

BCHA Double Diamond Award Application

Gila Chapter Back Country Horsemen of New Mexico (Gila BCH)
2025 Project Nomination

Executive Summary

In 2026, the Gila Chapter of the Back Country Horsemen of New Mexico (Gila BCH) celebrates its 25th anniversary (formed in 2001) by continuing to keep trails open for ALL in the Gila National Forest and surrounding wilderness areas. Over this quarter-century, the chapter has grown from small, member-led logging trips into a community-facing trail stewardship organization that plans, funds, and delivers multiple projects each year with complete, standard-to-spec maintenance: logging, brushing, tread and drainage work, cairns/route-finding, and trail signage. This includes over \$2 million in grants and in-kind donations towards trail work and trailhead improvements.

The 2025 “CDT and Connector Trails Restoration in the Gila Region” is a capstone example of today’s capacity. It required multi-trip coordination, mixed volunteer crews (hikers and equestrians), close collaboration with partners and land managers, and remote logistics supported by equine and llama pack strings - including drought-driven water hauls to backcountry camps. This project produced durable, safer travel on a nationally significant trail system while demonstrating the partnerships and professionalism Gila BCH has built over 25 years.

25-Year Evolution: Before and After

Gila BCH began as a small group of horse people who organized trainings, fun rides, and member-focused trail trips, with an emphasis on clearing downed timber so stock and other users could pass. Over time, the chapter intentionally expanded in three ways: (1) broader community service and volunteers beyond membership; (2) broader partnerships and funding; and (3) more complete trail maintenance that makes trails safer and longer-lasting - not just passable.

Milestones that show this growth:

- 2001-2016: Member-led projects and trainings; early corral repair/installation; advocacy for equine use; member-only logging-focused trail trips.
- 2019: Became an official 501(c)(3), enabling broader fundraising, grants, and community partnerships.
- 2021: Launched the public-facing trail information website (gilatrailsinfo.org) to help all users plan safer trips with current conditions and resources.
- 2022: Expanded to a two-seasonal-contractor trail program, pairing professional trail capacity with volunteer crews; leadership now represents 50+ combined years of local trail experience.
- 2024: Contributed significantly to the 100+ mile Centennial Trail effort as part of the Gila Wilderness Centennial. The Gila Wilderness is the first designated wilderness in the US.
- 2025: Delivered maintenance at scale - 170 miles maintained (74 miles deferred maintenance and 96 miles routine maintenance), 1,298 logs removed, and hundreds of markers/cairns and signs installed or improved, supported by 4,145 volunteer hours plus 3,729 contractor hours.

Seen in this light, the 2025 CDT work is not a one-off achievement; it is a culmination example of an organization that can plan and execute complex, multi-trip backcountry operations and deliver complete trail outcomes that stand up over time. This quote from the Gila Forest Service Trails Staff, during an email correspondence regarding planning for future trail improvements, summarizes Gila BCH’s positive effect: “Gila BCH is such a force for good around here, and is the reason why our wilderness trails haven’t been wiped off the map over the last twenty years.”

Project Summary (Who / What / Where / When / Why / How)

- **Who:** Gila Chapter, Back Country Horsemen of New Mexico (Gila BCH), a volunteer 501(c)(3) trail stewardship organization.
- **What:** 2025 CDT and connector/access trail restoration using hand tools consistent with wilderness restrictions: logging, brushing, tread repair, cairn building, drainage improvements, and trail signage.
- **Where:** Gila National Forest region: sections of the CDT and access/connector trails in the Gila and Aldo Leopold Wildernesses and surrounding forest lands, including work near Silver City, NM and remote backcountry areas.
- **When:** Multiple work periods February through August 2025 (with related CDT access work initiated in early 2026).
- **Why:** Downed timber, brush encroachment, tread degradation, and route-finding needs threatened safe access on a nationally significant trail system in a post-fire, remote environment.
- **How:** Multiple coordinated work parties supported by equine and llama pack strings to move tools, food, and water; mixed volunteer crews; and grant/donor support for materials, staffing, and logistics.

Detailed Project Description (Start to Finish)

Project planning prioritized restoring CDT segments and access routes needed for public travel and for safely staging remote maintenance. Because many work sites require a full day of travel to reach, the project integrated backcountry camps, pack support, and careful sequencing to open routes for stock and tool transport.

Implementation occurred in multiple phases:

- February 2025: CDT project south of Silver City. Three packers supported a base camp with food, water, tools, kitchen gear, and some personal gear. Crews completed brushing, logging, cairn building, and tread work on 4.5 miles.
- Early March: Day work on the Gnarly Trail (a CDT access trail) to improve access for subsequent work.
- Mid-March: Horse crew logged 10.25 miles of the CDT near Rocky Canyon and Bannon Park; additional volunteer logging opened the route for stock access to support later backcountry operations.
- April: Volunteers from two trailheads logged, brushed, built cairns, and spot-retreaded five miles of CDT plus two access trails (1.2 and 3 miles). They also logged an additional 4.7 miles of CDT.
- Late April / early May: Four-day backcountry project with the Continental Divide Trail Coalition; drought conditions required a 50-gallon water haul. Equine and llama packers supported the effort.
- August: Final connector trail work again required a 50-gallon water haul to a dry base camp and was supported by equine packers.

