



Photo by Kari Schiffman, Bitter Root BCH

# Decker Dispatch



## Last Chance Back Country Horsemen Maintain Historic Mann Gulch Fire Site

By Fred Benson - LCBCCH Chanter

The Mann Gulch fire was a deadly wildfire that occurred on August 5, 1949. Fifteen smoke jumpers out of Missoula, Montana jumped the fire in Mann Gulch, near the Missouri River, north of Helena, Montana in what is now the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness area. The fire claimed thirteen lives, and has become infamous in the firefighting and fire behavior lessons that were learned. The Last Chance Back Country Horsemen (LCBCCH) have helped the US Forest Service to maintain this historic site over the years. The site is on the US National Register of Historic Places.

The National Heritage Program of the US Forest Service began planning for the 75th anniversary of the Mann Gulch Fire in 2023. Some of the cement cross markers that identify where the firefighters died were deteriorating and needed to be replaced. LCBCCH worked with the Forest Service to pack in four replacement crosses into Mann Gulch. Each cross weighed about 75 pounds, was about five feet long with a 2-foot beam. The Forest Service did have five crosses built in case one broke. Now for the fun part...how to pack these crosses? It is not every day that you get to pack something like that!

On May 12, 2024, LCBCCH held their



annual freeze branding and potluck gathering at which we had access to the crosses and practiced loading them using lumber bunks with 1" x 4" boards secured around the crosses to help support them for transport.

On May 17, 2024, a LCBCCH trail crew of eight rode into Mann Gulch from the Willow Creek trailhead in the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area, clearing the trail prior to packing in the crosses. The terrain in this area is extremely steep and it was important to have a plan for getting the mules in and unloaded in a safe area.

On May 21st, six riders and 7 pack animals from LCBCCH rode into Mann Gulch packing 4 crosses, 20 gallons of water and 6 bags of quick setting concrete (double wrapped in plastic bags) and some hand digging tools. Since there is limited space to turn animals around on

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### OUR PURPOSES

- To perpetuate the common sense use and enjoyment of horses in America's back country, roadless back country and wilderness areas.
- To work to ensure that public lands remain open to recreational stock use.
- To assist the various government and private agencies in their maintenance and management of said resource.
- To educate, encourage and solicit active participation by the general public in the wise and sustaining use of the back country resource by horses and people commensurate with our heritage.
- To foster and encourage formation of new state Back Country Horsemen organizations.
- To seek out opportunities to enhance existing areas of recreation for stock users.

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## LCBCH Maintain Mann Gulch Historic Site [continued from front page]

the steep terrain, four of us left our mounts at the top of the gulch and followed the pack animals on foot for the remaining mile. There we unloaded the pack animals on the steep terrain and helped setup the Forest Service and Montana Discovery Foundation volunteers to take over, digging holes and replacing the crosses that had deteriorated.

There is a history of the LCBCH working with the Forest Service and Smoke Jumpers in Mann Gulch. LCBCH packed in the first set of markers about 25 years ago, for the 50th anniversary. Speaking with older LCBCH members there were several trips over a couple days packing in markers, cement,



water and tools.

In 2015 and 2016, a spur trail was constructed by the retired Smoke Jumpers and members of the National Smoke Jumpers Association <https://smokejumpers.com/index.php> preparing for the 70th anniversary of Mann Gulch. These retired men and women participate in NSA Trails Restoration and Maintenance Projects (TRAMPS) throughout the US. Additionally, the Smoke Jumpers were clearing trails to the top of Mann Gulch as well as building a mile and a half trail from

the saddle above Mann Gulch, to down near the crosses. This trail made it more accessible for visitors as the terrain in Mann Gulch is very steep and challenging.

Now visitors can readily access the crosses with the new trail, called the Jim Phillips Spur Trail. In June 2016, the Smoke Jumpers, Forest Service personnel, LCBCH and two ladies that volunteered as cooks spent 6 days in a dry camp building that trail. It was fun to be part of this group, hear the stories about Mann Gulch as well as other stories from the Smoke Jumper's personal experiences.

Many thanks to all the Last Chance Back Country Horsemen members that helped work on this project. This was a special event for me being an Associate Member of the National Smoke Jumpers Association and having worked with the Smoke Jumpers who built the trail we used to bring replacement crosses into Mann Gulch.



## Upper Clark Fork Back Country Horsemen to Join Mile High BCH

By Casey Waldrop, UCFBCH Vice-President

Upper Clark Fork Back Country Horsemen have voted to dissolve our chapter and merge with Mile High Back Country Horsemen, effective January 1, 2025. Our decision follows careful consideration of our membership numbers and proximity to MHBCH. We feel this merger will be beneficial to everyone. By joining with MHBCH, we will be able to consolidate resources and expenses, attract new members, and have a

greater impact on our community and the back country we all love.





