

Good Things Do Happen!

History of Trails on Public and Private Lands in PA Over the Last Decade

The Allegheny National Forest (ANF) is managed by the United States Dept. of Agriculture (USDA). Because the land is public (tax supported land) they must have a written, published Forest Plan on how they will manage the 513,175 acres of the ANF. As most heavily wooded National Forests, the primary focus is managing the forest resources as well as water protection in the forest. Recreation is also a part of their mandate, but must fit into the overall primary goals.

These revision plans were open for public comment and there were public meetings several times and places throughout the process. Individuals could learn about the plan and participate and have input in the process.

As demands on the natural resources increase, these plans must be rewritten periodically to protect the resources. Protection of the resources does not always mean limiting use, but using the land responsibly. Without help maintaining equestrian trails and learning to Ride Smarter, we will lose access. The plan, which was open for public comment, created an outcry in the summer of 2005 when it revealed horse access would be limited to about 12% of the forest. The 12% was distributed across three areas referred to as Equestrian Use Areas (EUA) and would limit riding to designated trails in those areas only.

The ANF has had an organized volunteer effort from the ATV, snowmobile and hiking groups who offer help almost monthly to protect their access. About ten years ago a group of horse folks did meet with the ANF staff and said they would help them. As time went by, the equestrians' enthusiasm waned and only a few individuals were active. It appeared to the forest that the horse folks just didn't care. In some areas of the forest equestrians have been off the radar completely.

With budget cuts and the added expense of natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, forest fires, floods and tornados, both domestic and foreign, there is a tremendous strain on the federal government. Funding for recreational management needs will not be a top priority.

Without organized equestrian groups to help maintain trails and facilities, as other user groups do, the ANF has no choice but to curtail access in order to manage the land within the environmental laws and regulations under which they are bound.

At the end of July 2005, there was a spirited meeting with accounts of 100 people attending. This was the catalyst for the formation of an equestrian group, the Allegheny National Forest - Equine Advisory Committee, ANF-EAC. Over the following months the committee had met many times and has met with the ANF forest plan writing staff and recreational personnel to see what could be done to stay the closure of 88% of the Forest. The ANF-EAC's main focus was to keep access to the forest for open riding (not on designated trails). It also became apparent that there are some heavily used areas that had erosion; some sensitive areas

protected by Federal Regulations were being impacted as well as safety issues that must be dealt with if trails and riding were going to continue.

The bottom line is the ANF staff needs help with trails, and equestrians who want to continue to open ride outside the heavily used areas will also need to get involved. A handful of people will not be able to keep the ANF open for equestrian use.

Some folks taking access to the ANF very seriously started to pull together One-Day Trail Stewardship Workshops across the ANF area to help equestrians get involved.

A Three-Day Trail Stewardship Workshop was conducted at Marienville, May 4-6, 2006 which included four ANF personnel participants. Eighteen volunteers who are now Trail Stewardship Coordinators, (TSC's) who ride different places on the ANF attend so they can work directly with those ANF folks and help coordinate efforts across the forest system. The following weekend, May 13-14, a work weekend was held at Kelly Pines to work on the trail out the back of the camp and began work on the first designated equestrian trail on the ANF. This work on the Spring Creek Water Shed is vital to the area so equestrians will be permitted to continue to ride in the During Area. This was the first opportunity for the equestrian users of the forest to interact with the forest service personnel and show them that we are serious about helping them. Several One-Day Workshops were conducted to create trained volunteers who the TSC's could call upon to help get the trails opened and maintained.

The revisions of the Forest Plan were approved in 2007. Under the Recreation section it was decided that there would be two Equestrian Use Areas, EUA's, one in the Marienville District of the ANF known as the Spring Creek near Kelly Pines and the other in the Bradford District near the Hickory Creek Wilderness area also known as the Economite area. These areas are to develop designated trail systems. When completed, equestrians must stay on them to protect forest resources and watersheds. Also outside the EUA's, except in Natural Areas, open riding would still be permitted if undesirable impacts do not develop.

Over the years the Pennsylvania Equine Council Trail Committee has continued to keep in contact and encourage the ANF districts to pursue the designated trail construction. When stimulus funding became available in 2009, plans were developed for the Spring Creek and Hickory Creek areas. The Spring Creek Horse Trail was completed and signage was almost completed by fall of 2014.

If you know anyone who rides in the ANF, please give them a call and pass on this information. Also, let us know who they are and we will inform them of the one-day trainings coming up. As more people come forward, more One-Day Workshops will be organized in different areas.

For upcoming events and workshops, visit our Events page. If you don't see any in your area and you would like to help organize a Workshop or a public meeting we can help, please contact us -The PEC Trail Committee.

The Department of Conservation of Natural Resources, DCNR - State Forest & State Parks must also go through a similar long range planning process as the National Forest to produce a management document regarding their land. DCNR Forest are primarily Over the last decade the DCNR has come a long way with horse access and shared use trails that will accommodate. The key has been to have knowledgeable equestrians working with local Forest Districts or Park Managers to help identify needs and best management practices. They too have a lot of horse impact and not much in the way of trained trail help. We know it is hard in some areas to begin working with the State Forest or Park, but if you need a hand making a contact please let us know. Budget cuts are a big concern for all agencies and we receive calls regarding educated volunteers who can help build a good relationship between the agencies and user groups. Educated volunteers are the best protection to equestrian access of public land. There will be two Trail Stewardship Workshops in State College this coming summer. At the completion of the training participants are considered Trail Stewardship Coordinators (TSC).

Pennsylvania Game Commission (PGC) Progress has been made with the Game Commission. Beginning with a total shutdown of access to bike and horseback riders in 2002 a tremendous effort has been put forth by the Pennsylvania Equine Council and PGC staff to create an administrative mechanism that would allow designated trails to be marked and available for use during off hunting season times and on Sundays.

The Game Commission is not public land as is DCNR State Forest & Parks or National Forest or Parks that are funded through our state and federal income tax. Their budgets are a line item in the State and Federal Budgets. The Game Commission funding does not come from our PA Tax dollars. Therefore the PGC must support its activities and staff through hunting license fees and a very specific habitat fund, Federal Wildlife Act fund commonly known as the Pittman- Robertson. Other support is given to the PGC through wildlife and habitat volunteer organizations such as the National Wild Turkey Federation, Trout Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, Ruffed Grouse Society and Keystone Elk Alliance to mention a very few.

Trails being considered a secondary use of PGC and must not conflict with the primary use of the game lands which is ***“Protecting conserving and managing the diversity of wild birds and mammals and their habitats; provide wildlife related education, services and recreational opportunities for consumptive and non-consumptive use of wildlife, and maintaining and promoting Pennsylvania's hunting and trapping heritage.”***

PGC does not have a recreational mandate there for it does not have funding for recreational trails, so those who want access to the land may need to apply through a Three-Day Trail Stewardship Coordinator, and have a 1-Day Stewardship Workshop Group to maintain the routes. Particularly there are trails in the elk range that may need to be adopted.

We will be scheduling a 2-Day Packing Clinic again for the spring in the western end of the state at our home the middle of May. 1-Day trail stewardship Workshops are scheduled fall, winter and spring. Dates will appear on the Events button on the web site when dates are finalized.

If you have questions about the issues or workshops please contact us at gwwills@pennswoods.net or call 814-379-3759.

Help the PEC help you make Pennsylvania a Horse Friendly State.

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