

**Date: Aug 2, 2023**

**TO: Connecticut Lakes Headwaters Citizens Committee (CLHCC) members, CLHCC Recreation Sub-Committee, and the NH Division of Parks and Recreation**

**FROM: New Hampshire Horse Council (NHHC), Debbie Briscoe, Chair, Trails Committee**

On behalf of the NHHC Board of Directors and the Trails Committee, I am writing following a review of the June 12, 2023, notes from the CLHCC Recreation Sub-Committee meeting. With this letter, the NHHC and Trails Committee are anticipating the September public outreach meetings to initiate a change to the current Plan regarding equestrian use.

There is an expressed interest to amend the equestrian recreation use in the Connecticut Lakes Headwaters Working Forest Recreation Program Public Access and Recreation and Road Management Plans. The NHHC analysis of the equestrian use of the Headwaters area is as follows:

For over 15 years with the current policies for equestrian recreation use at the Connecticut Lakes Headwaters area have been in place, and there has been no significant change of allowed access to over 140,000 acres of this state-managed recreation land. This Plan has had limited success with access for equestrian use based on policies limiting horse use or requiring an organization for inclusion. The NHHC believes that this stems from equestrian use not being considered in the interim plan on designated roads and existing trails and not designated as a primary user. Below is the NH Horse Council's analysis of the Plan.

#### **NHHC Discussion Points:**

- Horseback riding was missed in the interim plan and not included on the designated roads in the 2007 plan but included bicycles and hikers. As a result, it has limited the access for equestrians.
- Bicycling and hiking as a primary user does not require an organization to manage designated roads or existing trails (excluding the Cohos Trail).
- Equestrian use has been favored in public sessions, which would allow equestrian use anywhere or on specified trails on the property.
- Past evaluation comments specifies that horseback riding is consistent with the Easement and implementation would have slight effect on current management, budget, and law enforcement needs.
- The Easement does not prohibit or limit equestrian use. Being silent on public use should not influenced becoming a public use.
- Horses are allowed on the road systems in New Hampshire.
- Equestrian use has been defined around the nation as an activity that is a natural resource-based outdoor recreation, passive, low-key, and low-impact even in the most sensitive environments. Hikers, bicyclists, and horseback riding are commonly grouped together as low-impact recreational users.
- Horseback riding, a non-motorized, low-impact recreational user, should not raise concerns for erosion any more than other users. All users have some erosion impacts. Equestrian use is a small percentage compared to the other recreational users, whose larger numbers will have more impact.
- Concerns about horseback riding on trails related to the NH environment have not been shown in literature to validate the long-held hypothesis about invasives from equines as being significantly higher than other recreational groups. All users' groups have the potential to bring in invasives.
- Horseback riding is listed in the Easement as a natural resource-based outdoor recreational activity that the fee holder has the right to participate in. Bicycling was not on the Fee holders list, yet it was included as a primary activity. Bicycling was added to use designated roads with ATV use. Horseback riding should have been considered a primary use on the designated roads and existing trails.

- Policies in the 2007 Plans are causing hardship within the equine community because equestrian use is now considered a secondary use although it was a permitted use in the easement. It would be unreasonable to expect a small voluntary group to take primary responsibility for maintenance and repair of trail systems on lands managed by the Division of State Parks and Recreation, it seems to go against the purpose of providing recreation for the public. Equestrian organizations tend to be small in membership, limited in financial funds, and a local start up organization may not survive, the plans policies put a burden on a conventional outdoor recreational user group (US Bureau of Economic Analysis) to become included on State recreational lands.
- The use of designated roads should be an alternative to the inclusion of equestrian use. The designated roads are maintained and funded by endowments thus organizations should not be required for public use.
- New facilities are not likely needed for equestrian use on designated roads and existing trails, because current infrastructure design plans can be adjusted to meet the demand, such as shared parking. As it is understood by NHHC, organizations or clubs would not be required for infrastructure items.
- There may be a need to steer equestrians toward areas which are not in the thick of summer forestry activity, and heavy traffic, and encourage use of the safest areas.
- Equestrian visits to this property are not expected to be prevalent when allowed.
- Policies and amendments for equestrian use should be consistent with other non-motorized uses that are primary.

#### **Conclusion:**

**It would seem reasonable to allow equestrian use on the designated roads without the need of an organization to take primary responsibility for maintenance and repair of the route system. This would follow policy like hikers and bicyclists. In addition, the use of existing trails should be considered. Equestrians use is expected to be low, and this user can make decisions to use the property or not after reviewing information on the property. NHHC has provided alternatives and actions below for your consideration.**

#### **Alternatives**

**1. Allow for dispersed use on All Designated Roads and All Trails open to the public; includes -  
Allowed on the designated roads whether gates are closed to motorized traffic or not, except if road is posted closed to equestrian use due to a safety hazard.  
Allowed on public trails unless posted closed to horses.**

**2. Allow for dispersed use on All Designated Roads and Specific Trails; includes –  
Allowed on the designated roads whether gates are closed to motorized traffic or not, except if road is posted closed to equestrian use due to a safety hazard.  
Allowed on specific trails designated open to horses on the Headwaters property.  
Allowed on any other State managed lands as noted in their Plans, or as applicable per NH State Park administrative rules.**

**3. Allow for dispersed use on Specific Designated Roads and Specific trails; includes -  
Allowed on the specific designated roads either when gates are open or when gates are closed to motorized use.**

Allowed on specific trails designated open to horses on the Headwaters property.

Allowed on any other State managed lands as noted in their Plans, or as applicable per NH State Park administrative rules.

**4. Allow for dispersed use on Specific Designated Roads; includes –**

Allowed on the specific designated roads either when gates are open or when gates are closed to motorized use.

**5. Allow for dispersed use on All Designated Roads; includes –**

Allowed on the designated roads whether gates are closed to motorized traffic or not, except if road is posted closed to equestrian use due to a safety hazard.

**Action**

**1. Allow horses on designated roads per alternative.**

**2. Allow Carriage use and organized events with special use permit.**

**3. A loop system of trails and roads or out and back routes could be designed and designated on a yearly basis, if necessary, working around known forest management activity. Colebrook State Park and Diamond Pond area could be a focus place to start with. A loop system is preferred but not necessary for equestrian use to be allowed. Various routes of 10 to 20 miles are preferred.**

**4. Users will be encouraged to inquire on safest areas and best locations for difficulty and interest prior to their trips or use of the Forest.**

**(With respect to low traffic and forest logging activities)**

**5. Web Site postings and other literature to provide safety messages along with desirable locations for equestrians.**

**6. The Division will consider, in consultation with the State Forest, the Designation of parking lots for trailers.**

Sincerely submitted,

Debbie Briscoe

New Hampshire Horse Council

Trails Committee

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