



Centre for
Trail Excellence



Cost of Doing Nothing

Executive Summary

2026

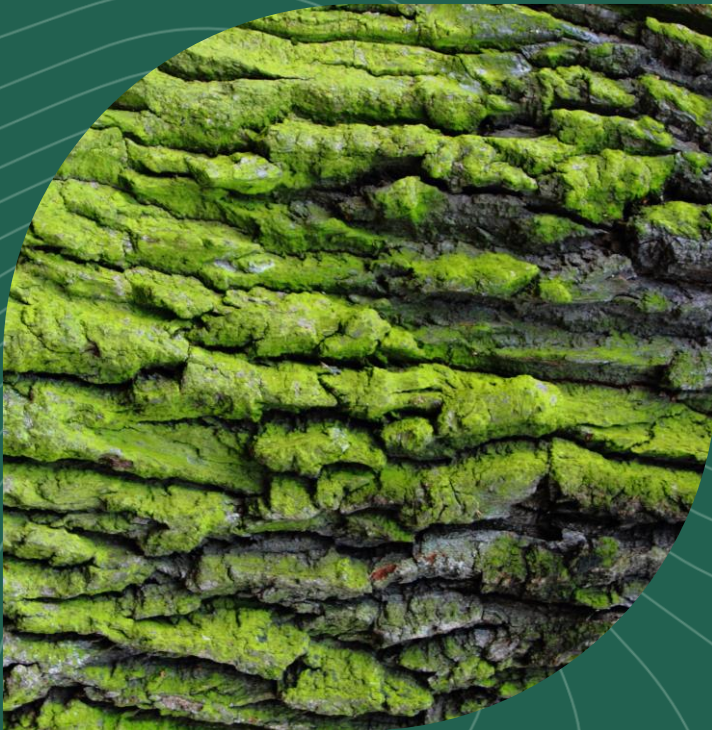
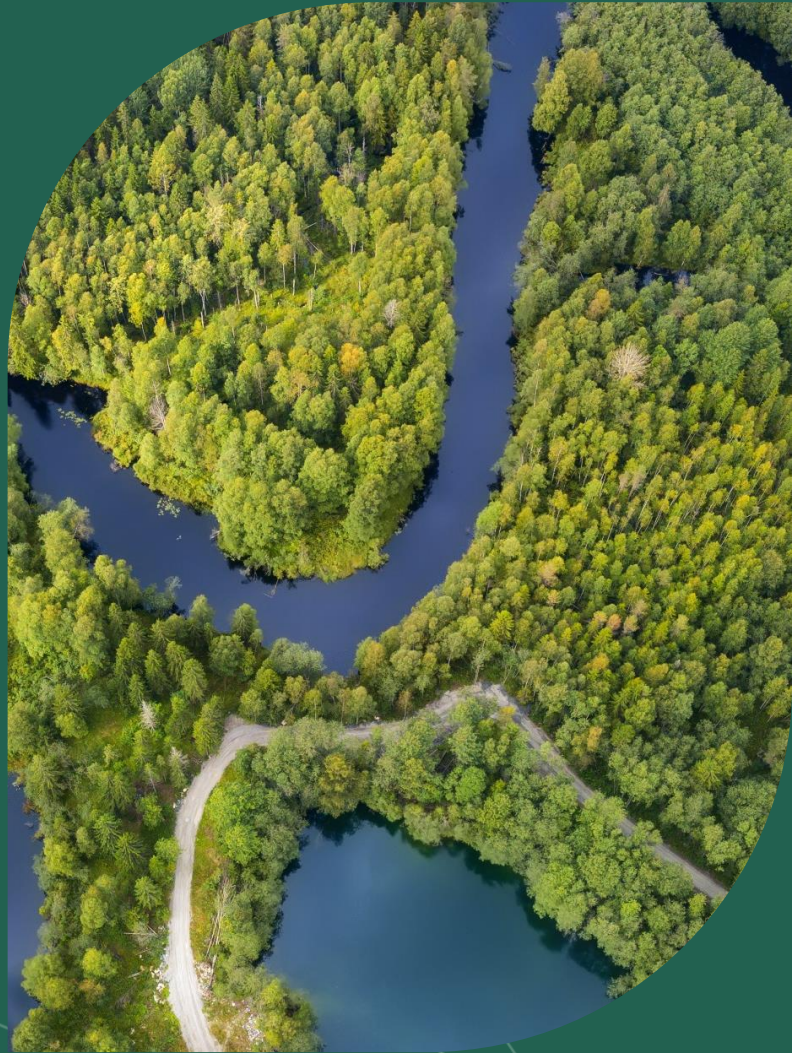




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Executive Summary

The Trans Canada Trail (the Trail) is the longest recreational trail network in the world. It is over 30,000 kilometres connecting communities in every Province and Territory, used by 29 million Canadians each year. It is maintained by 1,000 trail partners, most of them small community organizations that depend on external support to survive.

