

A Training Program
To assist BCH Chapters Monitor Implementation of
The Forest Service Trails Classification System

Part 1 – Why We Need to be Concerned:

Introduction: “In 1998, the Forest Service determined that a more uniform and integrated national trail classification system would improve inventory and on-the-ground management. Consequently, in 1999 the Forest Service transitioned from the three trail classes of way, secondary, and mainline to the five Trail Classes in effect today.” (FS RIN0596-AC47) The change created different trail classes for all major recreational users, many of which will not accommodate pack and saddle stock use. Back Country Horsemen are concerned that managers will assign trail classes that will not accommodate pack and saddle stock use on trails that were historically accessible to stock. Preliminary information received from the Forest Service indicates that as much as 59% of the existing trail system will not be managed for pack and saddle stock under the new system. Back Country Horsemen need to get involved in monitoring the implementation of the program or we may find that our favorite trails are no longer managed for our use.

BACKGROUND: The Forest Service Trail Classification System has changed standards for pack and saddle stock trails that evolved over, and have been time tested for, nearly a hundred years. From the time that the Forest Reserves were established in 1891 until the 1990s, trails were regarded as the primary transportation facility to provide for “(a) safe and unobstructed passage of loaded animals and foot travelers at a walking gait and in single file; and (b) durability designed to meet expected use and liability of damage from natural causes.” (Forest Service Trail Handbook, 1935). The historical trail classification included three classes of trails – mainline/primary, secondary and way. All would accommodate equestrian use -- mainline and secondary trails would accommodate both pack and saddle stock, and way trails would accommodate saddle stock.

The new classification system views trails in an entirely different manner -- as a recreational facility. Under the new system, trail management will be based on the management intent for the trail, as determined by the applicable land management plan or travel management decisions. It will provide a range of trail classes (development scales) from minimally developed to fully developed and different design parameters to accommodate Hiker/Pedestrian, Pack and Saddle, Bicycle, Motorcycle, All-Terrain Vehicle, Four Wheel Drive Vehicle, and several winter-sports activities. At the less developed levels, design parameters for Hiker/Pedestrian, Bicycles and Motorcycles will not accommodate pack and saddle stock use.

Prior to BCHA involvement, the new Pack and Saddle Stock parameters were marginal in designated wilderness, and the more primitive backcountry areas. Through our law suit and subsequent communications with the Forest Service we have negotiated pack and saddle stock parameters – **a menu of choices** – that will preserve our historic access to National Forest System Lands. **The menu, however, includes choices for other user types as well.** With as many as 5 different trail classes and 6 different classes of users (excluding snow and water trails), managers could potentially select from a menu of **24 different sets of parameters -- many of which would not accommodate either saddle or pack animals!**

MONITORING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE TRAIL CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM: When BCHA first got involved in the Trail Classification Process, we were concerned that managers would assign trail classes and design parameters that would not accommodate pack and saddle stock on trails that were historically accessible to stock. The court, using the Forest Service's own argument, established a standard for determining management intent. **"The managed and designed uses of a trail are established by individual forest staffs ... with the public's active assistance, and any changes require public involvement process and land management planning determinations, including appropriate [NEPA] review."**

THE TASK AHEAD!

1. To determine if the **"managed and designed use of trails"** or **"the physical characteristics of trails"** has changed as a result of implementation of the new trails classification system, and if so,
2. Were the changes established with **"active assistance"** or through **"a public involvement process and land management planning including [NEPA] review?"**

WHY DO WE NEED TO BE CONCERNED!

In the spring of 2009, BCHA requested data from the Forest Service on the amount of trails in the system that are managed and designed for pack and saddle stock use. The data revealed that 40% of the trail system was being managed for pack and saddle stock, and 41% was designed for pack and saddle stock.

59% of the trail system is not designed for, and may not, in the future, accommodate pack and saddle stock use!

This undoubtedly constitutes a major change in the managed and designed use of trails from the historical 3 class system -- mainline/primary, secondary, and way trails -- all of which (with some exceptions in special management areas) would accommodate saddle or pack and saddle stock use.

The Forest Service emphasized in the letter accompanying the implementation data that it was *"working/draft data. As we continue our training, data validation and update efforts Agency-wide, the quality of the information will improve."* It is preliminary data and may be changed as the quality of information improves! We have an opportunity, consistent with the court's decision, to help them improve the quality of that data. If we choose not to do so, ***we may find that our favorite trails are no longer managed for our use.***