

## What Equestrians Need to Know About the USDA 10-Year Trail Shared Stewardship Challenge

Equine access to public land is very important to our equine community as recreational riding represents a significant segment of equine activities in the United States. According to the results of the American Horse Council's 2017 Economic Impact Study of the U.S. Horse Industry, in the equine recreation sector 13 million households participated in trail riding, and 87% of them did so on public land.

With over 159,000 miles of trails, the US Forest Service manages the largest system of trails in the country, including more than 10,000 miles of designated historic, scenic, and recreational trails. This presents tremendous opportunities for horsemen and women to saddle up and experience the great outdoors from the vantage point of horseback. Hitting the trails provides a great relaxing recreational experience for both horse and rider.

With so many miles of trails however, it is no wonder that maintenance of these trails is a huge undertaking that has resulted in significant backlogs, since the maintenance of these trails nationwide is dependent on Forest Service employees, volunteers, partners, communities and Tribes and Tribal organizations. According to the USDA, in 2019 only 24% of National Forest System trails met agency standards for safety and high-quality recreation.

Recognizing these challenges, the USDA has initiated the **10-Year Trail Shared Stewardship Challenge**. According to the USDA, "over the next decade, Forest Service employees, together with Federal partners, States, communities, Tribes and Tribal organizations, volunteers, partners, and others are encouraged and challenged to prioritize, invest and innovate to achieve a sustainable system of trails under the Trail Challenge, which will institute an ongoing way of doing business shifting the collective focus on trails to be more strategic than reactive." The Trail Challenge will focus combined efforts of employees, volunteers, and partners to increase efficiencies and capacity, eliminate obstacles and lead to a more sustainable National Forest trails system that is more economically viable, socially valued and supports ecological resiliency. The shift to a more strategic focus will allow the Forest Service to better serve the public and take advantage of opportunities like the Great American Outdoors. For a summary of the GAO, go to [Great American Outdoors Act of 2020 – Overview and Implementation : ELCR](#).



*Recreational riding on public lands brings us out into nature, providing varied experiences for both horse and rider. Photo credit Roy Cornett.*

## 10-Year Trail Challenge Goals:

- Improve the collective capacity to care for trails over the long term.
- Directly increase on-the-ground results benefitting trails.



Equestrian groups like Back Country Horsemen of America play a vital role in maintaining trails on public land. Photo credit BCHA.

## 10-Year Trail Challenge Phases

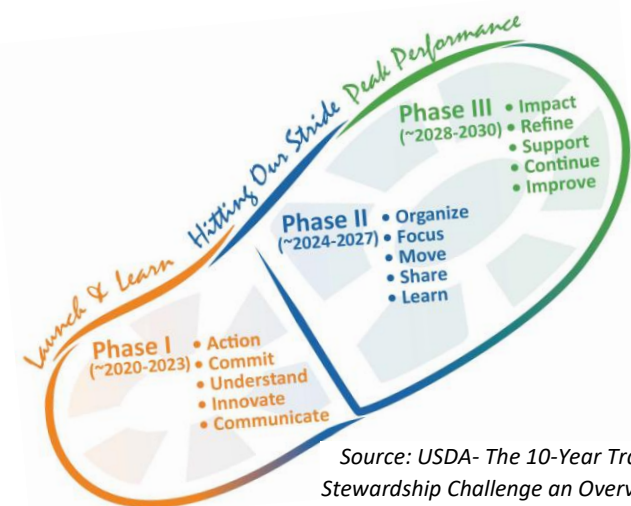
The Trail Challenge consists of ten elements or focus areas that will be implemented in three phases, with each element having corresponding outcomes and metrics for accountability and to track progress. The focus areas/elements are a subset of 26 action items described in the USDA National Strategy for a Sustainable Trail System ([National Strategy for a Sustainable Trail System | US Forest Service - usda.gov](#)) with some of them accomplishing requirements of the National Forest System Trails Stewardship Act of 2016 ([National Forest System Trails Stewardship Act | US Forest Service - usda.gov](#)).

