



September 9, 2010

Ken Salazar
Secretary of the Interior
Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
Lisa P. Jackson
Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency
Nancy Sutley
Chair of the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ)

Re: America's Great Outdoors Initiative

Dear Secretaries Salazar, Vilsack, Administrator Jackson, and Chairwomen Sutley:

The American Horse Council is pleased that President Obama has launched the America's Great Outdoors Initiative. We applaud President Obama's effort to highlight conservation and outdoor recreation.

The American Horse Council (AHC) is a Washington-based association that represents the equestrian community. The AHC includes individual members and over 160 equine organizations that represent virtually every facet of the equestrian community, including horse owners, recreational riders, competitive associations, breeders, veterinarians, race tracks, horse shows, trainers, rodeos, farriers, breed registries, horsemen's associations, state horse councils, and commercial suppliers.

The conservation, management and use of America's public and private lands are extremely important to the equestrian community. The entire equestrian community is dependent on America's public and private lands. America's horses are bred, boarded, and trained on private horse farms all over the country. Every horse relies on grain and hay produced on America's farmland. Recreational riders need access to public lands and well maintained trails, trail heads for horses, and facilities to make use of our nation's public lands.

The equestrian community and horse industry is extremely diverse. It includes the family that goes trail riding on public and private trails near their home, as well as the family or hunter who takes a two week pack trip in the west. It includes young Americans who participate in pony club, high school rodeo, or vaulting and individuals who compete in Three Day Eventing, Dressage, and Jumping events on weekends as recreation as well as the Olympic and professional athletes who compete in these events. The breeders, trainers, owners, and even spectators of America's horse racing industry are all part of the equestrian community.

The equestrian community is demographically diverse. Ownership of horses and participation is spread across the range of American household incomes. Contrary to popular perception, most horse owners are middle class. 23% of horse owners' have household incomes between \$25,000 and \$50,000 while another 22% of horse owners have household incomes between \$50,000 and \$75,000. The equestrian community is geographically diverse. It has participants in every state. Almost 40 states have horse populations over 100,000, some many times that. It also includes individuals who live in our nation's largest metropolitan areas in addition to rural communities.

It is worth noting that the horse industry involves 9 million horses, has an economic impact of \$102 billion on the U.S. economy and supports 1.4 million full-time jobs.

Working Land

The common trait all parts of the equestrian community share is the horse, and American's horses are linked to its land. It is not a stretch to state that every segment of the equestrian community is inexorably tied to America's private and public lands.

The relationship between the equestrian community and the preservation of America's working lands is a direct one. According to the Equine Land Conservation Resource "a minimum of 36 million acres (4 acres per horse, conservatively) is needed to support the 9 million horses in the US." This figure is the farmland required just to feed our horses, it does not include the pasture and open space needed to raise, breed, and board horses. We know America's farmland is under threat from continuing urban development throughout the country. Steps must be taken to protect this land and we look forward to the America's Great Outdoors Initiative identifying definitive measures to do so.

The AHC also hopes the Administration will recognize the contribution horse farms and facilities make to preserving open green space, stream buffers, wild life habitat, forests, and pasture. We believe horse farms are and should be considered working lands and need to be protected from urban development like any other working lands.

Additionally, the AHC specifically recommends the Administration work with Congress to:

- Pass the Conservation Easement Incentive Act of 2009 and Rural Heritage Conservation Extension Act of 2009.
- Ensure the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program and The Grassland Reserve Program are adequately funded.

Public Lands

America's public lands are very important to the equestrian community. Hundreds of thousands of Americans of all ages use horses and pack stock to enjoy America's great

outdoors each year. Riding provides Americans with a link to the past and a chance to see and experience America's great public lands from horseback just as early explorers and settlers did.

The equestrian community recognizes its responsibility to treat our nation's public lands with respect. This community has a deep commitment to outdoor recreation and believes that recreation is a fundamental and legitimate use of our country's public lands. Whether they are trail riders, competitive riders, packers, outfitters or saddle-stock users, they recognize the overriding need for the responsible use and wise management of our natural resources.

