



2009 Report on Equestrian Access on Federal Land



A study done by the
American Horse Council
to gather information about trail closures or
attempted trail closures on federal public lands.

In recent years a reduction of trails, trail heads and the closure of federal lands to horses and pack animals has been a growing concern for recreational riders around the country. There is a clear feeling among recreational riders that access to trails historically open to equestrians is being lost and a bias against equestrians by land managers is more prevalent. However, there is a lack of specific information regarding access issues on federal land including detailed examples, data on the scope of the problem, causes for this trend, etc.

In order for the horse community to combat this perceived loss of access the AHC determined that it was essential to gather information concerning this issue. This led the AHC to launch an effort to collect information on access issues equestrians are experiencing on federal lands. The center piece of this effort is an AHC online form riders can use to report their personal experiences regarding trails on federal lands that have been closed to them or other access issues. This online form is located at <https://www.horsecouncil.org/survey.php>.

The 2009 report is intended to provide a brief overview of the responses the AHC received in 2009. The AHC is continuing to collect reports of access issues that will be included in future reports.

Survey

The survey is an electronic form that allows recreational riders to report their experiences, access issues, closed trails or attempts to restrict equestrian access.

The survey asks respondents to provide specific information regarding their access issue. This includes, but is not limited to, the type of federal land, (National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, US Forest Service, etc) that is associated with the report, as well as the specific national park, forest, ranger district, trail, etc. Also asked is the reason for loss of access/trail closure or at least the stated reason, such as environmental impact, user conflict, maintenance, reclassification or parking restrictions and any agency process associated with an example like a public comment period or an environmental impact study.

Additionally, the survey requests any information regarding historical use by equestrians and volunteer work performed by equestrian groups on the land in question, and any problems of persistent conflict between users.

Initial Findings 2009

The equestrian access “survey” was operational in July of 2009, and by the end of 2009, the AHC had received over 100 responses. Some of the responses received are not completely applicable, such as a conflict with a new owner of private land to which a respondent previously had access. However, the AHC has received many complete reports.

The AHC also received a significant number of reports concerning access issues on state, county, and local public land. While the primary objective of the AHC is to document issues on federal land these reports are also of interest because they create a fuller picture of equestrian access issues throughout the country. Furthermore, they could be analyzed in-depth at a future date or be of use to state and local equestrian organizations such as State Horse Councils and trail riding

clubs. These reports clearly demonstrate the need for recreational riders to be active within their local communities and for State Horse Councils to actively engage their state legislators and land managers on equestrian access issues.

It should be noted that this is not a scientific survey. Individuals are self reporting based on their experiences and on their personal assessments. Reports have not been confirmed by the AHC.

As previously noted, the primary objective of the effort is to collect examples of access issues on federal land. The AHC to date has received 36 such reports. What follows is a basic overview of these reports.

2009 Overview

The majority of reports concern the National Park Service (NPS) **13** and National Forest Service (FS) **24**. However, reports were also received concerning land managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) **4**, the Army Corps of Engineers **2**, and the U.S. Fish and Wild life Service **2**.

Reports have been received from **26** different states including: North Carolina, Washington, Indiana, Oregon, California, Virginia, Arizona, Maine, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Colorado, Montana, New Jersey, Tennessee, Texas, Arkansas, New Mexico, Florida, Kentucky, Delaware, Georgia, Ohio, Idaho, Michigan, Missouri, and Massachusetts.

These reports primarily fall into several general categories of access issue.

- Loss of access due to a maintenance issue (maintenance related) **10**.
- Trails or areas where equestrian access has been restricted or a trail closed (restricted access) **25**.
- A trail or area has become unusable due to user conflict (user conflict) **1**.
- Several reports fall into an “other” category where the issue is not entirely clear or the respondent would like some improve made even if access has not been restricted or a trail closed.

The following is a breakdown of reports received based on the type of access issues by land agency.

- National Park Service: **8** reports of restricted access, **2** maintenance related reports, **3** other.
- Forest Service: **10** reports of restricted access, **8** maintenance related reports, **6** other.
- Army Corps of Engineers: **2** reports of restricted access.

