

USDA Forest Service Recommended Best Practices for Managing Stock Use Sites at Developed Campgrounds

The recreational use of public lands has been steadily increasing over many decades due to factors such as increased population, expanded interest in healthy living, new outdoor recreational activities and advancements in technology and equipment. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on outdoor recreational activity across outdoor recreation sectors.

According to a study commissioned by the Outdoor Industry Association, 8.1 million more Americans hiked in 2020 versus 2019. Furthermore, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, automated counters at trail systems around the country recorded four times as many users compared to the same timeframe in 2019. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy reported a 79% spike in usage nationwide between March and July of 2020. The feedback we are getting from our local equestrian partners in many parts of the country support this data.

While it is great that so many more Americans are out enjoying recreational activities, the increase in usage can lead to issues and conflicts. In 2021, Back Country Horsemen of American (BCHA) alerted the American Horse Council's Recreation, Trails, and Land-Use (RTLU) Committee about the issue of an increased number of campers without livestock camping in livestock campgrounds, and while this had been a problem prior to the pandemic it was clearly becoming an even more significant problem in some camping areas. The problem of campers without livestock occupying horse camps escalated across the nation during the COVID pandemic, when many families and others chose close-to-home vacations in favor of long-distance travel.



Bull Trout Lake Horse Camp -Boise National Forest (credit: Freddy Dunn)

A Horse Camp Working Group was organized by the RTLU Committee under the leadership of BCHA that included the American Horse Council, American Endurance Ride Conference, Equine Land Conservation Resource, and others to investigate the livestock camping issue further. BCHA and the Horse Camp Working Group approached the United States Forest Service regarding what options exist to minimize the extent to which parties without stock were occupying designated equestrian

campsites throughout the National Forest System. It was pointed out that agency policy for developed campgrounds prohibits parties from “Bringing in or possessing a saddle, pack or draft animal except as authorized by posted instructions” meaning parties with stock are prohibited by law from occupying Forest Service campsites that are not designated for equestrian use.

However no corresponding regulation exists that prevents parties without stock from occupying developed equestrian campsites. At the prompting of BCHA and its allies last month the Forest Service national office circulated a memo to all national forests and national grasslands titled “Recommended Best Practices for Managing Stock Use Sites at Developed Campgrounds.” The Forest Service memo describes well the implications to stock users of this growing problem. A copy of that memo can be [found here](#)

Equestrians are encouraged to review this memo and to use it as a reason to schedule a meeting with personnel at their local national forest to assist them in achieving the following objectives:

- Ensure the memo was received by the local Forest Service office,
- Discuss with forest staff the magnitude of the problem locally and the memo's relevancy and implications, and
- Come to agreement on what adjustments in the management of equestrian campsites within Forest Service jurisdiction might be implemented to communicate to the public the need to prioritize equestrian campsites for use by parties with stock.

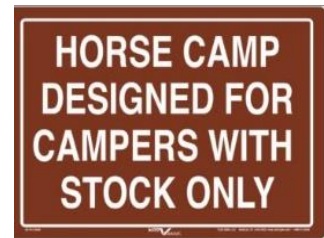
Horse Camp Incident Report Form

To help identify specific locations where this issue is most problematic, BCHA and its allies developed a **Horse Camp Incident Report** form for equestrians to capture and record incidents where parties without stock are occupying Forest Service equestrian campsites. The printable form can be [found here](#). An online version of the form can be [accessed here](#).

The purpose of the form is to support BCHA, and its allies should there be a need to make the case for new regulations to prevent parties without stock from occupying equestrian campsites. BCHA and its allies are pleased that the Forest Service issued the memo on "Recommended Best Practices for Managing Stock Use Sites at Developed Campgrounds" to field staff as it represents a logical first step of using education as a tool to help lessen the problem.

Special notes:

- Always be courteous to other campground users. It is likely that any party without stock has occupied an equestrian campsite because regular campsites were already taken or reserved.
- Remember, it is not illegal for others to camp in an equestrian campsite. Plus, some folks might not know the difference between an equestrian and regular campsite or why their occupancy of an equestrian campsite might force equestrians to travel further distances to secure a legal campsite—if not forced to return home, an outing ruined.



If you end up speaking with such parties, use these talking points to educate them about the scarcity of legal campsites for equestrian use and what happens when parties without stock occupy equestrian campsites.

ELCR wants to thank our partner BCHA www.BCHA.org for their work and leadership on the horse campground issue.

