

A REASON IN THE RFV FOR HORSE & HIKER ONLY TRAILS



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To each of our State Senators, men and women in Congress, land managers, friends, and policy makers to whom this subject of protecting, restoring, and building RFV hiker and horse only trails concerns,

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. We know that not everyone wants to hike on a horse trail, so reading this may not be in your interests, but this must be said. The language and the points of view are from collections of conversation from the East Coast to the West Coast.

Land managers are very receptive to bikers' and bike companies concerns about their trail surfaces, and for the most part the land managers have not been as receptive enough to equestrians concerns about our safety and fairness.

Since we feel this way, we then pivot in our documents and conversations to platitudes about education and etiquette. These responses are fine but adding newer bigger signs to our trail heads and our good intentions aren't going to keep us safe when we meet a group of bikers on a blind curve on a single track.

Historical horse/bike conflicts

No doubt we can all agree that horses, and the practice of riding them, have been around for a very long time. Horses carried and pulled the entire world into the twentieth century, serving as transportation, initially for indigenous peoples, and playing crucial roles in military, agricultural and logging operations prior to their current role as recreational partners.

Mountain bikes came on the scene in the late 80s/early 90s, and bikers quickly took over the historic hard packed horse trails and soon developed an aversion to sharing trails with horses. In fact, they initially framed their concerns as environmental by asserting that horses damage trails, but eventually the truth did prevail, meaning that ALL users have environmental impacts, and the real issue is that horses disturb the trail surface that bikers prefer.

The emergence of horse/bike conflicts

The development of fat-tire bikes changed everything because the fatter tires enabled bikers to use the even rockier and steeper or softer trail surfaces, ergo, they became interested in using all the horse trails.

After an amount of time, and sharing these trails, equestrians no longer want to share trails because biking has changed dramatically. Now, there are not only exponentially more bikers, but they are riding faster, more aggressively and in larger groups, such that they endanger our safety on most trails but especially on single-track trails.

Why? Horses may react explosively when startled, especially by something moving at high speed, because they are prey animals. Certainly, they can be de-sensitized to the sights and sounds of civilization, but even on Mackinac Island in Michigan, where only horses are allowed, and the horses are as de-sensitized as possible to bikes, they separate single-track trails for horses and bikes and the Island managers are experts at trying to eliminate user conflicts with bikes and horses.

On trails and on roadways, horses in their minds eye need to have an "out" – they need to "see" an area to escape sideways, forward, or backwards – on a straight away 2 track or wooded road, horses can "see" their "out" when meeting an unexpected user where there is room for all users.

On a single track, the frightened horses only choice is to spin and bolt or jump off the trail into whatever there is off the side of the trail – a tangle of blown down trees, an embankment, a swamp, a river or a cliff. Let's face it, most trails in the RFV are characterized by dense brush, stands of trees, rock cliffs, blind curves, and non-existent sight distances.

As the bike trails become professional built and seasonally maintained, there are now many "de facto" closures of bike trails to horses, i.e., in addition to being annoyingly serpentine, crisscrossing terrain seemingly to make the "ride" easier, they now have structures and other obstacles that are impossible for horses to navigate – high narrow bridges, narrow boardwalks, guardrails and other barriers with narrow openings, "corduroy" over wet spots, etc. The bikers in making the trails say, "it's all about the grade and making the trail more pleasant for all users." You can imagine how we feel about that. These trails are allowed to flourish, at our environments expense, with multiple switchbacks creating unreasonable land disturbance many times more than what is needed to reach the top of the hill.

Now, this means that it is easy for bikers to use our easy-going horse trails but difficult for horses to use the bike trails. Bikers are keenly aware of this, because they have the best of both worlds – they don't have to worry about horses on their trails and they feel free to use ours.

So, there is obviously a fairness issue in addition to the safety issue, as in, "In what universe could it ever be fair for horses to be unable to use bike trails but bikers to be free to use horse trails?", it becomes clear that bikers don't care about either equestrian's safety or basic fairness.

Around the country the bikers intend to fight for their access to all our equestrian established trails because, well, they are the majority and we're the minority. That is why the RFVHC is asking the hikers to join with us, to carve out and protect great hiker horseback rider trails in our favorite RFV areas.