- Bureau of Land Management: 2 report of restricted access, 1 maintenance related report, 1 user conflict.
- U.S. Fish and Wild life Service: 2 reports of restricted access,



Report Examples

Maintenance related examples

Reports of maintenance issues effecting equestrians can be varied and include land agencies allowing a particular trail to become usable, whole trail systems suffering from chronic lack of attention or roads to trailheads becoming inaccessible to horse trailers due to lack of maintenance. The following are excerpts from some of the responses the AHC has received to date.

Note: these excerpts are taken directly from the reports and are the exact words of the respondents.

1. Wayne National Forest Ohio does not have the man power or financial resources to maintain trails and refuses to let Ohio Horseman's Council to help maintain trails.

After eight years of OHC helping to set up the trails and have members willing to help maintain trails if allowed to ride for free or discounted price. However the forestry has raised riding rates and refuses to let us reopen around a slip that occurred in 2006 opting for closing half the riding trails and has not even cut

- fallen trees from the trails after several complaints from current paying riders in 2007.
2. Turkey Pen Gap Road access to Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina between Fletcher and Brevard. This is a narrow, pitted road that goes for a mile to a very small parking area. It is impossible for horse trailers to pass another vehicle on the access road or to park and maneuver in the parking area. A wider access road with more parking would allow safe access to the horse trails in the forest.
 3. The Gifford Pinchot NF has stated publicly that it has no money to maintain its existing system of trails,,,,,there are likely hundreds of miles of trails in this NF that have been closed due to neglect and lack of funds....while there are 'volunteer' organizations that help where they can.....and I always pack a scabbard saw when I ride into unfamiliar areas.....I cannot hope to keep up with the task at hand and have been 'turned back' several times....unable to negotiate the existing trail systems.....one way the NF system gets around this problem is by 'decommissioning' trail heads and trails. As I do not keep an accurate log of my travels, and the GPNF encompasses a very large land mass, suffice to say I have seen several erosion issues by determined folks who bypass the established treadworks of the established trails.
 4. Hoosier National Forest- specifically Charles Deam Wilderness Area.Many good trails and old roadways have been closed to equestrian travel. The USDA reason for this is supposedly due to trail erosion, maintenance, and environmental impacts which have never been legitimately documented. The Hoosier National Forest and the Deam Wilderness Area are located in southern Indiana and have historically been available for multiple use recreational activities including horseback riding. Beginning in 1989 the Forest Service initiated implementation of a new management plan for the Forest. It started with identification of "opportunity areas" that were individually analyzed with recommendations for changes to control what the Forest Service deemed to be "overuse" of the Forest, mainly by horse users, specifically in the Deam Wilderness Area. This analysis covered a ten year period and stated "trails that are severely eroded or run parallel to other trails, or in a poor location or present a safety hazard to users will be moved, closed and/or rehabilitated." In addition it went on to say "during the next ten years, existing trails will be maintained at a low standard trails generally will not be marked ..."

Restricted access examples

An initial examination of restricted access reports reveal that in most instances there was a clear history of equestrian use. Furthermore, in only a few examples of restricted access was the respondent aware of any public process or public comment period associated with the trail closure. Respondents in some cases are aware of a stated reason for restricted access for equestrians. However, in a number of instances the respondent is unaware of any reason behind a closure.

1. Acadia National Park on Mount Desert Island in Maine. Access has been denied for horses on a large portion of the "Carriage Roads". This access has been ongoing since the mid eighties and when I have inquired about why I have been given no answer. The Carriage Roads traverse Acadia National Park, built in the early 1900's by David Rockefeller for horses. There is a portion of them still open to equine use and there is a concession offering carriage rides and allowing access for people to bring their own riding horses for a fee. But this access is only on a portion of the Carriage roads. I live very close to one section of the Carriage roads that has been closed to equine traffic. I have requested information from Park administration as to why this has happened and if there is any way to open the closed areas. I have received no reply from them. In order to ride the carriage roads that are less than 1/2 mile from my stable I now need to trailer my horses 12 miles one way and pay to park my trailer. There are numerous horse owners in close proximity to me that would benefit from access to our traditional riding areas. In specific, the Paradise Hill / Witch Hole Loop Road.
2. Rock Castle Gorge (off the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia) has an equestrian history. There are several old homesteads in it's 7-8 mile length and, prior to being taken over by the NPS, horses and mules were the only means of transportation to the area. On Memorial Day 2006, my wife and I decided to enjoy the trail by horseback. She is 100% disabled and cannot walk or hike long distances (more than 1/4 mile) and horseback is the only way she can see and enjoy our trails. On that day we started at the top of the trail. There were no markings or signs prohibiting horses. When we got to the bottom, there was a sign which prohibited horses. Since our trailer was back up top, we rode back up. As we were loading the horses, a NPS law enforcement officer drove up and advised us that the trail is closed to horses. I must say that he was very courteous and understanding and did not issue us a citation. I feel that by closing the trails, the NPS and NFS are discriminating against the handicap in violation of the Disabilities Act.

