

How State Budget Cuts will Affect Trails - The Facts

Submitted by Kay Hines

On April 28, DNR officials Kevin Szcodronski, Chief, State Parks Bureau; and Paul Tauke, Bureau Chief, State Forester; met with equestrian representatives concerned with the trails in state forests.

Those in attendance were Bill Paynter, Iowa Horse Council (IHC) President; Rebecca Cordray, IHC Director, Co-Chair Trails Committee; Kay Hines, IHC Director, Co-Chair Trails Committee; Marilyn Bender, IHC Director; Marsha Achenbach, Iowa Trail Riders Association Director; and Bill Horton, IQHA President and AQHA National Director.

Due to possibility of trail closings this summer in the Iowa State Forests (Stevens Forest, Shimek, and Yellow River), we met to discuss the situation and ways equestrians can help the state parks and forests to keep the trails open.

Here are the facts:

1. As it now stands, the trails will remain open for this season.
2. The total funding has been cut from \$2.9 million in 2008 to \$1.8 million for 2011, and \$1.6 million proposed for 2012.
3. They are trying to do the best they can with approximately half the funding.
4. Seasonal staff will be cut. If weather damages trails, and there is no money to repair them, there is a likelihood that they will be closed. The greatest challenge is erosion problems that occur after a rain or flooding event. This is when trails need immediate attention in order to keep them safe for users.
5. They will need volunteer help & donated material and/or money in order to function well.

Parks and state forests are funded somewhat differently. State Forests are looking for a way to fund summer seasonal help. There may be a possibility of hiring two Americorps coordinators to set up and plan work days and projects using volunteer labor and donated materials.

Equestrian trail users can help with challenges faced by the State trails by:

- Volunteering when a call for help on specific projects is announced. They need volunteer coordinators. We can't just randomly decide to do work on a park. We will go through the coordinator and when the trails officials announce they need help, the coordinator will contact the trail riders. We are in the process of setting up a "volunteer clearing house." Trail riders can let the coordinator know on which trail/state forest(s) you are able to work. Then, when the DNR contacts us and asks for help on a specific project, we will contact our ready-and-able volunteers from our list.
- Joining a Friends of the Park (such as Friends of Elk Rock, Friends of Rock Creek, etc.) group that regularly helps maintain trails in a specific park.
- Donating materials that can be used to repair trails when a call for materials is announced.



The author, Kay Hines, is an Iowa Horse Council Director, Co-Chair of the Trails Committee. She is also an active member of the Iowa Trail Riders Association.

Here, Kay rides Bo, her 26-year-old Grullo QH gelding at Jester Park in Polk County, Oct. 2010.

"Can you believe he is 26? Riding on trails so much has kept him young!" - Kay Hines

"... we must realize that the days of taking trails for granted are over..."

- Cleaning up after yourselves - when leaving a campground, take out as much waste as you can. Bag out manure, spoiled hay, and garbage.
- Being good stewards of the trails themselves and report any problems to the park manager.
- Talking to your legislators about why the State trails and State forest trails are important to you; and emphasize the local economy of the trail, and the economy of many towns in Iowa that benefit from equestrian trail users coming to the parks and forests. Focus on the economy.

Other possible ideas for future funding of trails were discussed, such as a yearly bridle pass in Iowa, or a pass for a one-time stay in a park or use of a trail, or possibly a yearly fee for all state forest users. This would require the user group to initiate such a policy, and if started now, would take a year to go through the bureaucracy. Grants available to the DNR and State Forests were also discussed.

It was a good, informative meeting and the final note was that after the final budget is passed, the Parks and Trails and State Forests will know just how much funding they will have for this summer to maintain campgrounds and trails.

In my own, personal opinion, I think there were several factors at work, leading up to this important meeting. The speed with which the news of the possible trail closings traveled and was disseminated was phenomenal, and the huge number of horse people who immediately made phone calls, wrote letters, and sent emails, is what ultimately led to our being heard. **Good work, everyone!** But if we are truly concerned, we must realize that the days of taking trails for granted are over. We have to volunteer, with sweat equity as well as materials, and raise money, while state funding is cut. We must let it be known that we are serious!

April, 2011

Dear Ms. McDermott--

Thank you for your concerns related to equestrian trails in state forests and the valuable suggestions you have made. I want to apologize for not being able to respond sooner, but a great deal of discussion has taken place within the Iowa Department of Natural Resources in the past week to address concerns of the trail users and to be able to meet current anticipated budget levels.

The DNR will be keeping the trails open to the best of our ability, weather and conditions permitting. The DNR will also be working with equestrians, saddle clubs, and other volunteers as much as possible to get assistance with trails maintenance and supplies. Any help you can provide in this regard will be greatly appreciated, but closing the trails as a budgetary response is no longer under discussion.

I would like to take this opportunity to say that despite some various reports, there never was a decision made to close the trails at Stephens or Shimek state forests. It was just one of many options that were open to discussion depending on what the final appropriation is to the Department from the Legislature. Likewise, closing of the Yellow River Forest trails was never even under discussion. I'm very pleased that we were able to find ways to keep these important trails open.

Once again thank you for your interest. We at the DNR have truly been appreciative of the many thoughtful suggestions and offers to make donations by trail riders throughout the state of Iowa. Hopefully, we will all be blessed with good weather this summer and ample time to get out and enjoy the natural beauty our state has to offer.

Kevin Baskins

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This email was written and sent by Kevin Baskins, DNR Communications Bureau Chief,
in response to an email he received from Ruth McDermott, concerned citizen.

Used here with Mr. Baskins' permission

The 2011 Iowa Trails Summit

"The future of Iowa trails and healthy communities"

June 16-18

featuring:

Multi-User Trail Safety & Sharing

DNR Water Trails Development Training

Speakers / Panel Discussions / Hands-On Workshops

Location:

Schindler Education Center

University of Northern Iowa

Cedar Falls, Iowa

As soon as details are finalized, more information to follow at www.iowadot.gov (Hot Topics)

Registration will be available in a few weeks on the Iowa Bicycle Coalition website.
www.iowabicyclecoalition.org/iowatrailssummit