Logistics and risk management were central to success. In a very dry year, crews hauled up to 100 gallons of water to backcountry camps over the course of the season. Pack support enabled crews to bring in tools and supplies and to focus field time on productive trail work rather than heavy carry loads.

Outcomes and Measurable Results

CDT and Connector Trails Restoration (Project-Level Results):

- 21.5 miles of the CDT and 9.5 miles of connector/access trails improved.
- 201 downed logs removed using hand saws and crosscut saws in wilderness settings.
- 206 rock cairns constructed to improve route-finding.
- 71 dirt drains rehabilitated or constructed to improve tread sustainability and reduce erosion.
- Three trail signs constructed and installed.
- 1252 volunteer hours, 718 paid staff hours, and 51 horse/llama days.

- Map of work: [Gila BCH 2025 - CDT and Connector Trails - CalTopo](#)

2025 Gila BCH Trail Program (Context):

- 170 total miles of trail maintained across the Gila National Forest region in 2025 (74 miles deferred maintenance; 96 miles routine maintenance); 4145 volunteer hours contributed; and 1298 logs removed across 2025 projects (estimated volunteer time value: \$154,140). These results reflect a mature program that now routinely pairs logging with brushing, tread/drainage work, cairns, and signage—so trail projects are more complete and longer-lasting, not just passable.

Partnerships, Collaboration, and Funding

- Continental Divide Trail Coalition (partnered on a backcountry work period and portions of the overall effort).
- Gila National Forest and wilderness managers (coordination for priorities, access, and field operations).
- Volunteer hikers and equestrians; equine packers and llama packers who enabled remote logistics.
- Funding support included Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) funding, a National Forest Black Fire Rehabilitation grant, a New Mexico Outdoor Recreation Trails+ Grant, and private donors.

Community Awareness and Public Benefit

Gila BCH's work keeps trails open for ALL users - horseback riders, hikers, hunters, anglers, and mountain bikers - in a landscape where catastrophic fires, remote conditions, and budget constraints make trail stewardship both difficult and essential. A maintained, well-dispersed trail system supports visitor safety, protects resources by reducing user-created detours, and strengthens surrounding rural economies by enabling longer, safer backcountry trips.

In addition to on-the-ground work, Gila BCH provides region-wide trail information through the Gila Trails Info website (gilatrailsinfo.org), offering current trail information, seasonal condition guidance, water updates, maps, and newsletters to help visitors plan safer trips and to support community awareness.

Additional 2025 Chapter Highlight (Supporting Context)

Woody's Corral Trailhead Expansion - New Equestrian Facilities:

In 2025, Gila BCH completed new equestrian facilities at Woody's Corral Trailhead (a primary access point into the Gila Wilderness near the Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument). The project added eight new 20x30-foot corrals designed to disperse camping impacts and reduce overcrowding. Each corral set includes manure bays and frost-free hydrants, with a shared water trough outside the corrals. Partners included the Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument, the New Mexico state wildlife agency, and the Gila National Forest.

Photos: Click [Here](#)

Letter of support: Next page



File Code: 2300
Date: February 12, 2026

Back Country Horsemen of America National Board

PO Box 1182

Columbia Falls, MT. 59912-1182

Re: Letter of Support for BCHA Gila Chapter Double Diamond Award Nomination

Dear Volunteer Hours Committee,

This letter serves as a formal recommendation for the Gila Chapter Back Country Horsemen of New Mexico (Gila BCH) for the Double Diamond Award. Since its founding, Gila BCH has evolved into one of the Gila National Forest's most effective and dependable recreation stewardship partners.

Celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2026, Gila BCH has grown from a small equestrian group into a crucial high-capacity, volunteer-driven partner. Their work delivers comprehensive trail infrastructure improvements, including tread enhancement, drainage repair, brush removal, cairn placement, signage installation, and large-scale log removal. Gila BCH's accomplishments demonstrate a consistent ability to provide and improve safe, sustainable public access for equestrians, hikers, hunters, and anglers across a remote landscape, providing an essential economic driver for local communities in Southwestern New Mexico.

A primary example of this capacity is demonstrated through their collaboration with the Continental Divide Trail Coalition to maintain the Continental Divide Trail and its vital connector routes. During the 2025 season, the group contributed 4,145 total volunteer hours toward this effort, maintaining 170 miles of trail and removing 1298 logs to clear trail corridors. This partnership directly supports the U.S. Forest Service's core mission to expand recreation access and improve visitor experiences through shared stewardship. By addressing deferred maintenance and infrastructure resilience, Gila BCH aligns with national agency priorities through direct, on-the-ground action that delivers immediate benefits to the American people.

Beyond physical labor, Gila BCH provides a critical public service by maintaining a robust trail information website with current trail conditions for trip planning. This organization exemplifies long-term volunteer stewardship, significantly expanding the U.S. Forest Service's capacity to care for public lands and serve the community. Gila BCH is highly recommended for the Double Diamond Award for its dedication to the preservation of the Gila landscape.

Sincerely,

**CAMILLE
HOWES** Digitally signed by
CAMILLE HOWES
Date: 2026.02.13
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CAMILLE HOWES
FOREST SUPERVISOR