## Letter from the Chair

By Mack Long, Chair, BCH Montana

A special thanks to all of you for the hard work you did this year on trails and projects. In looking at the volunteer hours and hearing updates on the projects you worked on, it was impressive once again.

We stayed within budget statewide for the mileage portion of the Forest Service Challenge Cost Share Agreement (CCSA). I appreciate your help in adhering to and communicating about the chapter budgets.

At the last State Board meeting, I circulated a draft of a letter to be sent to our Regional Forester and Chief of the Forest Service regarding their decision NOT to hire temporary seasonal employees next year (2025) for trails and recreation. I received approval from the Board to send the letter. Further, Mark Himmel, Chair of Back Country Horsemen of America, offered to sign on as well. We received a response from the Regional Office in less than 24 hours to which they offered to meet with us and discuss the situation. Mark Himmel and I met with them at the Regional Office in Missoula.

The Region confirmed that they will not be hiring temporary seasonals except for fire crews due to budget constraints in 2025.

I have attached the letter (pages 4 and 5) as it explains the budget situation and expected negative effects of their decision not to hire temporary seasonals. Permanent Seasonals may return to work in 2025, but overall, it is expected to reduce the work force on trails significantly. Because of the budget deficit, it will be important for each BCH Chapter to work closely with your local Ranger District on project planning for 2025. I'll keep you informed on any new information I receive.

Mack

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## Mile High Back Country Horsemen Reflects on a Busy 2024

By Bob Larson, MHBCH President

Butte's Mile High BCH year started with the much appreciated cooperative effort from Upper Clark Fork BCH to host the state convention at Fairmont Inn in March. Attendees had a wonderful opportunity to hear backcountry escapades from Smoke Elser following the Saturday evening banquet, as well as participate in several discussion forums. We also had an informative presentation by David Armstrong from the World Museum of Mining regarding "Mules in the Mines". A big Thank You to all who came to the convention and especially to those members who tirelessly helped to organize the event.



Hauling water in Maud S Canyon

Throughout the year club members hosted several activities including packing and horsemanship clinics, first aid and chainsaw certification classes, and of

course, various rides to enjoy Montana's beautiful scenery. weed spray trail maintenance throughout the summer, as well as providing assistance with some painting maintenance activity at the World Museum of Mining in Butte.

While we did not have a specific trail maintenance project this year, several rides included the usual trail clearing activity that is so common to all of us who travel the backcountry. Community service projects included the annual Maud S Canyon Loop Trail water hauling project to supply water for weed spray trail maintenance throughout the summer,

We have been glad to welcome the partnership throughout the year with the Upper Clark Fork members and look forward to what 2025 will bring.

As the year comes to a close it is a good time to remember those who helped build up our BCH chapters and took the time to pass along their wisdom and experience, helping us learn about and appreciate the country we travel. May we be as diligent in passing along our experiences to future generations.



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Northern Region Office  
Leanne Marten, Regional Forester  
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September 28, 2024

Dear Chief Moore and Regional Forester Marten:

The purpose of this letter is to express our concern over the current United States Forest Service (USFS) budget situation and the expected negative impacts on Temporary Seasonal Employee hiring that are, and will most certainly be, occurring in the 2025 budget year.

We want to preface this letter expressing our appreciation for a long and outstanding working relationship with Region One. It's in the spirit of that relationship and our willingness to be a valued partner in assisting the USFS that we make the following observations and comments.

Backcountry Horsemen of Montana (BCHMT) is a long-time service organization committed to assisting the USFS in managing recreation resources with a focus on trail access and maintenance. We work with communities, clubs, and other governmental agencies to provide, manage and enhance recreational opportunities for all trail enthusiasts across the State of Montana. BCHMT works on all seven Montana National Forests maintaining and improving trails and related infrastructure, improving user ethics and education through a variety of programs, and helping volunteers and partner groups with required training to facilitate successful work across the Forests in the Northern Region.

We recognize and sympathize with the challenges and legal constraints of operating within a balanced budget at the National and Regional level. BCHMT has supported Congressional funding for the USFS through the years. We notice your budget carries an unfunded liability which compounds your challenges. As a partner, our mission is to support the USFS in ways that allow you to stretch those dollars.

Over the last couple of years, we have observed the level of Temporary Seasonal Employees has decreased significantly. The transition from Temp Seasonal status to Permanent Seasonal status reduced the number of Seasonal employees by our rough estimate of about 30%. While the new status provided personal benefits and made it easier to rehire, it appears that many of the new Permanent Seasonal Employees will not be returning in FY25. In visiting with some applicants

who have applied or "attempted" to apply for these jobs, it seems there are several problems of timing of announcements, application periods, evaluating qualifications and offering the jobs to successful applicants in a timely manner. As a result, several qualified applicants have accepted jobs elsewhere.