Furthermore, thousands of equestrians and members of various equestrian organizations, state horse councils, and trail riding clubs are involved in volunteer projects each year building and maintaining trails for all users of public lands. For example, the Backcountry Horsemen of America (BCHA) estimate that in 2009 alone their members contributed 345,690 volunteer hours, for a value of \$7,490,864 on federal land. In fact, many trail projects in wilderness would not be possible if it were not for horsemen packing in supplies, tools, and building materials.

The AHC believes the volunteer contribution and potential of equestrians should be recognized. We hope the Administration will work with the equestrian community to expand its volunteer efforts.

Access

Most recreational riders do not have access to large tracts of private land to ride on and depend on public land to ride. Recreational riders also need well maintained trails, trail heads for horses, access routes, picnic and camping facilities, restrooms, and stables to make use of our nations public lands. In recent years a reduction of trails, trail heads and the closure of federal lands to horses and pack animals has been a growing concern for recreational riders around the country. There is a feeling among recreational riders that access to trails historically open to equestrians is being lost.

In 2009 the AHC launched an effort to collect information regarding equestrian access issues on federal lands and earlier this year released the *2009 Report on Equestrian Access on Federal Land*. This report was intended to provide a brief overview of the responses the AHC received from equestrians to its ongoing access survey in 2009 (the report is included.) In all, the AHC received 45 reports of issues on federally managed land from 26 states. These reports primarily fall into several general categories of access issues; loss of access due to a maintenance issue, instances where access has been restricted or a trail closed and reports of trails or areas that have become unusable due to user conflict.

Our land managers have a very difficult job to do, often with limited resources and competing interests. The equestrian community is thankful for the hard work of so many of these individuals in the National Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, Corp. of Engineers, and U.S Fish and Wildlife service as well as state and local land managers. It is the experience of most equestrians that land managers work with all user

groups in good faith; however, that is not always the case. Respondents to the access survey report some instances of seemingly arbitrary closures. Often they did not know the reasoning behind these closures. Some reported new management plans that resulted in the loss of trails, and some reported rumors of bias against horses by local land managers or pressure from other user groups for the closures.

It is certainly true that equestrians need to engage and build relationships with the managers of the land on which they ride before there is an issue and work with other user groups. However, if the goal of the President's initiative is to connect more Americans with the outdoors, policies should be explored to ensure land managers accommodate all recreational users where appropriate. It is clear to the equestrian community that there are some areas not suitable for equestrian use. However, access should not be denied based on the personal bias of a land manager.

The AHC hopes the Administration will explore all options to educate federal land managers on equestrian issues and encourage state and local governments to do so as well.

Maintenance

Maintenance issues are a major concern for equestrians and all recreational user groups. Many of the access issues reported by equestrians are maintenance related. According to *A look at the future of trail access on our National Forest System Lands: written by Dennis Dailey, BCHA*, the Forest Service alone has a huge backlog of trail maintenance and capital improvement work – in excess of \$450,000,000. The need to adequately fund our federal land management agencies cannot be understated. The Equestrian community understands the current fiscal situation precludes major increases in the budgets for the federal land management agencies. However, the AHC believes the Administration, Congress and recreational users must come together to find a solution to address the current situation.

Equestrians are also concerned about any serious threat to our public lands that could have a lasting impact. For example, the spreading infestation of the mountain pine beetle in the west and hemlock wooly adelgid in the east are causing great damage to our nation's forest or the growing acreage of forest destroyed by wildfires each year. The Equestrian community believes action must be taken to address such threats to our public land and is ready to help in anyway it can.

Additionally, the AHC specifically recommends the Administration work with Congress to:

- Fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund.
- Support Reauthorization of the Federal Land Transaction Facilitation Act (FLTFA) for ten years.
- Support the Recreational Trails Program reauthorization in the next national surface transportation bill.
- Pass the Complete Americas Great Trails Act
- Ensure the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program is adequately funded.

Youth and the Outdoors

The AHC also believes equestrian activities can play an important role in reconnecting our young people with the outdoors. Today a great many individuals who are involved in equestrian activities are young people. Riding can play an important part in getting our nations children off the couch and away from the computer. Riding can be a great outlet for young people to develop physical strength and coordination. Additionally, by its very nature riding, even though some events take place indoors, is an outdoor pursuit and most equestrians trail ride at some point.