This report asks the question: **what would Canada stand to lose if the Trans Canada Trail no longer had a national organization to support it?**

The answer is billions of dollars and thousands of jobs. This is in addition to the intangible value that is harder to quantify: the erosion of a national asset that connects communities and provides Canadians with affordable access to nature and shared experience.

What Canada Stands to Lose by 2045

The following figures represent the annual difference between a fully supported trail network and one where the Trans Canada Trail organization (TCT) ceases to exist, projected to the year 2045.



Note: These categories capture different dimensions of impact and are not all additive. Tourism spending and user benefits, for example, partially overlap. The figures are presented to illustrate the range and scale of consequences, not as a single sum

The Trail Today

The Trans Canada Trail exists because of a simple, ambitious vision: a trail that would connect Canadians to nature and to one another. Since its founding in 1992, TCT has grown from an idea into a fully connected national network, achieved in 2017. Today, the Trail is more than a footpath. It is a multi-generational, pan-Canadian initiative that links more than 900 municipalities across the country.

TCT does not own or directly manage most of the trail network. It operates through a collaborative model, providing leadership, guidance, funding, and resources to 1,000 local trail partners. These partners, municipalities, trail associations, Indigenous communities, provincial parks, and other organizations, are the stewards who manage, maintain, and develop their local sections of the trail. Each section is shaped to reflect the unique character and geography of its community.

TCT's contribution is catalytic. Over the 2022–2024 period, TCT disbursed more than \$16 million to support trail projects ranging from maintenance and signage to large-scale construction. TCT's contribution averaged approximately 11% of total project costs, but in many cases it served as the critical early-stage funding that enabled projects to attract the additional Provincial, Federal, and private investment needed to move forward. For every dollar TCT contributes, trail partners typically catalyze \$3-5 in additional investment.

The organization's focus has now shifted from building a connected national trail to strengthening, protecting, and elevating the one that exists. TCT's strategic vision is organized around three priorities: improving infrastructure **quality**, expanding **accessibility** for all Canadians, and building long-term **resilience** in both the physical trail and the organizations that sustain it.

Two Diverging Futures

This study compares two scenarios over a twenty-year timeframe.

“Do Something”

In the "Do Something" scenario, TCT continues to operate as a fully funded national organization, providing seed funding, technical expertise, and strategic coordination to trail partners across Canada. This is an enhancement of the trail. TCT deepens its impact by expanding infrastructure investment, developing inclusive design toolkits, delivering promotional campaigns, supporting Indigenous-led initiatives, and advancing partnerships across the public, private, and civil society sectors.

Trail quality, accessibility, and resilience improve measurably over time. The network becomes safer, more inclusive, and better equipped to withstand climate events. More Canadians use the trail, including visitors with different accessibility needs and tourists from outside their home communities. The economic, health, and community benefits documented in this report grow accordingly.

Based on observed increases in trail use following recent TCT investments (e.g. the trail paving project in Magog, Quebec produced an 18% increase in visits per visitor compared to an adjacent unimproved section. The "Do Something" scenario assumes a 20% increase in trail visits per person achieved over ten years through quality and accessibility improvements.

"Do Nothing"

In the "Do Nothing" scenario, TCT ceases to exist. The physical trail doesn't disappear overnight. Many parts of the network predate TCT and have local support that may continue for some time. However, the sole national organization responsible for coordinating interjurisdictional trail development, channelling funding to local partners, sharing expertise and advocating for the trail sector at a national level is gone.

