Sharon Witherspoon of Bells, Texas, undoubtedly enjoys showing her solid Paint-bred mare Aria in hunt-seat equitation and dressage. Whether or not you and your Paint enjoy and have the necessary resources to care for and enjoy your horses, if it continues to be consumed at this rate, we could start losing the resources needed for our horses in as little as 15 years. Meanwhile, a massive backlog of trail-maintenance projects on U.S. public land is leading to trail deterioration, closures and frustrated users.

Randy says that a warming climate and a century of fire suppression on America’s national forests have contributed to the frequency and intensity of wildfires; Congress has not adequately funded the Forest Service to reduce the severity of the fires. “Our fire season has been extended an additional 60 days, and the fires are becoming more severe,” Randy said. “When necessary low-intensity burns are suppressed, we get a huge build up of fuel fuels and overgrown forests that burn much more rapidly. We could reduce the problem with fire prevention and selective thinning, but Congress is scaling back funding. It’s a self-perpetuating problem.”

Another issue trail riders are facing is non-equine trail users’ general lack of education and understanding about horses and their impact on public land. Randy says BCHA aims to raise the bar on increasing awareness and educating all trail users about minimizing their impact on the land.

To reduce negative perceptions of equine trail users, BCHA has worked with the Center for Outdoor Editors in Boulder, Colorado, the Federal Bureau of Land Management and state land management agencies to teach trail-riding organizations how to respect the environment, minimize their impact and educate others.

“Commercial outfitters have a valuable role in educating the American public. As a majority of their customers would never otherwise ride a horse into the backcountry wilderness, outfitters provide them with incredible experiences and expose them to land-
PHOTOGRAPHY: In certain areas, guide
If you’re navigating a trail that’s
driest, most durable
surface to avoid
impact to obtain certification to teach the For-
Lightly. BCHA is the first nonprofit organiza-
tion to create a similar program for private trails called Tread Lightly. BCHA is the first nonprofit
organization to obtain certification to teach the For-
Service how to conduct master education
courses in Equine LNT policies.
“We basically train the trailheads,” Randy
explained. “This has been a really good way to
demonstrate our leadership and our bonds with federal and state agencies to spread the word
about Equine LNT.”
As its name suggests, Equine LNT aims to
keep horse owners from ever hearing the myths
that cause physical damage to a trail and
leaving track marks or punching holes in the
trail. Riders are vulnerable to damage and you should
always plan your route to avoid causing damage.

Respect the environment: If you’re plan-
ing a multi-day trail ride, determine how
best to corral your horses overnight to prevent
them from damaging campsites. If you plan to
tether them, find a place for your horses to move
definitely so they don’t pace at the ground or girdle
tress with rope. Consider what type of wild-
life you might encounter and learn how those
animals might respond to people on horseback
so you can be respectful of their home.

Manage manure: Randy says the chief
complaint he receives from non-equine trail users is about manure on
shared trails, Equine LNT offers several
easy solutions to reduce the amount.
“We encourage riders to be sensitive to both the
aesthetic and water concerns regarding manure,
so horses don’t get a bad rap from hikers who en-
counter a lot of manure on trail, especially near
water or trailheads,” Randy said.

Riders tend to stop at creeks to let their horses
drink, which often results in horses unloading man-
ure in or near the water. While horse manure
doesn’t contain pathogens harmful to humans,
animals or the environment, small amounts of
phosphorous and nitrogen in manure can acceler-
ate algae growth faster than systems can man-
age it. To reduce the chances of this happening,
riders should stop 100 to 200 feet before a creek to
encourage their horses to unload well away from the water.

Horses also usually unload the first quarter-
to half-smile from the trailhead. If you’re on a day-
trip with a large group of horses on a shared-use trail,
have someone follow your group on the way back to shovel manure off the trail or haul it to the
trailheads,” Randy said. “We don’t suggest riders
stop and shovel every bit of manure, as there’s an
increased risk of injury with frequent mount-
and dismounting.”

What You Can Do to Protect Equine Trails
Everyone who uses trails exerts an impact—
backpackers, hikers and horseback riders alike. It’s crucial that horsemen and -women learn how
to minimize their impact, assist with trail maint-
ance and educate others about Equine LNT policies to keep trails open for equine use. Here’s
how you can make a difference.

