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CONTACT: Patricia Brooks, patricia@matchmapmedia.com, 202.351.1757

New Rails-to-Trails Conservancy Data Shows Strong Demand for Places to Walk, Bike and Be Active Outside

Trail Use Continues to Rise as Majority of Americans Say Trails are Important to Community Well-Being.

WASHINGTON—New data released today by Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC), the nation's largest trails advocacy organization, shows trail use and demand for trails rebounding to near the record-setting levels of the pandemic. The data includes an analysis of trail counts for 2022, alongside new findings from a benchmark study commissioned by the organization about the perceptions of trails and active transportation nationwide.

Nationwide, RTC's trail counters showed an average increase in trail use of 9.5% between 2022 and 2021, and a marginal 1.5% decline compared with 2020—the most significant year for trail use on record. Notably, trail use in 2022 is 45% higher than in 2019, demonstrating enduring demand for trails across the country.

"When trail use spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic, people were flocking to the outdoors to find safe spaces to connect with each other, to find respite and to be active. It was hard to predict the long-term implications of surging trail use in 2020," said Torsha Bhattacharya, Ph.D., research director at RTC. "Now, after several years of sustained demand for trails, it's clear that this is a trend and that this infrastructure is essential to people across the U.S. These consistently high levels of trail use reinforce how critical this infrastructure is to our physical and mental health—as well as the well-being of our communities."

In an online survey, RTC found that a majority of respondents (62%) report using trails once a week or less, but 24% say they're using trails more than they did in the past year, which is particularly true for Black (35%) and Latino (27%) trail users. In addition, many Americans say they're interested in using trails more than they do now—26% say a lot more and 36% say a little more. The majority also say that trails contribute to the well-being of the community—44% saying a great deal and 43% saying a moderate amount. Top reasons for using trails include exercise (66%), enjoying a bike ride or walk (59%), spending time in nature (52%), recreation (45%) and managing stress (45%).

"The public support and demand for trails tells us that we need to prioritize investment in trails in our communities—creating more access to trails, improved maintenance for trails and more programming to encourage inclusive trail experiences," said Bhattacharya.

RTC continues to recommend those who visit the nation's trails and outdoor spaces to share the trail and recreate responsibly, following guidelines to keep themselves and others safe while contributing to a welcoming and inclusive trail experience. Learn more at railstotrails.org/sharethetrail.

RTC's 2022 national trail count represents data collected from 26 Eco-Counters located on geographically diverse multiuse trails across the country. Trail organizations and municipalities interested in sharing their data with RTC's national trail count program can contact Torsha Bhattacharya at torsha@railstotrails.org. More information about trail counts is available at railstotrails.org/trailcount.

RTC's benchmark study was conducted online by the firm Stratalys Research between September 14-23, 2022, with a sample size of 1,200 adults over age 18, including an oversample of 200 Black and 200 Latino respondents.

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy is the nation's largest trails organization—with a grassroots community more than 1 million strong—dedicated to building a nation connected by trails, reimagining public spaces to create safe ways for everyone to walk, bike and be active outdoors. Connect with RTC at railstotrails.org and @railstotrails on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

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