Today, a great many individuals who are involved in equestrian activities are young people. In fact, there are many equestrian organizations specifically geared toward youth such as the United States Pony Club, the American Youth Horse Council, and the National High School Rodeo Association. Additionally, most equestrian organizations have youth programs like the United States Equestrian Federation's "High School Equestrian Athlete" program or the American Quarter Horse Youth Association.

A Pennsylvania State University 2006 study, *Impact of Equine Activities on Youth Development*, found that over 450,000 youth participated in the American Quarter Horse Youth Association, the 4-H horse program, United States Pony Club, and the National High School Rodeo Association alone.

That same Pennsylvania State study found that once children became involved in a youth horse program that 90.8% stayed involved for more than four years and 58% stayed involved for more than 8 years. It should be noted that individuals do not have to have their own horse to participate in many equestrian youth programs.

Currently, childhood obesity is cause for great concern around the country. Besides getting our children outdoors, riding can be a great physical activity for young Americans.

Competing on horseback is a complex and demanding physical sport and riding for pleasure on a regular basis has many of the same benefits. Riders must develop muscular strength, endurance, flexibility, coordination, balance, and fine motor skills. Riding can also improve posture and cardiovascular health. Though there is often the perception that the horse is doing all the work, riding requires athletic skills and activity from the rider that develops muscle and burns calories. Dr. Robert Leavitt, who has a Ph.D in sports medicine, has confirmed that horse related activities can burn as many calories as many other physical activities. For example, riding a horse at various gaits can burn as many calories as walking, riding a bicycle, or playing a game of basketball. Additionally, the daily care of a horse such as mucking out stalls, stacking hay, grooming, etc. promotes physical fitness also. According to Dr. Leavitt, grooming a horse can be equivalent to playing doubles tennis in the number of calories burned.

The AHC hopes the Administration will make equestrian activities, an integral part of its effort to reconnect our nation's youth with the outdoors. The AHC believes that any national policy

should recognize the role equestrian activities can play in getting kids outside and improve their physical health.

Limited Mobility and the Outdoors

The AHC believes as we consider policies concerning America's outdoors it is important to remember the ability to experience America's outdoors can be limited for individuals with disabilities. The horse is a major means of access for disabled individuals. Many therapeutic riding programs prepare handicapped individuals for the experience of trail riding. Indeed, such programs are working with disabled veterans of the Iraq war and teaching them to ride or facilitating their riding under new limitations.

When considering outdoor recreation, access to trails and natural places, any significant medical condition that impairs a person's ability to gain such access deserves consideration, including people with limited mobility due to arthritis, heart disease, lung problems, peripheral vascular disease, etc. as well as those confined to wheelchairs.

Many Americans with these various physical impairments regularly visit trails and the backcountry on horseback. Indeed, more and more such trail users with these conditions are using horses as a means of access. The horse is a common and environmentally friendly means to not only access wilderness but also many other outdoor areas for physically challenged individuals.

We believe it is essential to include the role horses, mules, and burros can play in allowing access to the outdoors for physically-challenged Americans in any discussion of America's outdoors.

History and Culture

The horse has played a distinctive roll in the history and culture of America. The horse has been transport, tool, athlete, and companion for every generation of Americans. It played an important role in the exploration and settlement of the continent. The image of the cowboy on his horse is iconically American. Horse racing is one of America's oldest sports and the Kentucky Derby is known as uniquely American around the world. The horse was and is an integral part of the culture and everyday lives of Native American tribes in the west.

The abundance of open space and vast natural resources of our country has played a central roll in shaping our history and national character. The horse has always been part of that special American connection to the land. We hope the historical and cultural relationship American's have with the horse will not be forgotten as the Administration contemplates our great outdoors.

Conclusion

We hope as the Administration and Congress determines future policy the contribution America's millions of equestrians make to support and conserve America's outdoors and the role equestrian activities can play in connecting Americans of all ages with the outdoors will be considered. The equestrian community is part of the historic legacy of America and riding on America's public lands continues to play an important roll in the lives of many Americans and their families today.

The AHC and the equestrian community looks forward to working with President Obama, Congress, the federal land management agencies and all stakeholders to preserve our great outdoors and ensure their enjoyment by future generations of Americans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "James J. Hickey, Jr." with a stylized flourish at the end.

James J. Hickey, Jr.
President