The consequences cascade through the network:

- **Funding Dries Up.** Without TCT's seed funding, many trail partners lose not just TCT's contribution but the additional Provincial, Federal and private investment it helped attract. Projects stall and maintenance is deferred.
- **Expertise and coordination disappear.** TCT provides centralized knowledge sharing, volunteer management support, and technical guidance that most local organizations cannot replicate on their own. Without it, trail standards diverge, best practices are lost, and the network fragments.
- **The trail loses its champion.** TCT's national communications, wayfinding support, and marketing efforts make the Trans Canada Trail visible and navigable as a unified network. Without this, the Trail fades from Canadian identity and culture.
- **Communities bear the burden.** For many rural and small-town communities, the Trail can provide tourism revenue, a source of local pride, and a connection to the broader national network. Without TCT's support, these communities maintain their sections alone, with more limited budgets and declining volunteer support.

The evidence for decline

We know this is not hypothetical; there are several examples of trails across the country degrading and losing visitation as a result. When an atmospheric river washed out a section of British Columbia's Kettle Valley Rail Trail in 2021, annual per-person visitation on the damaged section was 50% lower than on adjacent, intact sections despite the

damaged section having previously been the more popular of the two. When an ice storm struck the Beaver River Wetlands Trail in 2025, a similar decline in trail use followed. When trail infrastructure fails, people stop using it, and communities that depend on it feel the impact.

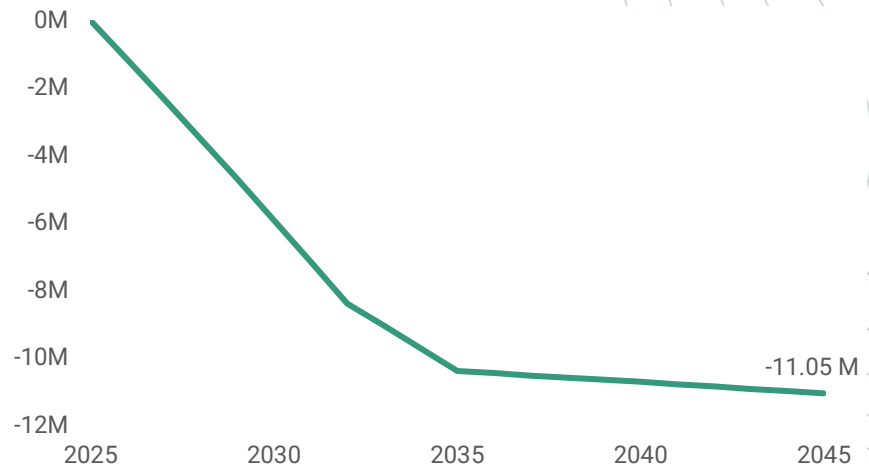
By 2045, the Trail is projected to receive 78 million fewer visits per year in the "Do Nothing" scenario compared to the "Do Something" scenario. That is a loss of 11 million unique visitors annually, which is equivalent to 23.4% of Canada's projected 2045 population of 47 million.

Which trails are most at risk?

Not all sections of the trail face the same vulnerability. The trails most at risk are dedicated trail sections in rural areas, small towns, and wilderness settings; they are the sections that depend on external funding and organizational support. This represents approximately 11,000 kilometers of trail, close to 50% of TCT's land-based network. It does not include major urban trails, road-based routes, water routes or self-sustaining backcountry trails that would persist regardless of TCT's existence.

Trail degradation does not require decades of under maintenance to become severe. A natural forest trail requires some resurfacing, hazard removal (e.g. fallen logs) and erosion maintenance every few years to maintain it in an accessible and quality condition for Canadians of all abilities and ages. As trails quickly become impassible or dangerous, people will start to feel unsafe on them and visitation will start to quickly decline within a couple of years.

ES-1: Estimated Decline in Annual Trail Users in the "Do Nothing" Scenario



Source: CPCS Analysis

Figure ES-2: Trail Length at Risk across Canada



The Cost of Inaction

The following sections summarize the five categories of impact quantified and assessed in this report. Each represents a different dimension of the same underlying problem: trail degradation and visitor decline driven by the loss of national coordination and investment.



Tourism and Local Economies

\$2.0 billion in lost tourism spending annually by 2045.

The Trail drives domestic and international tourism to communities of all sizes across Canada. In the “Do Nothing” scenario, declining trail quality and reduced visitation result in \$2.0 billion in lost tourism spending annually by 2045, disproportionately affecting small towns and rural areas. 97% of the loss comes from external visitors: people travelling from outside the local community to visit the trail. This spending represents injections of economic activity into trail regions across the country.

