

Jim McGarvey, Chairman

Back Country Horsemen of America

Unsolicited testimony for Hearing on “Impediments to Public Recreation on Public Lands”
House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulation
May 7, 2013

Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva, and members of the Subcommittee, I submit this testimony for your consideration. My name is Jim McGarvey; I am Chairman of Back Country Horsemen of America (BCHA). This year, BCHA celebrates its 40th anniversary as a service-oriented trails organization serving in partnership with public land management agencies.

BCHA’s mission is to perpetuate the common sense use and enjoyment of horses in America’s back country and wilderness and to **ensure that public lands remain open to recreational stock use**. BCHA’s volunteers have contributed over 3.3 million hours of volunteer time to trail maintenance over the past 18 years alone. We believe that **trails are a critical way to connect Americans, including youth, to the outdoors** and to ensure our wild heritage remains cherished and protected.

Recreation is a key economic driver for many rural communities located near public lands. Yet public lands recreation is facing traumatic budget cuts in FY 2014 – cuts that will further deprive all Americans access to the lands they love. **The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) trails budget line item has remained flat for over 30 years**, increasing only 1.75% since 1980 after adjusting for inflation. Meanwhile, miles of trail have grown 56.9% since 1977 to accommodate the 376% growth in annual visitor-days on the USFS trail system. **The trail maintenance backlog reached \$314 million as of FY 13 and continues to grow**. The challenge has been exacerbated on more than 10 million acres of forest land damaged by Mountain Pine Beetle. The number of downfallen trees over trails every year could be 10 times the average amount and could continue for periods of up to 20 years, dramatically adding to the maintenance backlog. This has resulted in **the biggest trail management challenge the USFS has experienced** since the trail system was constructed in the first half of the last century.

To remedy this, BCHA encourages Congress to support continued funding for federal agency trails in the FY14 budget process, including the Recreational Trails Program, Legacy Roads and Trails, and the Land and Water Conservation Fund. We also encourage Congress to assist the agencies in the development of programs that facilitate and enable volunteers to accomplish this important goal.

Lastly, BCHA has witnessed a disturbing trend among some National Park units to propose either eliminating or severely restricting use of recreational stock without adequate justification. The current **Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan/EIS** at Yosemite National Park offers a vivid illustration. The public comment period closed April 30 on the draft plan, which includes the proposal to eliminate popular outfitter-guided horseback rides in Yosemite Valley and drastic reductions in commercial stock outfitter use within the Yosemite backcountry. BCHA documented many flaws it believes affected the agency’s analysis, the most concerning being the agency’s failure to provide a scientific basis for the restrictions. We are gravely concerned with bias against horse/stock use demonstrated to date and that more restrictions could be forthcoming.

P.O. Box 1367, Graham WA 98338-1367 | Phone 888-893-5161 | www.backcountryhorse.com