Educate yourself: Unlike education pro-
grams like Equine LNT and Tread Lightly to learn
about their policies and how to minimize
their impact. If you use public land trails, go to
Apha.org to learn about Equine LNT; private-land trail
users can learn about Tread Lightly at

Positive interactions: Through programs like Equine LNT and Tread Lightly, learn how to
positively interact with non-equine trail users to
make it a great experience and to foster trail stewardship. When you encounter a non-equine
user, inform them about Equine LNT policies and respectfully explain how they can avoid spoiling
horses on shared trails.

Ride Your Paint Horse: David Ruby, vice-
chairman of APHA’s Equestrian Experience Ad-
visory Committee and APHA national director from Nevada, urges members to get involved with
BCHA or ELCR and says volunteering for trail
maintenance is a win-win opportunity for Paint
Horse owners.

Even if you don’t regularly ride on trails, help-
ing with maintenance is a great way to give back
to the equine community and will help ensure trails remain open to horses. David encourages
riders who have no interest in show-ring competi-
tion, but own a registered Paint, to participate in APHA’s Paint Alternative Competition program
and log hours for their time riding and doing trail
maintenance from the saddle.

“We strive to recognize and reward every-
one who loves, appreciates and rides their Paint
Horse—not just those who excel in the show
pens,” David said. “You don’t have to own 14
world-champion show horses to get recognition
with APHA. If you enjoy riding your Paint in any

If you’re navigating a trail that’s only muddy
in certain areas, guide your horse over the
driest, most durable surface to avoid
caus ing damage.
Get Involved with Trail Preservation

- Become a member of your local BCHA or ELCR chapter or join a similar organization.
- Learn how to minimize your impact on trails through education programs like Equine Leave No Trace or Tread Lightly and teach fellow riders about their policies.
- Volunteer with BCHA, ELCR or a similar group to help with trail maintenance in your area. Participate in APHA’s PAC program and receive points for your time in the saddle while volunteering.
- Foster stewardship with non-equine trail users through positive interaction on shared trails; educate other trail users about Equine LNT or Tread Lightly’s policies.
- Develop respectful relationships and open communication with private landowners and help them understand liability issues.
- Start a riding club in your community. Especially important for private trail users, local clubs help members advocate for trail needs and maintenance projects, provide a regular source of information on new issues and enable you to establish a common set of rules for trail etiquette.

If you have concerns about maintenance on a private trail, fully assess the trail’s condition and talk to the landowner about resolving any problems. Organize a group of riders who regularly use the trail and volunteer to assist with maintenance; if there are any major improvements needed, seek advice from a professional trail developer to help you create an improvement plan or make any necessary changes.

Trails’ Takeaway

Careful planning and action are paramount to keeping land open for equine use; trails must be valued and cared for—from design and maintenance to minimizing impact and respecting the environment. As Sharon and Aria discovered, trail riding can serve as a fun way to bond with your Paint, offer a multitude of valuable, real-world lessons and can even provide you with a new and often profound experience.

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Landowner communication: ELCR Board of Directors Member Dot Moyer says private trails are most at-risk in the equestrian landscape and to preserve them, it’s essential for private trail users to develop and foster friendly relationships and open communication with landowners. A lack of respect for these relationships or poor communication with landowners leads to anger, frustration and closed trails.

“Landowners have reasonable expectations that their property will be treated with respect. Entitled attitudes or inconsiderate usage lead to loss of trail access,” Dot said. “This includes things like no littering, no loose dogs near owners’ livestock or pets, and no riding when trails are wet.”

Dot says landowners’ other main concern is legal liability. A single bad accident can spook owners and result in lost access to trails; taking simple precautions like wearing helmets reduces owners’ liability risk and puts them at ease.

Learn about liability insurance through your state’s recreational liability laws and help landowners understand the laws.

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Get Educated: Trail Resources

Utilize the educational programs offered by these organizations to learn more about how you can help support, maintain and protect equine trails in your community.

Back Country Horsemen of America
bcha.org

Equine Land Conservation Resource
elcr.org

American Horse Council
horsecouncil.org

The Wilderness Society
wilderness.org

U.S. Forest Service
fs.fed.us

Paint Alternative Competition:
apha.com/programs/rideamerica
apha.com/programs/pac

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“In addition to the other benefits of trail riding, it’s a great way to keep horses’ minds fresh and it prevents arena or show-ring burnout by incorporating variety into their routines,” Sharon said. “A lot of farms and ranches don’t have the available land or terrain for trails and because we’re losing so much open land, it’s extremely important that we have access to trails to provide all equestrians with this valuable experience.”