This represents approximately \$178 per person per year, or \$25 per trail visit. Under our sensitivity analysis this ranges from 1.9 billion to 2.1. billion depending on the levels of visitation decline as the trail degrades.

The associated decline in construction and maintenance spending puts approximately 1,000 jobs per year at risk, these are jobs that are concentrated in smaller urban areas and rural regions across Canada.



The value of the trail to Canadians

\$1.14 billion lost in user benefit annually by 2045.

Trail users derive value from using the Trail that goes beyond what they pay for it, which, in most cases, is nothing. Using a travel-cost model, which estimates value based on how far people travel to reach the trail, we estimate the average Canadian trail user values their access at \$103 per person per year, or \$15 per visit.

The trail is not a luxury. It is an accessible resource that delivers value to Canadians of all backgrounds and income levels. When the trail degrades and becomes impassable, the value disappears and disproportionately affects Canadians with limited mobility and those in communities where the trail may be one of the few available recreational amenities.



The growing cost of neglect

\$630 million in deferred maintenance liability by 2045

The most critical financial risk of the “Do Nothing” scenario is not the cost of maintaining the trail, it is the cost of not maintaining it. Research shows that a dollar of deferred maintenance leads to five or more dollars of future rehabilitations costs. When surfaces crack, drainage fails, or bridges go uninspected, the damage compounds. Brush grows over cleared paths, water infiltrates pavement, and small defects become structural failures.

Applied across approximately 11,000 kilometres of at-risk trail, this dynamic generates a deferred maintenance liability of approximately \$630 million by 2045, equivalent to 57,000 per kilometre. This is the cost that would come due if any future government, organization or community decided to restore the trail.

This figure is in real, 2025 dollars. With construction input costs rising well above general inflation over the past decade (e.g. lumber up 40% in the past ten years), the actual bill could exceed \$1 billion by the time it comes due. The longer the trail is neglected, the more expensive it becomes to fix. In contrast, maintaining a forested hard-packed trail can cost less than \$3,000 per year.



Health and Wellness

\$72 million per year in societal health costs by 2045 from reduced physical activity

Trail use is physical activity, and physical activity saves lives. Using the World Health Organization’s HEAT tool, we estimate that reduced trail use in the “Do Nothing” scenario contributes to 7-8 additional premature deaths per year by 2045, at a societal cost of \$72 million per year annually. The greatest impact occurs in the first decade, as degrading trail conditions produce a marked decline in exercise across the population.

These figures capture only the mortality cost of reduced physical activity. They do not include the broader health system costs of the increased morbidity, reduced mental health, and lower productivity, all of which are understood but not monetized in this analysis.

Previous TCT research estimated that the Trail, as a broader network, contributes to savings of approximately \$62.6 million in mental healthcare costs per year. While not included in the headline estimates, this indicates the scale of what is at risk.



Environmental stewardship

19,000 hectares of ecosystem at risk

The Trail passes through marine, wetland, forest, woodland, and grassland ecosystems that provide services valued at approximately \$100 million annually. This includes water filtration, carbon sequestration, pollination, climate regulation, and biodiversity support.

The environmental impact of inaction is nuanced. Fewer visitors may reduce wear on some ecosystems, but unmanaged trails attract improper use, including off-road vehicles, uncontrolled access, and trampling of sensitive habitats, that can cause far greater damage than managed recreation. Well-designed and maintained trails channel human activity along defined pathways, protecting adjacent ecosystems while educating visitors about conservation and responsible use.

Without active stewardship from TCT, the balance tips toward degradation. Trail corridors also serve as disaster response corridors in rural and remote areas; their degradation reduces the ability of emergency services to access communities during wildfires, floods, and other natural disasters.



National identity, Indigenous heritage and community connection

89% of Canadians say nature has the most powerful influence on their sense of identity.

The Trans Canada Trail is one of the very few truly pan-Canadian initiatives, built with and for communities in every Province and Territory. It carries the history of railway corridors and Indigenous trade routes. It provides a platform for sharing local culture with visitors and residents alike.