According to the officer, the park superintendent does not want horses on the trail.

3. South Cherokee National Forest, Citico Creek Wilderness, east Tennessee. No reasons given. All at once, there were just new signs posted "No pack, draft or saddle animals..."
4. Toiyabe NF Carson RD Proposed Reno to Tahoe Rim Trail. Reason given was too many hikers when this is a section that casual hikers probably won't frequent. The real reason is that the ranger "didn't want horses in her meadow" as provided by another FS employee. Public comment was solicited... Was only given a few weeks. Deadline was vague.
5. Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest, Boulder Ranger District -- Boulder County, CO Brainard Lake Travel Management Area -- South St Vrain Trail, Waldrop

N. Trail, CMC South Trail, Little Raven Trail, Niwot Ridge Trail. Equestrians had historic use of these trails. During a recent re-evaluation of the Brainard Lake area, parking was removed, the lake and campground became "developed recreation areas" and horses were banned, and equestrians are no longer allowed on the trails listed above -- but mountain bikes are now allowed on the South St Vrain and Little Raven Trails when they never had been allowed there before (in fact, the boundary of the Indian Peaks Wilderness Area was "adjusted" specifically so that bikes could use the South St Vrain Trail!). Other trails we have lost in this area during the past decade include Pawnee Pass, Jean Lunning, Blue/Mitchell Lake, and Mount Audubon Trails in the Indian Peaks Wilderness Area, totaling approximately 30 miles and 100% of the trails. The Forest Service also tried to close the new James Peak Wilderness to equestrians, but I pointed out the historic access we have had there, and -- so far -- have staved off those closures.

User conflict example

1. Owyhee County, Idaho. The problem is not that BLM is actively denying trail access to equestrians. The problem is that BLM is not regulating motorized use of trails. The motorized users have caused so much damage (rutting, erosion) to the trails, that they have become unusable for equestrians.



Reports, Land agency, Location, State and Issue

Note: multiple reports for the same issue and location are not listed separately.

Trails or Areas Reported Closed to Equestrians

National Forest

- Roosevelt NF, Rawah wilderness, Colorado. Blue lake trail #959 (Trail closed to equestrians from March 15, to Sept 15).
- Hoosier NF, Deam Wilderness, Indiana. (Several trails closed to equestrians).
- Hoosier NF, Indiana (Limited access due to lack of parking facilities for horse trailers)
- Roosevelt NF, Bernard Lake Travel Management area, Colorado. South St Vrain, Waldrop N, CMC South, Little Raven, and Niwot Ridge Trails (all close to equestrians).
- Tooyabe NF, Nevada, Reno to Tahoe Rim Trail (closed to equestrians).
- Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, Montana. Zimmer creek trail #574, the lady of the Lake Trail #31 (closed to equestrians).
- Bozeman Ranger District, Montana. M trailhead and the Kirkhill trail #428, (Closed to Equestrians).
- Mount Rogers National Recreation Area, Virginia. Highlands Horse Trail (portions of trail closed).
- South Cherokee NF, Citico Creek Wilderness, Tennessee (Several trails closed).
- Clinch Ranger District, Virginia. Stone Mountain (closed to equestrians).

National Park Service

- Acadia NP, Maine. Carriage roads (limited access and a number of trails closed to equestrians).
- Blue ridge Parkway, Virginia. Rock castle Gorge (trail closed to equestrians).
- Delaware Water Gap National Recreational Area, New Jersey. (Limited access, some trails closed to equestrians).
- Allegheny Portage Railroad National Historic Site, Pennsylvania (closed to equestrians).

Bureau of Land Management

- Mica Mine trail, Bangs Canyon Recreation Area, Colorado (closed to equestrians).
- Fillmore Canyon trail, New Mexico (closed to equestrians).

