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Contact: Back Country Horsemen of America, Peg Greiwe

1-888-893-5161

Back Country Horsemen of America Welcomes Illinois Trail Riders as Advocacy Partner

By Sarah Wynne Jackson

Back Country Horsemen of America, the leading organization in saving public lands for equestrian use, knows there are groups of equestrians across the nation who share their vision. Accomplishing the goal of preserving our right to ride on public lands will take a unified effort of pooled resources, networking, and shared information. To that end, BCHA invites organizations to become Advocacy Partners.

BCHA is pleased to announce its newest Advocacy Partner, the Illinois Trail Riders, a non-profit trails advocacy organization dedicated to helping horse people keep existing equestrian trails and camping facilities in Illinois. ITR is also committed to encouraging the development of new trails and facilities statewide. Before the BCHA Advocacy Partner Program was formed, ITR was a Bronze Spur member, contributing \$100-\$249 each year.

The Advocacy Partner Program

Since its introduction in 2008, Back Country Horsemen of America's Advocacy Partnership Program has grown in popularity as a way for groups of various sizes who believe in the mission of preserving trails for horse use to share in BCHA's strengths, information, and support.

Advocacy Partners gain a stronger voice on all issues because of their association with BCHA, and can draw on BCHA's expertise and resources when fighting local right to ride battles. BCHA also collects updates and information from Advocacy Partners to pass on to others so issues can be handled before it's too late.

About Illinois Trail Riders

With around 200 members scattered across the state, the Illinois Trail Riders (a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization) promotes the work of those actively endorsing trails in various areas of Illinois through coordination, networking, and other support.

In all cases, Illinois Trail Riders works with planners, managers, and legislators on behalf of trails advocacy throughout the state of Illinois. Like Back Country Horsemen of America, ITR has established good communication with planners at the federal, state, and local levels to assure that the recreational needs of riders are met.

ITR often interacts with Illinois Department of Natural Resources land management and planning employees to help local equestrians deal with issues that arise on various state-owned sites. ITR encourages and supports the efforts of local trail riders and saddle clubs who volunteer to maintain or build equestrian trails on public lands.

Like BCHA, the Illinois Trail Riders believe that horse owners and trail riders must be represented in the planning process when new trails are planned or recreational

opportunities are considered. Illinois Trail Riders is the connection between individual riders and organizations throughout the state. ITR offers expertise and information on a wide variety of trail planning, building, and maintenance issues to local and regional groups.

The goals of ITR include establishing the development of year-round horse trails with adequate parking and camping facilities; establishing and maintaining communication through all levels of public land management; educating trail developers in providing safe, multi-use trails and facilities; illustrating to legislators the importance of trail based recreation to the horse community and state economy; encouraging an unbiased approach to trail development with environmental groups; keeping existing trails open and defending our right to ride on trails throughout Illinois.

Challenges in Illinois

As with many states across the country, equestrians in Illinois face a variety of threats to their ability to enjoy our land by horseback.

Most public land in the state is front country; smaller properties of a few acres in the suburbs, many of which are not forested. They may be open parks that are heavily used by the rest of the public, not unlike New York City's Central Park or the borders of privately owned farm fields rich with corn, soy beans, and wheat. The majority of trails available to horses exist in park or forest preserve districts surrounding the region of Chicago. There are also over 300 miles of superb horse trails and private campgrounds in The Shawnee National Forest, in the southern most part of Illinois. This is thanks to the efforts of Illinois Trail Riders, Shawnee Trail Conservancy, Shawnee Back Country Horsemen, and other partners who work well with the US Forest Service.

Most of America's trail horses have to learn to negotiate difficult footing, varying terrain, and wildlife sightings. However, Illinois trail horses (especially in the Chicago collar counties) must be trained to accept fast moving traffic, baby strollers, umbrellas, running children, and almost silent bicycles whizzing past. In other parts of the state, large farm equipment is a common obstacle for horses.

Back Country Horsemen of America units often report seeing "automatic" increases in fees to access public lands and to park at trail heads. ITR states that recently the Cook County Forest Preserve District automatically raised access rates without public process. The cost of a bridle tag (required for horses in any Chicago park) increased 500% while other fees, such as gazebo rental and baseball diamond use, went up only 30% or 50%. With help from the Illinois Trail Riders board members, local equestrians were able to reverse this decision.

Illinois equestrians are frustrated that they are barred from many of the places appropriate for horseback riding. Due to a long hunting season and wet spring weather, trails and campgrounds on state owned land are closed to horses from October through April. Horses aren't allowed on many rail trail projects despite the fact that horse owners help pay for rail trails with the title transfer taxes on their cars, trucks, and trailers. Bicyclists and pedestrians (who pay fewer of these taxes because most of them drive only cars) enjoy these rail trails. ITR supports the recreational trail funding in the Federal transportation bill.

In an effort to increase the trail miles available to horse use, the Illinois Trail Riders are working to get access to places that must be kept clear anyway, such as power lines, ditches, and high pressure gas lines which sometimes parallel rail trails. They also seek safe riding opportunities on surfaces that parallel roads and public transportation corridors.

Illinois Trail Riders Publications

The Illinois Trail Riders publishes a handbook of trails, camps, and services throughout the state of Illinois. Now in its tenth edition, the Handbook has 300 pages of information on over 24,000 miles of rideable Illinois trails and trail riding resources. Divided by area with each site listing giving directions, a trail description, a detailed trail map, information on camping facilities, and a contact name and phone number, the Handbook is the ITR's sole source of funding besides memberships.

ITR's quarterly newsletter is a resource to keep equestrians advised on trail issues and is filled with current information on legislative matters, trail development, trail openings, surveys, conference notices and reports, and information from the United States Forest Service, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the Governor's Office and more.

About Back Country Horsemen of America

BCHA is a non-profit corporation made up of state organizations, affiliates, and at large members. Their efforts have brought about positive changes regarding the use of horses and stock in the wilderness and public lands.

If you want to know more about Back Country Horsemen of America or become a member, visit their website: www.backcountryhorse.com; call 888-893-5161; or write PO Box 1367, Graham, WA 98338-1367. The future of horse use on public lands is in our hands!

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