

Effective Political Involvement Brings Results

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By Sarah Wynne Jackson

A major portion of Back Country Horsemen of America's purpose and philosophy is "to work to insure that public lands remain open to recreational stock use and to assist the various government and private agencies in their maintenance and management of said resource."

For the last four consecutive years, Back Country Horsemen of Washington has put that purpose into action as they have journeyed to their state capitol in Olympia, Washington, for an event they call Legislation Day. This year, on March 2nd, 65 members were in attendance, some traveling a number of hours from the eastern portion of the state.

Back Country Horsemen of Washington is a state organization of Back Country Horsemen of America. It has 35 chapters across the state of Washington. The tradition of Legislation Day began under the guidance of Judy Warnick, a previous BCHW Legislative Chair who is now a state representative. Current BCHW Legislative Chair Robert Brooke continues to organize this important occasion every year.

Rallying for a Reason

Their purpose is simple. Meeting with state representatives and senators in face-to-face conversations keeps our interests real to them, enabling them to see how important it is to us to continue enjoying wilderness lands with our pack and saddle stock.

This group of dedicated equestrians believes that such demonstrations of strength and leadership encourage other recreational users, such as hikers and mountain bikers, to work with them in keeping trails open. This serves to increase their influence as recreationalists, not just stock users.

BCHW folks prepare a packet of materials to distribute to the decision-makers they meet in Olympia, which includes a glossy, high quality calendar featuring colorful photos of rides and work days, as well as beautiful Washington state scenery. The packet also contains information about the mission and efforts of BCHW.

This year at Legislation Day, Back Country Horsemen of Washington realized that trails might be a secondary issue, overshadowed by related but no less important subjects. There is an increasing sentiment that fuel use, endangered species, perceived equestrian impact, and user conflict may, at this point, be greater threats to our access to wilderness areas.

Don't Cut Funding for Public Lands

BCHW also keeps an eye on topics that are presented in Olympia, ready to speak out on the issues that affect equestrians. As the state looks for ways to cut costs and reduce its debt, our natural resources are often the first to lose funding. BCHW encourages the state of Washington to continue to support parks, forests, and public lands for all users, including horseback riders and stock users.

Fuel Tax

Another vital issue that affects not only horsemen but also all users of the back country in Washington state is the amount of fuel tax allocated to non-highway activities. As with all states, the Washington Department of Transportation taxes each gallon of fuel to acquire the funds needed to maintain highways and roads throughout the state.

With the understanding that some of that fuel is used for non-highway use such as boating and traveling in the back country on non-state roads, an exemption was established to distribute 1% of those revenues to various recreational entities like the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Fish and Wildlife, state and city parks, and other public lands.

Unfortunately, when the fuel tax was raised from 17 cents per gallon to 26 cents per gallon, the funds allocated to non-highway use remained 1% of 17 cents. BCHW took a stand with other public lands users to see that amount updated to stay in step with the current highway fuel tax, ensuring that land managers have access to the funds they need to maintain trails and related facilities.

BCHA Sets the Example

BCHW's Legislative Day is just one example of the many ways that Back Country Horsemen of America members nationwide volunteer their time and effort, often at their own expense, to make sure we continue to enjoy our horses and mules on public lands.

BCHA officers started setting this example many years ago, when they began to get involved with issues that affect equestrians. From attending town meetings and writing letters to state representatives to visiting decision-makers in Washington, D.C., BCHA has always believed in the responsibility of every American to speak out on the issues that matter to them.

Back Country Horsemen of America has been influential in a number of rulings, including the U.S. Forest Service trail classification system, right-to-ride legislation, and movements by various public lands managers to eliminate horses from trails. They realize the power of individuals when they work together through the appropriate channels toward a common cause.

What's Happening in Your State?

Do you know what issues your state representatives and senators are considering and voting on right now? How will their decisions change the way you keep your horses and mules, where you ride, and how you enjoy our nation's wilderness lands?

Back Country Horsemen of Washington and Back Country Horsemen of America encourage every U.S. citizen to get involved with local, state, and federal politics. Have your rightful say on the topics and decisions that affect how we live.

Knowing what's going on in your area means attending town meetings, casting your vote, and encouraging others to do the same. It takes keeping an eye on the bills that come through your state capitol, understanding the effects they'll have, and voicing your opinion. Getting involved means introducing yourself to your state representatives and senators, the voice of the American people, and expressing your concerns.

Sometimes, it just takes a simple phone call or e-mail to the people making these important decisions. Other times, it requires a more pro-active approach, including letters, signed petitions, and face-to-face visits to get our voices heard. Regardless of the methods, though, BCHA admonishes us to go through legal means and always present ourselves peacefully and with a spirit of cooperation and shared empathy.

About Back Country Horsemen of America

BCHA is a non-profit corporation made up of state organizations, affiliates, and at large members. Their efforts have brought about positive changes in regards to the use of horses and stock in the wilderness and public lands.

If you want to know more about Back Country Horsemen of America or become a member, visit their website: www.backcountryhorse.com, call 888-893-5161, or write PO Box 1367, Graham, WA 98338-1367. The future of horse use on public lands is in our hands!