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Wild Riders Making a Difference for Horse Use on Public Lands

By Sarah Wynne Jackson

Only ten months ago, Back Country Horsemen of America and The Wilderness Society came together to form a partnership called Wild Riders, a group dedicated to preserving our traditional and historical ability to ride horses on public lands. In that short time, Wild Riders is already changing the landscape.

Coming Together for a Common Cause

The partnership is a natural one. Back Country Horsemen of America is dedicated to protecting our right to ride on public lands. If our wildernesses aren't preserved, where will we ride? Founded in 1935, The Wilderness Society's mission is to protect our wildernesses and inspire Americans to care for our wild places.

A number of The Wilderness Society's founders and early leaders were horse folks who explored our country's spectacular wild places with their constant equine companions.

Aldo Leopold helped found The Wilderness Society and is highly respected by Back Country Horsemen of America for his hard work in the preservation of our wilderness lands. Leopold spent many a day in the saddle in his early years as a young forest ranger in the wilds of eastern Arizona, near the Blue River. Longtime leader and inspiration to many generations of conservation-minded citizens, Mardy Murie is known as the grandmother of the conservation movement. Murie, on her faithful horse Lady, traveled extensively in undeveloped lands conducting research on elk herds with her naturalist husband Olaus.

As stated so succinctly by Bart Koehler, The Wilderness Society's Senior Wilderness Campaigns Director, at the first BCHA/TWS meeting: "You will hear echoes of your history in our history. Our historic TWS leaders would not have gotten where they needed to go without horses, mules, and pack trains. This is true for both their wild destinations and for striving towards the landmark legislation we know as The Wilderness Act."

Snap Into Action

Immediately after joining forces, Wild Riders developed a comprehensive action plan. Their goal: *to ensure that traditional, historical, and responsible pack and saddle stock use in wilderness areas is recognized, protected, supported, and sustained consistent with the capabilities of the land.*

Wild Riders will review current public lands management policies to ensure our future enjoyment of wilderness areas with horses. They will also look for opportunities to restore access for horseback riding and pack trains where they are appropriate on public lands.

As new wilderness areas are designated as public lands, Wild Riders will be there from the beginning, promoting the sustainable use of horses. Back Country Horsemen representatives local to the new wilderness will be involved with the planning process and advise Wild Riders regarding the best ways to make sure horses and mules are allowed on the new wilderness areas.

Open communication from Wild Riders with decision makers, such as key legislators and agency managers, will encourage them to do their part in preserving our ability to ride on public lands. Joint letters explain Wild Riders' position point by point, while on-the-ground meetings and organized rides demonstrate their message clearly.

All in a Day's Work

One of the Wild Riders' first projects was joint advocacy in support of the Forest Service Legacy Roads and Trails Remediation (LRTR) program, as provided in the House-passed Interior and Environment Appropriations Act for 2010.

The LRTR program provides a very important and urgently needed source of funding to restore healthy watersheds and improve recreational opportunities in our national forests. The U.S. Forest Service lacks the resources necessary to properly manage their more than 380,000 miles of roads and 153,000 miles of trails, of which 32,000 miles are in wilderness areas.

The LRTR enabled the Forest Service to decommission more than 500 miles of obsolete roads and to maintain an additional 2,600 miles of recreation trails last year. However, many thousands of miles of other road decommissioning and trail improvements are still needed, including repair of significant storm damage and deferred replacement of historic trail infrastructure that has not been addressed.

Congress appropriated \$50 million for the Legacy Roads and Trails Remediation program in 2009, a number that fell short of meeting the need. A large increase in LRTR funding for road decommissioning and other remediation work was needed for 2010 to accomplish essential watershed restoration work, improve water quality and fish habitat, and help defend national forest resources against the expected impacts of global climate change.

Back Country Horsemen of America and The Wilderness Society as Wild Riders wrote a joint letter to senators and congressmen, encouraging the provision of \$100 million in funding to the Forest Service for the LRTR in 2010 as a wise investment that would greatly benefit the public and our environment. Wild Riders are very pleased with the resulting \$90 million budget for LRTR this year.

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 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! Find out more about The Wilderness Society at www.wilderness.org.