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**National Wilderness Conference**  
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**Back Country Horsemen—America’s Best Kept Secret in Wilderness Trail Stewardship**

A Panel Presentation Abstract, “Engaging the Full Spectrum of Wilderness Stewardship,” by:

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The founders of Back Country Horsemen of America lobbied for passage of the Wilderness Act over 50 years ago. Today, Back Country Horsemen are among the dwindling practitioners of wilderness tradition in their use of primitive tools to maintain trails and by their primitive mode of travel—a mode that was extolled and favored by wilderness champions that include Aldo Leopold, Teddy Roosevelt and Howard Zahniser. Yet some organizations fervently advocate that horses and mules should be strictly regulated or outright prohibited in Wilderness.

With ecosystems imperiled as a result of climate change and a century of fire suppression, are concerns from a few individuals who feign outrage at the site of horse manure on a Wilderness trail to be taken seriously? Do these newcomers fail to understand that the vast majority of trails in most Wilderness areas were constructed to accommodate saddle and pack stock use? Do they understand that the Back Country Horsemen are among the few organizations with a history of public service whose primary purpose is to keep trails open for everyone?

Packstock use represents a primary mode of travel for transporting materials and supplies to trail crews and restoration activities in Wilderness. Hike-in crews can carry-in tools and supplies only so far. Consistent with the “Keeping it Wild” philosophy, the desire of federal land management agencies to minimize use of helicopters and motorized equipment in Wilderness is expected to increase. Therefore, wilderness advocates that welcome this trend should realize that use of packstock is both necessary and desired in order to preserve and enhance wilderness character.

The 2014 fire season in California provided a good example of the importance of pack stock as a management tool in preserving wilderness character. Region 5 packers, stock and mule teams associated with the U.S. Forest Service Southern Center for Excellence (USFS SCE) worked on seven different wilderness fires. Suited to the rugged terrain, mules carried loads up to 160 pounds each and were capable of travel up to 30 miles in a single delivery. As a result, each mule string precluded the need for up to 12 helicopter supply trips. Pack stock operated throughout adverse weather, including 11 days when helicopters were grounded due to inversions. On those occasions, pack stock were the sole means of supplying back county fire crews, in many cases providing critical supplies and in two cases transporting sick firefighters out of the back country. A mule team supplied and operated by Back Country Horsemen of California evacuated a California Conservation Corps trail crew to a work camp away from an active fire area. Mule teams also were instrumental in saving the historic Hodges Cabin, located within the Trinity Alps Wilderness, during the early days of the Coffee Complex fire.

Overall, the USFS SCE estimated that pack stock use to fight wilderness fires eliminated the need for 110 helicopter flights during the 2014 fire season, reducing cost and exposure of personnel. Use of pack stock in lieu of helicopters also served to preserve and enhance wilderness character through the promotion of a primitive and time-honored mode of travel.