The trail sector that sustains this network is fragile. TCT's 2022 National Trail Sector Survey found that 57% of trail organizations operate on annual budgets of less than \$20,000. Seventy-six percent rely on volunteers, and 46% report that their average volunteer is between 45 and 60 years old. These organizations lack the reserves to weather the loss of national

coordination and funding. Without continued funding and support for these organizations, in the “Do Nothing” scenario, between 40 and 440 trail organizations are at risk of ceasing operations.

TCT's commitment to Indigenous reconciliation is substantive and growing. In 2024–25, TCT invested over \$525,000 in community trail projects supporting Indigenous communities across all Provinces and two Territories. In the “Do Nothing” scenario, these partnerships dissolve, and the funding that supports community-led trail and heritage projects disappears.



The virtuous cycle

These impacts do not occur in isolation, they interact through a self-reinforcing dynamic. Trail degradation reduces visitation, which erodes political support for funding, which makes it harder to attract volunteers, which accelerates further decline. Tourism losses reduce the economic rationale for local governments to invest in trail maintenance. Deferred maintenance grows the rehabilitation liability while the political, social and financial conditions for addressing it deteriorate in tandem.

This vicious cycle is the reason the “Do Nothing” scenario is not just a collection of discrete losses. It is a compounding trajectory of decline. Each year of inaction makes the cost of restoration higher, the communities affected increasingly disenfranchised, and the benefits harder to recover.

In the “Do Something” scenario the same dynamics operate in reverse. Investment leads to higher-quality trails, which attracts more visitors, which generates strong community support, which attracts further investment. This is the virtuous cycle, and it underpins the case for action.

The Case for Action

Preventing these losses does not require extraordinary spending. It requires sustained investment in a Canadian asset that already exists and delivers returns to society.

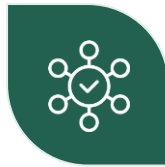
What investment buys

The Trail is not simply a recreational amenity, it is a piece of critical national infrastructure with tangible economic, health, environmental, and cultural benefits. The analysis in this report is organized around three strategic priorities that define what continued investment achieves:



Quality

Improving the physical standard of trail infrastructure (e.g., surfaces, bridges, signage, drainage), so that every section of the trail is safe, well-maintained, and provides a reliable experience for all users. Without quality, the trail degrades, visitation declines, and the \$2.0 billion in annual tourism spending and the \$1.14 billion in annual user benefits documented in this report erode accordingly.



Accessibility

Ensuring that more Canadians can use and benefit from the trail, including people of different physical abilities, income levels, and geographic locations. The trail is a low-cost, high-access public resource. Maintaining and expanding that accessibility protects its value to the 29 million Canadians who use it each year, and extends it to those who cannot currently use it.



Resilience

Making the trail network and organizations that sustain it more resilient to climate events, funding uncertainty and demographic change. This includes building organizational capacity among trail partners, diversifying funding sources, and designing infrastructure that can withstand increasingly severe weather. Without resilience, the vicious cycle of decline becomes inevitable.

TCT's funding model is designed to maximize the impact of every dollar invested. TCT's seed funding, typically up to 35% of a project's cost, catalyzes \$3-5 in additional investment from Provincial governments, Federal programs, and private donors. Removing TCT does not produce a proportional reduction in trail investment, it can collapse financing in communities.

TCT's funding enables quality, accessibility and resilience for the trail and trail sector more broadly. It mitigates the costs of inaction and provides a pathway for ongoing excellence. It avoids the unravelling of a network that took decades to build and is used by Canadians and tourists from all around the world.

The Trail is not simply a recreational amenity; it is a piece of critical national infrastructure with significant tangible and intangible benefits. It supports tourism in rural communities; it improves the health and wellbeing of Canadians and helps preserve Indigenous heritage and local history. It connects Canadians across the country to nature and their communities.

Maintaining trail quality requires between approximately \$3,000 and \$16,000 per kilometre per year, depending on surface type; however, TCT's funding is only a portion of that. The rest is generated by third parties (Provincial, Municipal, Community Organizations). TCT's funding model catalyzes other investment, acting as seed funding for trail projects. Removing TCT does not just eliminate its direct contribution, it collapses the broader funding, financing, and support ecosystem.

Years of inaction make the eventual cost of restoration higher, the communities affected increasingly disenfranchised, and the benefits harder to recover. The cost of doing nothing is the unravelling of a network that took decades to build and provides billions in benefits to Canadians.



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