With the new direction from Chief Moore and directives to Region One Forests, to not hire Seasonal replacements, and to freeze permanent and seasonal Non-Fire hiring, as well as direct hire authority for external hires, it appears that there will be a further reduction of another approximate 30% in the number of "boots on the ground" that will be working on trails in our Montana Forests.

While flexibility is generally a good thing, the Permanent Seasonal Employees were hired as Forest Interdisciplinary Technicians, which allow them to be moved to non-recreation assignments other than trails, such as fuels reduction and fire. While we agree that Fire and Fuels is important for public safety, so are trail hazards, safe trails and access. The American public expects and deserves this. It appears that our resources for trails are being diverted. Fire crews received a significant pay, and operations increase which is well deserved, however, with the Fire budget increased, it appears that the Recreation side of the USFS is now paying for this.

BCHMT has worked tirelessly to secure additional funding for the USFS such as GAOA for trails and improvements. These efforts have been paying off and progress has been made in catching up on deferred maintenance. The current scenario takes this work backwards and reverses the progress that has been made. It will lead to an even greater backlog of deferred maintenance.

In closing, we are asking the Region and Washington Office to reconsider its approach to recruiting, hiring, and retaining its seasonal workforce. As Back Country Horsemen/women we volunteer and work alongside your seasonal staff, as well as permanent staff on a regular basis and see first-hand the value they provide. Further, a complete ban on hiring Seasonals on the Recreation side is excessive, and we ask your help in rectifying this.

Respectfully submitted,



Mack Long  
State Chairman, Back Country Horsemen of Montana



Mark Himmel  
National Chairman, Back Country Horsemen of America



## OLD TRAILS, NEW CHALLENGES

By Bryce Peters and Maria Rennaker, Selway-Pintler Wilderness BCH

As experienced backcountry stock users know, the whereabouts of a good camp with easy access to water and plenty of feed for graze is invaluable knowledge while traveling down the trail. Nothing ends a day in the saddle better than pulling into a good camp and setting down to a nice fire cooked meal while the horses graze to their content. However, for every good camp there were likely two or three camps that were a little dry, a little short on feed, a little wet or just plain miserable. The same trail struggles and triumphs were felt just over two centuries ago by the Lewis and Clark expedition. On their journey over Lolo Pass and along the Lolo trail to Weippe, ID (approx. 100 miles) maps show 15 campsites, and on their journey back eastward they also had 15 campsites.



Crossing Lolo Pass in Early Snow September 17, 1805- artist Frank Hagel

While many of these camps were poor, where the men and stock suffered from lack of sustenance or exposure to bitter cold, there were several notably good camps such as the 13 Mile Camp on June 28th, 1806 where Lewis wrote: *"... about eleven o'clock we arrived at an untimbered side of a mountain with a Southern aspect just above the fishery here we found an abundance of grass for our horses as the Indians had informed us. as our horses were very hungary and much fatigued and from information no other place where we could obtain grass for them within the reach of this evening's travel we determined to remain at this place all night having come 13 miles only."*

And, as detailed in the online resource "Packer Meadows" on the Lewis-clark.org webpage, when a day later they arrived back the familiar "quamas flats" that Lewis acknowledged it was *"a pretty little plain about 50 acres plentifully stocked with quawmash."*



Looking eastward at the camas blooms in Packer Meadows while standing in the tread of the old Northern Nez Perce Trail.

Photo: Steve Russell

Furthermore, he (Lewis) saw ample evidence that this was *"one of the principal stages or encampments of the Indians who pass the mountains on this road."* That evening, they camped at the hot springs, just seven miles north of the meadows.

While signs of use at a heavily frequented camp back in those days were probably common, today the focus tends to be more on preservation than exploration of an area. Stock can be hard on terrain when not managed properly and the National Forest Service has a handful of tips to help with minimum impact practices:

- When selecting that perfect camp spot remember that a good campsite is found, not made.
- Choose sites that are durable i.e. dry grass, sandy, or duffy areas well away from water, at least 200 feet.
- Before leaving camp, erase all signs of your stay by picking up all traces of litter, removing structures like meat poles, and scattering campfire ashes.

