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Social Distancing Made Simple on the Hatfield-McCoy Trail System



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Jeffrey Lusk is Executive Director of the Hatfield-McCoy Regional Recreation Authority, the multi-county economic development agency in charge of managing the over 700-mile Hatfield-McCoy Recreational Trail System in Southern West Virginia. He currently serves as the governor-appointed Chairman of the West Virginia Tourism Commission.

The Hatfield-McCoy Trail System has been open and growing the tourism economy of Southern West Virginia for 20 years. With more than 700 miles of trails on one million acres of property, the Trail System provides an expansive outdoor recreational venue for adventure seekers on All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs), Utility Terrain Vehicles (UTVs) and off-road motorcycles.

Last year marked the 20-year anniversary of the Trail System's opening, and 2020 was highly anticipated to be another record year of growth. The year started out great for the Trail System – ridership was up over 12 percent for the year by the end of February, and all indications pointed to a record spring. Then, on March 21, the world stopped. The Trail System was closed indefinitely as the State of West Virginia, under the leadership of Governor Jim Justice, responded to the national crisis of COVID-19, which was spreading rapidly throughout the northeastern United States and was making its way into West Virginia.

could be reopened on May 20, marking the end of a 62-day shutdown. The Governor's reopening order, as part of his West Virginia Strong plan, outlined procedures to not only protect trail riders but also our communities from potential spread of the virus as tourists returned to Southern West Virginia to ride the trails.

We had no idea if customers would actually return. During the shutdown, nearly \$1 million dollars in permit sales revenue alone were lost,



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The Trail System, its 65 lodging providers, eight ATV outfitters and numerous restaurants and small businesses could only wait, hope and pray that this closure was temporary. Their wish was granted when Governor Justice announced that the Hatfield-McCoy Trails

not to mention the financial impacts suffered by the communities and businesses that depend on visitor spending to keep them going. Most people were still not traveling, living in lockdown and socially avoiding others at all costs. The Trail System had to work out the

logistics of how to educate our communities, customers and vendors about the rules that must be followed as part of any reopening.

Two days before the start of the Memorial Day weekend, which is a historically big weekend for the trails every year, we officially reopened. It could not have gone any better, and the next seven months proved to be unlike any the Trail System had ever seen in its existence.

Memorial Day 2020 was the single best weekend in the 20-year history of the Trail System. We have grown every month since, not only recovering all the permit sales revenue lost during the shutdown but also increasing permit sales from 2019 totals. The underlying reason for the successful reopening is simple: people from across the country, looking for a safe place to vacation and bring their family, found West Virginia and the Hatfield-McCoy Trail System. A nationwide emphasis on social distancing and outdoor activities helped put our one million acres of property and 700+ miles of trails on the map as the perfect place to safely get away.

The West Virginia Strong reopening plan allowed the Trail System to operate and grow in a safe manner, and our communities have enjoyed the influx of tourism revenue. New ridership on the trails has driven much of this growth, and we believe these customers will be a permanent addition to the tourism economy in Southern West Virginia. Historically, over 75 percent of our current customers return annually, and over 50 percent make more than one trip each year.

So, 2020 ended up being a historic year for the Hatfield-McCoy Trail System, not for its 20-year anniversary or any grand celebrations of that milestone, but for the ability to survive and grow during a period of economic uncertainty unlike any other our country has experienced. The focus to get outside and play will not end with the COVID-19 crisis. Families and individuals have been introduced to our wonderful state's natural beauty and outdoor opportunities, and we know they will be back for more. And, once this pandemic is behind us, we know that they will be bringing their friends and additional family to enjoy the great outdoors of Almost Heaven. **V**

