

Sustaining equestrian trails for the future

by Denise Y. O'Meara • Equestrian Land Conservation Resource

Here's a wellness aspect you may not have considered—the condition of your horse trails. A poorly designed or maintained trail can lead to that most dread situation, denial of equine access. To remain available to horseback riders, trails need respectful treatment. From design to maintenance, from concept to long term preservation, careful thought and actions are paramount for equestrians to sustain trail access.

The relationships that you have with landowners and managers need to be nurtured and maintained too. Lack of respect for these relationships will likely lead to angry people and closed trails.

Things to think about

1. Whether public or private, trail landowners and managers have a stake in the value and condition of their land. Trail abuse by equestrians makes them very unhappy.

2. Land owners and managers are always concerned about liability. A lack of understanding about liability protections can prevent a trail from ever being built or close one to use. See: ELCR article, How to Assure the Reluctant Landowner

3. Horses are tough on land. The torque of pointy feet leads to churning of soil and plants, creating conditions for erosion.

4. Stormwater runoff makes trail erosion possible. Once erosion starts it needs to be corrected quickly. Clay soils are especially prone to erosion.

5. Rider behavior on the trail can result in enjoyable outings. Or it can undermine trail owner/manager relations. Contributing to erosion by riding off the trail, riding in wet weather conditions, leaving trash behind, not watching out for other users and not reporting trail damage are examples of bad rider behavior. See: ELCR article, Rules of the Ride - Model Rules for Trail Riders

6. Community planners make decisions about land use in your trail areas. In fact, they probably already have. Research current and future decisions that may affect your trails access. Without this knowledge, you may miss the chance to prevent trail closings and to help guide recreational and equine accessible trail planning to your community. See: Three Words Every Equestrian Should Know: Land Use Planning

7. The combination of bad rider behavior, poor land-

owner/manager relations, degraded trail conditions and uninformed equestrians, you will eventually lose access. Trail Gone. No New Trails. This Means You.

Seven steps to preserving access

1. Start with assessing the condition of existing trails. Are they too steep? Do they have ruts that make people ride outside of trail edges? Are surfaces washed away? Is soil and plant loss contributing to erosion? Are stream crossings too dispersed, stream banks eroded? If these conditions exist, talk to the land owner or manager about improving trail alignments and slope conditions. A professional trail designer can help create an improvement plan and/or make the needed trail changes. Watch: ELCR webinar, From Lemons to Lemonade: Creating Sustainable Trails

2. Initiate a riding club or organization if you don't belong to one already. This will give you several advantages:

- ✓ Advocacy group for your trail needs
- ✓ Identification of leaders who will drive action
- ✓ A regular source of information
- ✓ Planning capabilities
- ✓ Help develop rules for trail behavior
- ✓ A resource for riders facing new or recurring trail challenges.

3. Reach out to landowners and managers! Develop friendly relationships and work to keep them. Help private landowners to understand liability protection through state recreational liability laws and liability insurance, which may be provided by your riding club through group or individual policies.

4. Learn about easements. Educate your club or organization members. Approach private land owners about creating a trail easement across their property. This will help to assure long-term access and connectivity in your trail system.

5. Participate in the community planning process through your local planning or town council office. Comprehensive plans express how the community wants land to be used in the future. Learn how your community's plan addresses equestrian uses. Ask if an equestrian trails plan can be added to the comprehensive plan, or if an existing plan can be adjusted to include your specific trail needs.

6. Create a set of trail user rules and regulations. Use

riding liability waivers. Limit access if that is needed or required. Get to know and cooperate with other users if any to avoid conflicts.

7. Volunteer for trail maintenance activities. This is good for safety, owner/manager relationships, and reducing costs for needed improvements.

Seven steps to developing trails

1. Create a trails plan. Consider soil conditions, vegetation, wetlands, streams and ponds, slopes, etc. A professional can help design your trail alignment surface.

2. Look for funding. Sources may include farm/equine operation income, loans, donated materials and volunteer labor. Can you derive income from your trail? See: ELCR article, Finding Funds for Your Private Trails

3. Check your own liability insurance. Research your state's recreational liability laws. See: ELCR article, Reducing Recreational Riding Risk

4. Look for outside trail connections, including adjacent parks, trail easements, open fields and roadways. Get permission to traverse these areas and check them for safety and condition.

5. Familiarize yourself with community land use plans. See number 5 in the previous section.

6. Develop good relationships with adjacent land owners or managers, especially if you are looking to connect your trail to their land.

7. Pursue easements for private land trails. You should work with a land use attorney specializing in trail easements. See: ELCR article, Assuring Equestrian Access: Easements Assure Access to Equestrian Haven in North Carolina

Now that you have a new trail and potential trail connections, circle back to the preserving access section above for how to keep them.

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More resources. Visit ELCR's online library, including the previously listed titles, as well as the "Equine Access to Public/Private Land" selections (<https://elcr.org/>); then explore: Planning for Horses in Your Community, "Successful Trail Organization Models to Protect Endangered Trails," "Can't We All Just Get Along? Equestrians, Hikers & Bikers," and many other articles.