



In mid-February, 2023, BCHA's vice chair, Mark Himmel, and our recent past chair, Darrell Wallace, accompanied BCHA's Director for Public Lands & Recreation for the annual Hike the Hill® (HTH) event in Washington, DC. Use the following link to read Randy's HTH report and key takeaways related to BCHA goals and priorities.

Full article:



Hike the Hill® participants with US Forest Service Chief Randy Moore (last row, 7th from the right)

In mid-February, 2023, BCHA's vice chair, Mark Himmel, and recent past chair, Darrell Wallace, accompanied BCHA's Director for Public Lands & Recreation for the annual Hike the Hill® (HTH) event in Washington, DC.

HTH is organized by national partner organizations American Hiking Society (AHS) and the Partnership for the National Trails System (PNTS). The purpose of HTH is to:

Bring together the trails community to advance shared trail priorities with congressional and federal agency leaders including: trails funding, public lands management and conservation, equitable access, and other top priority issues that sustain trails and improve access to public lands.

Agency Briefings

This is the first year BCHA boasted three representatives in the week-long HTH event. It kicked off on Sunday afternoon with agency briefings from national trail program leads for the US Forest Service (USFS), National Park Service (NPS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) who provided an overview of key issues affecting the federal agencies and their plans for 2023.

Meetings with Agency Leaders

The following day, HTH participants were afforded a series of face-to-face meetings with the Director of the BLM, Tracy Stone-Manning; the Chief of the USFS, Randy Moore; and the Director of the NPS, Charles F “Chuck” Sams, III. The evening was capped with a trails celebration at the REI DC Flagship Store, where Director Stone-Manning and other dignitaries joined the group to toast the importance of trails to the American public.

Congressional Meetings

On Tuesday and Wednesday, AHS and PNTS hosted a series of meetings on Capitol Hill with staff of the:

- US Senate Committee on Appropriations (i.e., funding),
- US Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources (with oversight of federal land management agencies),
- US House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations, and
- US House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources.

During those days and the following, BCHA met individually with representatives of eight congressional offices, including: Senators Daines (R-MT), Tester (D-MT), Cantwell (D-WA), Wyden (D-OR), Merkley (D-OR) and Klobuchar (D-MN). They also met with staff of Congressman Zinke (R-MT) and Hoyle (D-OR). During a break in the action, Mark and Randy had a chance to sit in the Senate Gallery and watch a drawn-out vote as each senator appeared to either approve or reject a federal judicial court nominee.

Key Takeaways

Topics discussed with agency leaders and lawmakers during HTH included:

- **The need for robust funding** (appropriations) in Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 for federal agency field staff, including those who work with and support volunteers, and the need to continue modest increases in agency budgets related to recreation, trails and wilderness to account for inflation.
Takeaway: The House has yet to establish funding priorities for FY 2024, yet leadership of the majority stressed its desire to tamp down agency budgets across the board.
- **The need to continue prioritizing outdoor recreation and public access to federal lands.**
Takeaway: There is bipartisan support for a large (“omnibus”) public lands bill, the American Outdoors Recreation Act, that among other things would:
 - Streamline permitting required of outfitters & guides,
 - Improve data collection regarding public visitation and make park and public land passes available online and digitally, and
 - Direct federal agencies to designate long-distance biking trails on federal lands.The bill is expected to be reintroduced in the Senate the first week of March.
- **The need to reauthorize the Great American Outdoors Act’s Legacy Restoration Fund** (i.e., maintenance backlog funding) prior to that program’s expiration after FY 2025.
Takeaway: The Fund has been used well and transparently by the US Forest Service to reduce its maintenance backlog, but more funding is needed post-2025 to finish the job. Some appropriators want to exercise greater oversight into how the Park Service is addressing its maintenance backlog; questions remain about whether or not the House majority believes this is a good use of spending.

- **BCHA's request to not legislate solutions that benefit an e-bike industry that seeks greater access to non-motorized trails on federal public lands.**

Takeaway: BCHA believes that e-bike related decisions should be made at the local level, with public input and environmental analysis, consistent with recently revised e-bike policies adopted by the BLM and USFS. We and our partners would oppose legislation prompted by the e-bike industry that attempted to bias, dictate or compel any outcome related to e-bike authorizations at the local level.

- **The need to pass the Continental Divide Trail (CDT) Completion Act**, which was introduced (but did not pass) during the last session of Congress. The Act, if passed, would direct the Secretary of Agriculture and the Interior to prioritize completion of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail in time for the CDT's 50th anniversary in 2028, by eliminating gaps between sections of the Trail and relocating existing portions of the Trail where necessary to maximize conservation and enjoyment of the Trail corridor.

Takeaway: There is bipartisan support for this bill and it is likely to be reintroduced by mid-2023.

- **The need to pass the Volunteer Driver Tax Parity Act**, introduced last session yet Congress failed to advance. If passed, the Act would address a critical update to the IRS code that creates an unnecessary tax burden on some volunteers who are reimbursed—in part or in whole—for personal use of their vehicles. This is an issue that BCHA (Darrell) recently spearheaded after a tax advisor hired by BCHA Washington identified the unintended tax burden, which could force individual volunteers to report 1099 taxable income for any reimbursements they receive in excess of the (long outdated) IRS-deductible rate of 14 cents per mile.

Takeaway: BCHA made significant headway on this issue! We spoke with staff of the bill's Senate sponsor (Klobuchar), the Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee (Wyden) and members of that committee (Daines, Cantwell). They requested our help to secure additional cosponsors to make this a bipartisan bill, which could be reintroduced as early as this summer.

Special note to BCHA members: Please review [the list of US senators](#) on the Finance Committee. We expect to soon distribute an action alert seeking your help in requesting that these senators support and cosponsor the Volunteer Driver Tax Parity Act.

Conclusion

Hike the Hill® is an annual event that vividly demonstrates the power and durability of BCHA's national partnerships. Year after year, agency and congressional leaders make themselves available and are responsive to the needs and desires of this partnership and its member organizations. BCHA remains a critical component of the partnership, serving for years among PNTS' Advocacy & Policy Committee. We are the only national organization consistently present on this national stage to express the needs and desires of horsemen and women and BCHA's dedicated 12,000+ volunteer-stewards.

Submitted by: Randy Rasmussen



2023 Hike the Hill® participants in US House of Representatives
Natural Resources Committee hearing room
From left to right:

Randy Rasmussen, BCHA staff, Public Lands & Recreation

Jennifer Tripp, Pacific Crest Trail Association

Mark Himmel, BCHA Vice Chair

Jeff Kish, Pacific Northwest Trail Association

L. Fisher, Continental Divide Trail Coalition

Kevin Thusius, Ice Age Trail Alliance

Andrea Ketchmark, North Country Trail Association