investment in trails through the Invest in Iowa Act will accelerate community and workforce development. Most of all, trails make Iowa a great place to live.”

“Active Transportation Transforms America” Methodology
To determine the net economic impact of trails and active transportation in Iowa, RTC applied the methodology used to calculate the national figures for health cost savings and local spending impact. The net health cost savings was determined by applying the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s cost savings associated with increased physical activity ($630 to $1,437 in 2019 dollars) to Iowa’s population according to the U.S. Census 2018 population estimates (3.15 million), based on findings from the National Household Travel Survey that indicates 10% of the U.S. population meets physical activity guidelines through walking and biking. Local trail spending was calculated using RTC’s dataset of localized trail-spending studies, which finds average annual direct spending at trail-oriented and trail-adjacent businesses of $5 million to $7 million. These figures were then multiplied by the 91 open rail-trails in Iowa that are accounted for in RTC’s database of rail-trails nationwide.

Download the “Active Transportation Transforms America” report and view the methodology for the national study at railstotrails.org/atta.

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy is the nation’s largest trails organization—with a grassroots community more than 1 million strong—dedicated to connecting people and communities by creating a nationwide network of public trails, many from former rail lines. Connect with RTC at railstotrails.org and @railstotrails on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Learn more about RTC’s signature project, the Great American Rail-Trail, at greatamericanrailtrail.org.

Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation is a nonprofit conservation group that works to protect and restore Iowa’s land, water and wildlife. Since its founding in 1979, INHF has helped protect more than 175,000 acres and create more than 800 miles of trails. Learn more at inhf.org.