

## **Gates Park Pack Bridge: a plan for the span?**

The Rocky Mountain Ranger District of the Lewis and Clark National Forest is seeking public comments about the Gates Park Pack Bridge. Specifically, should it be repaired, replaced or removed?

In each case, District Ranger Mike Munoz of Choteau needs to know whether the level of use warrants the expenditure. The bridge crosses the North Fork of the Sun River into the Bob Marshall Wilderness as part of Trail 110. It's one of five trail bridges along about 1,000 miles of trail that the public uses for access into the 840,000 acres of backcountry.

The Gates Park Pack Bridge has served users for 41 years. It is a suspension bridge that was completed in 1964 to replace an older bridge washed out by flood. But its design and construction were not adequate to withstand snow loads of the area. Its concrete piers are placed on the water line, which is not desirable. Piers interfere with the natural flow of the stream and wetlands, with the potential of harming fish spawning areas. Other technical concerns include piers washing out and deterioration of concrete due to freezing and thawing that breaks it apart. A small budget doesn't mean one large project can't be completed, however. You have to start somewhere, and the temptation to portion small amounts of money to numerous projects may lead to the completion of none.

Taking this view, the Back Country Horsemen in 1974 helped rebuild the deteriorated Salmon Fork's bridge that spanned a dangerous creek-crossing deep within the Bob Marshall.

"The Flathead Back Country Horsemen hauled 13,000 pounds of cement and bridge planking nearly 20 miles into the Bob Marshall. They contributed a total of 1,300 man-hours and 1,800 horse hours," said Ken Ausk, one of the original founding fathers of the Back Country Horsemen Club. Fortunately, there are now new technologies that can provide the benefits of access with much less effort, cost and environmental impact.

Montana could lead the way nationally in safe, wilderness-friendly backcountry access by applying new design and construction technology with a few well-placed dollars.

One such bridge is called a "Free Span." It was designed by my dad, Dennis Nottingham, president of PND Engineers, Inc., of Anchorage, Alaska, which holds the U.S. patent on it. The design avoids the high cost of trail bridges for lengths greater than 100 feet and fulfills the need to maintain environmentally sensitive areas by spanning critical habitat. The cost savings is due to the ease of construction in remote areas, where no heavy equipment is required. Another attribute is its capacity to withstand heavy snow loads, thereby maintaining a life expectancy of 100 years or more with proper maintenance.

In Alaska, moose tracks are seen crossing this type of bridge. A moose weighs 1,200 pounds and stands 7 feet tall. If it is strong enough for a moose to cross, surely it is good enough for a horse with a rider. This is a bridge a cowboy can understand and appreciate. Recently, the Charlie Russell Back Country Horsemen voted to endorse the replacement and construction of a new bridge at Gates Park.

Redirecting the trail and fording the stream is another alternative. Safety, for the people using the trail, and environmental concerns are the paramount considerations for this alternative.

Ian Bardwell, trail manager at the Rocky Mountain Ranger District, is scoping out nature's accessibility and the environmental effects in fording the stream. His job is to determine a 30-year average water level for the stream, anticipating times of high and flood waters, and the dangers of shore ice at the crossing point during specific times of the year. Munoz said, "No decision has been made on any alternative.

We are fact-finding and want to get the best feedback possible from the public, before starting our analysis." Please address your written comments to Mike A. Munoz, Rocky Mountain District Ranger, P.O. Box 340 Choteau, MT 59422 before April 1.

## Horsemen help

The Back Country Horsemen of Montana, a service organization, is a dedicated group of individuals of all ages that has demonstrated commitment for quality wilderness management since 1973.

There are 16 chapters in Montana. The Horsemen take great enjoyment in riding the back country and working with local rangers in individual districts and with the Forest Service.

They volunteer their time, pack materials and supplies, work on trails, construct road end facilities, and put up trail markers and signs.

In 2004 the in-kind value provided was approximately \$301,000.

“Every time we get on our horses and ride into any area of the back country, we need to remember that at some time in the past 25 years, the Back Country Horsemen have probably had a hand in keeping that trail open for us to get to our favorite fishing hole or hunting area, or just to be able use that trail and ride,” said Dennese Schauss, a founding member of the Mission Valley Back Country Horsemen.

The benefit to the Forest Service and public is indisputable, given limited federal personnel and funds to cover vast wilderness areas of Montana.



### PHOTO COURTESY US FOREST SERVICE

Backcountry packers ford the North Fork of the Sun River in the Bob Marshall Wilderness to avoid using the Gates Park Pack Bridge.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PND ENGINEERS, INC.

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This “Freespan” bridge was designed in Alaska to cross critical backcountry habitat without interfering in the waterway. Its ease of construction holds the cost down.

Lori Nottingham is an Alaska writer and avid outdoorswoman who's currently living in Carter. Reach her at [lorin@3rivers.net](mailto:lorin@3rivers.net)