## The USDA describes the three phases of the 10-Year Trail Challenge as:

**Phase 1: Launch and Learn**-learning, growing, and sharing tools and successes.

**Phase 2: Hitting our Stride**- trails will have been assessed for sustainability and applying learning more broadly as well as implementing more elements of the Challenge.

**Phase 3: Peak Performance**-achieving more sustainable trails, continue to close gaps, function as a professional, collaborative trail community.



Source: USDA- The 10-Year Trail Stewardship Challenge an Overview

The first phase **Launch and Learn**, which runs from 2020-2023, is about getting organized, developing tools, and opening lines of communication within the USDA and with partners, volunteers, and communities. This phase will also focus on two of the ten elements mentioned above, establish a Trail Advisory Group and Meet Data Standards.

Lessons learned during the **Launch and Learn** phase will ultimately help fine tune, standardize, and set the requirements of the remaining Trail Challenge phases. Each phase is designed to help the trail community progressively meet the ten elements or focus areas as mentioned above.

## 10-Year Trail Challenge Outcomes

The USDA has identified the following outcomes for the Trail Challenge.

- Systematic assessment of trail workforce capacity and trail sustainability to identify and close gaps.
- Engaging and sharing leadership with local communities/stakeholders in trail priorities.
- Developing online toolboxes including best practices, success stories and reference documents.
- Better Forest Service trail data and reporting systems.
- Incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion principles in all aspects of the collective work.



*A group of local equestrian volunteers engaging in stewardship activities in the Daniel Boone National Forest. Photo credit Edith Conyers.*

Access to US Forest Service trails presents a tremendous recreational opportunity for equestrians now and into the future. A sustainable trail system is in the interest of all user groups. And as a user group, public land managers have long recognized the importance equestrians play in stewardship of public trails.

As a result, the equestrian community has an important role to play in the Trail Challenge to help support access to sustainable public trails and the US Forest Service welcomes their involvement.

### So, what can equestrians do?

The 10 Year Challenge Guidebook lists the actions and metrics the US Forest Service will be working on. While some may be specifically targeted to

partners, others may be something individual equestrian clubs could work on within a forest. Alternatively, equestrians can opt to join in with others or community collaboratives to make sure the equine community is represented demonstrating what they can bring to the table to help support the Challenge.

Below are just a few examples of how equestrians can support the Challenge.

- One of the 10 elements described in the Guidebook is user ethics. Under this element a local equestrian group could consider organizing to enhance user ethics in the equestrian community or extended trail community. Or work to become Leave No Trace Master's and Educators and hold sessions within the local community. Maybe even partner with nearby stables or outfitters and guides that use public equestrian

trails and work to make sure they include Leave No Trace or user ethics information so that equestrians visiting the area have the best information available and know to pack it in/pack it out, etc.

- Organize saw trainings for clubs and organizations and put together a saw response team to get the trails reopened after storm damage.
- Organize a trail maintenance team within the equestrian community or larger trail community.
- Help with the trail assessments.

With any of these activities, equestrians would first need to meet with their local district office and talk through what items they could work on to assist the forest or district with moving the needle on the 10 Year Challenge.

For additional information including instructions, examples, and reporting details, refer to the online guidebook posted on the Trail Challenge webpage at <https://www.fs.fed.us/managing-land/trails/10YTC>.

To learn more, see the [10-Year Trail Shared Stewardship Challenge Phase 1: Launch and Learn Guidebook \(usda.gov\)](https://www.usda.gov/10-year-trail-shared-stewardship-challenge-phase-1-launch-and-learn-guidebook)

**So, let's saddle up to support the USDA 10-Year Trail Shared Stewardship Challenge!**

#### **Additional Resources:**

[Webinar Recording: Great American Outdoors Act Webinar : ELCR](#)

[Great American Outdoors Act of 2020 – Overview and Implementation : ELCR](#).

[10-Year Trail Shared Stewardship Challenge Phase 1: Launch and Learn Guidebook \(usda.gov\)](https://www.usda.gov/10-year-trail-shared-stewardship-challenge-phase-1-launch-and-learn-guidebook)