- Pick up and pack out all of your litter. Begin by reducing litter at the source.
- While preparing for your trip, repack food into reusable containers or zip-lock bags.
- Use a portable electric fence, highline, hobbles, pickets, a temporary hitchline or allow your stock to free roam.
- A well fed, well-watered horse that is allowed to roll and rinse off sweat will be more content and less apt to paw or dig.
- Stock should spend the shortest amount of time possible in camp, only enough to load and unload.
- If you do tie up to trees while loading and unloading stock select a live tree at least 8 inches in diameter.
- Certified weed free feed is required on all National Forest System Lands

Backcountry stock management practices were different during the Lewis and Clark expedition, but one thing remains the same - locations of good camps are passed from traveler to fellow traveler. After determining your backcountry travel destination, often the second step is to reach out to someone who knows the area to see what camps there might be. Good resources tend to be the Forest Service field office for the area, outfitters and the local BCH chapter members who spend much of their time riding the local trails.

The BCH chapters are often the most up to date on local trail conditions and potential camps. Here in the Bitterroot, there is a common mentality that if you want to ride it, you better bring a saw. With the densely forested canyons, host to burn scars and subjected to extreme wind events, the downfall and therefore trail clearing demand is immense.

## OLD TRAILS, NEW CHALLENGES, CONTINUED

The local BCH chapters in the valley have specific trails that they seek to maintain every season. For the Selway-Pintler Wilderness chapter, one of those is the Sawtooth trail. It is a rugged, rocky, boggy, beautiful trail that extends approximately eleven miles into the wilderness where it ominously ends at the base of the south canyon wall. While it may seem like a trail to nowhere at first glance of the map, it is actually one of the most direct routes to Ingomar Lake, or would be if it was cleared to the end.

Ingomar is a legendary alpine lake, touted to be one of the best fishing lakes in all the Bitterroots. It sets high on the mountain nestled in rock and subalpine fur. Though not on Lewis and Clark's expedition path, enthusiasts seeking to make it to Ingomar may feel like the original explorers.



Ingomar Lake photo by Maria Rennaker

Sawtooth trail is one of the original trails maintained by SPWBCH since the inception of the chapter in 2006. The chapter has fought to maintain access into the backcountry by this route, even obtaining grants and resources to restore the bridge across Roaring Lion Creek. However, with the increased downfall in recent years, decreasing membership and resources, the chapter is struggling to maintain more than approximately the first five miles of trail, with much of that beyond starting to disappear into brush, fireweed and logs. Given the easy trail access from town and the general

excitement for reaching Ingomar, we are on a mission to preserve this gem of the Bitterroots. Under the banner of Saving Sawtooth, the chapter is pursuing additional support and grants to bring more resources with the goal of reopening and reestablishing this trail.



SPWBCH trail crew crossing the bridge they helped restore after a long day clearing up Sawtooth trail. Photo: SPWBCH

To assess the challenge facing the chapter and determine what resources may be needed, one chapter member, Maria Rennaker, and her friend Kelsey Loy, undertook what could only be described as a "grueling, slog-fest" of a three-day journey on foot to scout the upper section of trail this past summer.



A "typical" view up the Sawtooth trail  
Photo by Maria Rennaker

With fireweed over their heads and downfall stretching as far as the eye could see, Maria commented that the see, she commented that the trip was incredibly challenging and concerning with the amount of work involved to

restore Sawtooth trail. Though the trail felt defeating at times, she noted the serene mountainscape accompanied by glimpsing the trout cruising the clear, cold water of Ingomar was revitalizing. Knowing what lies ahead our chapter is unsure if we will succeed in Sawtooth's resurrection, but with the community's interest and hopefully the support from federal agencies, we know we will try.



Fellow Sawtooth scouting trip member Kelsey Loy pushing through the fireweed. Photo: Maria Rennaker

One can only imagine what the Lewis and Clark expedition thought upon seeing the Bitterroots stretch up before them but we imagine it must have felt a little like the trepidation at the challenge to come and excitement of the challenge accepted that we experience stepping into the saddle at one of these trailheads leading into the Bitterroot mountains. It's not only a privilege to help maintain and preserve our natural wilderness resources as part of the Back Country Horsemen of America but in the words of Abbey, "a necessity of the human spirit". In our work of Saving Sawtooth, we aim to help preserve that for generations to come.



Parting shot because everyone likes a gratuitous wilderness horse picture!  
Photo: Bryce Peters

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Editor reserves the right to edit articles.

*Winter Issue: articles due January 5th: Beartooth, Bitter Root, Cabinet, Mission Valley, Three Rivers, Upper Clark Fork, Wild Horse Plains, and convention hosting chapter.*

*Spring Issue: articles due May 5th: Charlie Russell, East Slope, Flathead, Gallatin, and Judith Basin.*

*Fall issue: articles due September 5th: Last Chance, Mile High, Missoula, North West Montana, Selway-Pintler Wilderness.*