



September 27, 2023

Loudoun County Board of Supervisors
1 Harrison Street, SE, 5th Floor
Leesburg, VA 20175

We are writing on behalf of the leadership and members of U.S. Trail Ride Inc. (USTR). Our members consist of primarily Loudoun residents. USTR is a non-profit, educational organization dedicated to preserving and creating trails for riding fun and pleasure. Through volunteering and direct financial support, USTR is dedicated to contributing to the development and maintenance of equestrian and multi-use trails and facilities to benefit all Loudoun residents. Since its incorporation on March 30, 1987, USTR has evolved from a 100-mile endurance riding club to the present-day club of horse enthusiasts and pleasure riders from all disciplines who enjoy riding Loudoun County and regional trails together.

It has come to our attention that The Friends of Banshee Reeks has begun a social media and emailing campaign against equestrian access to this Loudoun County Public Park, asking opponents to reach out to the Board of Supervisors. USTR strongly supports the addition of multi-use trails at Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve, as was approved in the 1999 Master Plan. We have been a partner with the Blue Ridge Center for Environmental Stewardship (BRCES) for decades and have proven that equestrians can well support the stewardship plan of conservation areas, and contribute to the responsible management of trails near sensitive areas. Loudoun County equestrians have a long-standing history of being good stewards of the trails and surrounding environments, and the trails of Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve are well suited equestrian access.

The addition of equestrian access to Banshee Reeks will:

- **Use already established trails** - The proposal is to allow access to equestrians on already established trails, much of which are old farm roads that are already compacted. No new trails would need to be created for equestrian access and trail parking could be accommodated at Nearby Evergreen Mills trailhead.
- **Enhance the experience of current users** – USTR members have been trail ambassadors at BRCES for decades. Trail users, particularly children, are delighted at the chance to interact with equestrians and their horses, so much so the new state park is considering creating an equestrian trail ambassador program. Horses are silent movers, and do not create the noise pollution that model airplanes or drones do, impacting the trail user experience. They also have significantly less impact on the spread of invasive species than wildlife does. Studies show the primary vectors of weed seed spread are wind, water, avians, and rodents. Studies also show that horse hay and manure can contain seeds of non-native plant species; however, success of germinating and becoming established on active horse trails in the eastern USA is extremely low (*see attached studies specifically related to the eastern United States*).

- **Address the need for more, longer distance, Loudoun County equestrian trails** - As noted above USTR was originally created to support a 100-mile endurance ride that occurred in Loudoun County. Much of those trails have been lost due to development and lack of trail protection and conservation. Loudoun County has a deep and long history with equestrians. Currently now in order for equestrians to find publicly accessible trails that exceed 4-6 miles we have to leave the County and travel into Maryland or south in VA. The almost 20 miles of Banshee Reeks trails have the potential to provide Loudoun County equestrians with trail system of significant distance close to home. In addition, it has the potential to link from Evergreen Mills to Oatlands and create a trail system with consecutive mileage for Loudoun County equestrians that does not exist today, that would attract users from outside the County.
- **Support the LPAT Plan adopted by the Board of Supervisors that looks to assess ALL parks in Loudoun to increase trail access and multi-use trail systems** - We urge you to open a significant portion of the Banshee Reeks trail system, that consist of established farm roads, to equestrian use.
- **Be in line with the original park master plan approved by the Board of Supervisors in April 1999, after public input, that includes equestrian trails.**

USTR supports the use of trails in Banshee Reeks for equestrians as well as the LPAT plan adopted by the BOS. We strongly urge you to support the addition of equestrian access to the existing trails in Banshee Reeks. Thank you so much for your time and consideration.

Best Regards,



Sharon Nankervis
President, U.S. Trail Ride Inc.



Janet Vandervaart
Vice President, U.S. Trail Ride Inc.

Attachments

- (1) Quinn, A., 2004, *Environmental Aspects of Horses on Trails*, Envirohorse.
- (2) Gower, S.T., 2008, *Are horses responsible for introducing non-native plants along forest trails in the eastern United States?* Department of Forest Ecology and Management, University of Wisconsin.

Tri-State Riding Club <info4tsrc@gmail.com>

to Phyllis.Randall, uli.Briskman, Mike.Turner, Tony.Buffington, Sylvia.Glass, Matt.Letourneau, Kristen.Umstatt, Koran.Saines, Caleb.Kershner, Adair, Tri-State, bcc: me

Dear Chair Randall and all members of the Board of Supervisors:

On behalf of the Tri-State Riding Club, we support the development of horse trails within the Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve.

Many of our 180 members are trail riders and some also belong to the U.S. Trail Riders association.

