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**Back Country Horsemen of America
Announces 2012 Double Diamond Award Winners**
By Sarah Wynne Jackson

The name "Back Country Horsemen" carries weight. They are some of the most highly respected horse folks in the US. That's not surprising. Since 1973, they've been keeping trails open for horse use in a variety of ways, such as attending public land planning meetings, talking with legislators, working with governing agencies, and putting grunt labor to work maintaining trails.

With the annual Double Diamond Award, BCHA acknowledges a BCH unit that has exceeded even their high standards of public service. In 2012, two outstanding projects were selected for the Double Diamond Award, submitted by Show Me Missouri Back Country Horsemen and the San Geronio Pass unit of Back Country Horsemen of California. Both projects demonstrate how BCHA brings together public agencies and private interests to work for a common goal and access for all back country users.

Recognizing Excellence

Established in 2003 by the Back Country Horsemen of America National Board of Directors, the Double Diamond Award honors special projects and programs that best exemplify collaborative spirit, community awareness, and devotion to the mission and purpose of BCHA. Eligible projects and programs include, but are not limited to, trail maintenance, trail construction, trailhead construction, educational programs and youth programs.

Applications are judged on the scope and purpose of the project; the ways the project improved access or benefited the general public or public lands; what was involved in organizing the project; and how the project was accomplished from conception to completion. Applicants may include letters from agencies or private parties that worked with them on the project. Winners are announced at the Back Country Horsemen of America National Board Meeting annual banquet.

Thinking Outside the Box

The Show Me Missouri Back Country Horsemen project illustrates the innovative thinking and can-do attitude of BCH folks across the country. They used a first-of-its-kind approach in the Midwest to open a lengthy equine-accessible trail, linking multiple trail units managed by different public land managers and private land ownership.

The Roger Pryor Pioneer Back Country consists of over 60,000 acres in a remote corner of the Missouri Ozarks. Several trails for hikers and backpackers existed, but no trails for equine use. In some places, the new trail parallels the Ozark Trail on Roger Pryor land where equine access is not allowed. The Ozark Trail is a contiguous, 350-mile trail that travels through properties managed by several public land agencies. Equine access either has been or is currently restricted on land managed by the Missouri Department of Conservation.

The project started 2 1/2 years ago and opened a new 17 1/2-mile trail through public and private lands. The project opened a new trail for equine use and made it possible for contiguous equine usage through an area beginning at the northern boundary of the Roger Pryor Pioneer Back Country, running south/southwest. The trail connects the Mark Twain National Forest, Roger Pryor Pioneer Back Country, and the Missouri Department of Conservation lands.

Show Me Missouri Back Country Horsemen partnered with a number of other groups, including the Sierra Club, Ozark Trail Association, Missouri Department of Agriculture, and Missouri Department of Tourism. Two Recreational Trails Program grants were awarded to this project from the US Forest Service and the Missouri Department of Conservation. Volunteers logged over 180 hours to date, with an estimated 600 hours required over the next five years.

Clearing a Forest-Worth of Trees

In October, 2011, the equivalent of a high altitude jet stream came down to earth in the Mammoth Mountain and Mono Lake Ranger Districts of the Inyo National Forest. North winds blew at 100-120 mph and lasted five to six hours, with gusts at an estimated 160-180 mph.

The worst storm damage centered on Mammoth Ranger District in Reds Meadow Valley where over 400,000 trees toppled into massive matchstick piles, unearthed root balls tore up trail treads, and loose branches lay scattered on the forest floor.

This epic event, known as the Devil's Windstorm, required an equally epic clean-up effort. The San Geronio Pass unit of Back Country Horsemen of California gladly took on the challenge. Other BCHC folks joined in, including the Eastern Sierra unit, Mid Valley unit, Kern Sierra unit, and the Kern River Valley unit, as well as Friends of the Inyo.

Nineteen Back Country Horsemen of California volunteers contributed over 4500 hours, clearing damaged and downed trees, rebuilding torn up tread, and restoring a devastated trail system. They cut over 370 trees on 30 miles of trails. A total of 27 volunteers from a variety of support groups along with BCHC cleared a total of 4400 trees on over 340 miles of trails. This project,

completed in collaboration with other trail user groups and the US Forest Service, demonstrates how different trail user groups can work together to achieve the common goal of keeping trails open for all wilderness visitors.

Under an agreement with the Pacific Crest Trail and the US Forest Service, Back Country Horsemen of California also provided over 40 personnel for three weeks to tackle some of the worst sections of blow down on trails. BCHC assisted in supporting crews with needed supplies, and with tools and saw skills.

About Back Country Horsemen of America

BCHA commends Show Me Missouri Back Country Horsemen and the San Geronio Pass unit of Back Country Horsemen of California for committing to a task and seeing it through to completion. BCHA encourages every Back Country Horseman, from at-large members to its executive staff, to do everything to the best of their ability, doing the jobs that need doing, sharing the knowledge and experience they've earned, and conducting themselves as responsible stewards of the land we all love.

BCHA is a non-profit corporation made up of state organizations, affiliates, and at large members. Their efforts have brought about positive changes in regards to 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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