US Fish and Wildlife

- Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge, Delaware (trail closed to equestrians). Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge, Massachusetts (no longer allows equestrians).

U.S. Army Corp of Engineers

- Masaryktown canal, Florida (closed to equestrians).
- J. Strom Thurmond Dam and Lake, Georgia (closed to equestrians).

Reported Maintenance Issues

National Forest

- Clinch Ranger District, Virginia. Stone Mountain (closed due to lack of maintenance and damage caused by ATVs).
- Chattahoochee National Forest, Chattooga Ranger District, Tennessee. Frady branch trail system (washed out trails).
- Wayne NF, Ohio. Kinderhook trailhead (reported lack of resources and manpower to maintain trails that has resulted in a loss of access to some trails).
- Pisgah NF, North Carolina. Turkey Pen Gap access road. (Road to parking area has become impassible to horse trailers.)
- Hoosier NF, Deam Wilderness, Indiana. (Loss in the number of trails open to equestrians due to lack of maintenance).
- Gifford Pinchot NF, Washington (lack of funding for train maintenance).
- Plumas NF, California (trails unusable or decommissioned due to lack of maintenance).
- Daniel Boone NF, Kentucky (lack of maintenance on trails).

National Park Service

- Grand Canyon NP, Arizona. North Kaibab Trail (closed while maintenance is performed).

Bureau of Land Management

- BLM, Sandy, Oregon. McIntyre ridge trail (access blocked due to maintenance issue).

Reported User Conflict

Bureau of Land Management

- Owyhee Field Office and recreation sites, Idaho (reported that motorized users have push equestrians off trails).

Other Reported issues

Forest Service

- Lizard Head Wilderness, Colorado (inadequate parking for horse trailers).

- Daniel Boone NF, Kentucky Cave Run area (new trail designation plan that could potential cause the loss of 35% of trails in the area to equestrian if adopted).
- Huron-Manistee National Forests, Pines Point recreation area, Michigan. (new recreation management plan).
- Angelina NF, Texas (respondent unable to get permits for organized trail rides or competitive endurance events).
- Cherokee NF, Tennessee. Sylco trailhead (inadequate parking, space for only 3 horse trailers).
- Cherokee NF, Tennessee. Rocky Fork area (uncertain whether or not equestrian access will be permitted).



National Park Service

- Ozark National Scenic Riverways, Missouri (over night horse camping no longer permitted).
- Buffalo National River, Arkansas (new general management plan).
- Spotsylvania Court House Battlefield, Virginia (equestrians allowed in the park, but no longer on the trails).

General Conclusions

It is difficult to make concrete conclusions from the reports the AHC received in 2009 at this time. As noted this is not a scientific survey. Individuals are self reporting based on their experiences and on their personal assessments. While efforts have been made to confirm locations it is beyond the capability of the AHC to physically confirm a particular trail is closed or in disrepair. Additionally, some reports are vague or incomplete. However, based on the reports received some tentative conclusions can be drawn.

There are several reports concerning maintenance issues on federal land that have effectively close areas to equestrians or limited the number of trails open to equestrians. This issue affects the recreational riding community as well as all recreational user groups. This issue seems to particularly prevalent on lands managed by the National Forest Service.

It is important that the recreational riding community work to make sure the federal land management agencies have adequate funding to maintain trails and recreational facilities. This includes making sure Congress knows the importance of such funding to equestrians both at the national level and from the grassroots. All recreational riders should let their elected representatives know how important adequately funding the federal land management agencies recreational programs are to them.

Respondents also reported significant numbers of trails that they had previously had access to closed to equestrians in recent years. Many did not know the reasoning behind these closures. Some reported new management plans that resulted in the loss of trails, and some reported rumors of bias against horses by local land managers or complaints by other user groups for the closures. It is difficult to make absolute assertions at this time.

It is clear that some equestrians are losing access to trails, and that this loss of access is not attributable to any one cause. It will be the continuing goal of the AHC to determine the extent equestrians have lost access to trails, the reasons behind these losses and develop strategies to combat the loss of access.

It remains important that recreational riders continue to report their experiences to enable the AHC to create a complete picture of the access issues facing equestrians around the country. The AHC will use this information to work with both the land management agencies and Congress to address access issues facing equestrians.