Trail riders are, by and large, stewards of the trails on which they ride, advocates of natural resources, habitat and wildlife preservation. Trail riders respect and appreciate the trail systems that have been developed in many other counties within our state. Loudoun County is lacking in such support for a community that provides major economic benefits to our county. Loudoun horses do mean business. But, also equestrians can be an important part of the stewardship of the preserve. For instance, there is a long-standing compatible relationship between trail riders and Sweet Gum State Park (formerly Blue Ridge Center for Environmental Stewardship). Issues have been addressed, logistics worked out and a plan to move forward developed by Kelly Foltman, President of the Loudoun County Equine Alliance, and Karen Jones of the Potomac Heritage Trails Association.

We fully support their work and plans to finally allow equestrians to enjoy the treasure of Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our comments.

Sincerely,
Adair Soho
President, Tri-State Riding Club

Dear Board of Supervisors,

I am writing to offer my perspective on allowing equestrian use at Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve. As the past president of Friends of Banshee Reeks, a conservationist by training and profession, a member of the Loudoun County Parks, Recreation, and Open Space board (Algonkian), and co-chair of the county's Linear Parks and Trails Committee I hope my comments help you think about this issue. Horses SHOULD be allowed at Banshee Reeks.

Please consider the following points:

1) Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve was formerly a farm. It was operated as such for many years before moving into county ownership. While the vision of protecting wildlife habitat and ecological function is admirable, the idea of this being a "nature preserve" is an artificial construct. I say this not to dismiss the excellent work of PRCS and BRNP staff, but to point out that this property has for generations been disturbed by human activity.

2) Daily there are 1,500 pound utility vehicles and tractors driving many of the 20+ miles of trails at BRNP. While compaction from horse hooves is a real thing, we shouldn't pretend these trails aren't already seeing heavy and frequent loads. As well established within the equestrian community, certain trails and certain trail conditions (ie, weather) are not used by horseback riders.

3) BRNP has become quite the haven for dog walkers. Some of those dogs are allowed to run off-leash. I cannot say how many are allowed off-leash by their owners, but I think the word "many" is appropriate. Those off-leash dogs defecate in the woods/fields and disturb wildlife. Consider the impacts to a nature preserve of so many dogs regularly on the trails (regardless of whether leashed) vs. the impacts of a few horseback riders on occasion. Thinking about this from that perspective, horses belong in a nature preserve far more than dogs. If horses are to be excluded, I would argue so should dogs.

4) Remote control airplane enthusiasts have used BRNP as a flying ground since the preserve's inception. The air modelers have been a friend to BRNP and I appreciate this. But tell me how flying remote controlled airplanes around a nature preserve is in any way conducive to a nature preserve. It simply isn't. I'll argue that people on horseback (as one of the most primitive forms of human transportation) is far more aligned with a nature preserve than remote controlled airplanes. If horses are to be excluded, so perhaps should remote controlled airplanes.

5) Horseback trail riding is passive and well within the scope of activities allowed at BRNP. Placing a person atop a horse for a trail ride is viewed by my eyes as an activity even more "down to earth" than simply hiking. Seeing someone on a horse reminds me of an earlier time and allows me to better appreciate what life would have been like 100 years ago. This is important. I assume equestrian activities are on the decline in

Loudoun County and elsewhere. Just as we are thinking about greenspace and gravel roads, we should recognize the value of the equestrian culture. And I say this as someone unapologetically without any affinity for horses. I am not an equestrian and have no desire to ride or care for a horse. However, I truly believe the equestrian community is important, especially in Loudoun County, and that perceived risks of allowing horses on trails (be they in BRNP or elsewhere) are significantly exaggerated.

6) Invasive plants are a concern. Not just at BRNP and related to horses, but everywhere. However, we are not hoeing new ground here. Most horses defecate before or shortly after beginning a walk, so manure is typically centralized. Most horseback riders pick their horses' hoofs to remove any seeds before entering a trail. And should invasive plants ever be attributed to coming from horse manure or hoofs, reclamation actions could be implemented quickly. With this said, consider all the shoes, boots, dog paws, and dog poop covering ground at BRNP. Should we stop those activities because of risk of spreading invasive plants?

Within Banshee Reek Nature Preserve's 700+ acres there are absolutely areas that are suitable for horseback riding. I served on the Friends of Banshee Reeks for about 10 years, coming off the board a couple years ago as president to focus on other volunteer activities. This idea of allowing horseback riding at BRNP is nothing new, yet has been treated as a third-rail issue. It need not be. It really seems to me a non-brainer. I try hard to think about issues like this from a neutral viewpoint - and I've thought about this particular question for years. Horses not only should be allowed at Banshee Reeks, they belong at Banshee Reeks. I've challenged BRNP staff and FOBR board members in the past to prove me wrong. Even after reading the recent materials presented by FOBR discouraging equestrian usage at BRNP, I remained affirmed of my position and believe the opposition is mostly misunderstanding, and to an unfortunate degree, bias.

Horses belong at Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve.

The comments above are my own and not made on behalf of the PROS board or LPAT committee.

Sincerely,

Jimmy O'Connor

Tue, Oct 10, 8:06 AM
(2 days ago)