

Recreation Resources Working Paper
Broken Wheel Ranch - Special Use Permit
Mississippi Bluffs Ranger District
Shawnee National Forest

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Introduction

The Mississippi Bluffs Ranger District is proposing to issue a one-year special-use permit to the Broken Wheel Ranch, a privately-owned cabin rental site. The permit would provide for commercial recreational use of the Shawnee National Forest, allowing access to National Forest lands equestrians using the Broken Wheel Ranch as a base camp. The camp is located near the River-to-River trail and is adjacent to the Bald Knob and Clear Springs Wilderness Areas. By issuing a special use permit, it will be possible for the Forest Service to improve a presently unregulated use situation and improve resource protection while providing for a growing business opportunity, in association with an increased demand for hiking and horse riding within the western portion of the Shawnee National Forest. The temporary permit would allow use from the Broken Wheel Ranch while the Forest completes a watershed analysis for the trails designation project for these two wilderness areas. The Trails Designation Project, Phase 2 analysis would serve to explore and define the long-term management of the two wilderness areas and three of the watersheds that are found within these areas.

The Broken Wheel Ranch cabin rental property has recently been purchased and the new owner is seeking a special-use permit so that his overnight equestrian clients can utilize the surrounding Shawnee National Forest for horse riding. The majority of the use would be in the Bald Knob and Clear Springs Wildernesses, with access by the River-to-River trailhead immediately adjacent to the private property. Equestrian riders will be able to leave the overnight rental property and immediately enter the River-to-River trail system. Some overnight horse accommodations are available, although limited. During times when the wilderness is not available for horse use, the Cedar Lake and Kinkaid Lake trail systems will be alternate riding locations. The ranch has four rental cabins, RV parking, horse-trailer parking, and barns. Combined total equestrian capacity is less than 15 horses. The owner did not foresee many days when that number of equestrians would use his facility He believes that 8-10 riders in one day would be the most that would use his facility during the peak riding season. The cabins are available for hikers as well as equestrians and he believes that it would be rare for the total capacity to be used by equestrians

Current Management Direction

This permit would allow for the Broken Wheel Ranch to operate on the Forest and provide a safe, maintained trail system that offers an adequate recreational experience, consistent with the 2006 Land and Resource Management Plan. Additionally, it is consistent with both 36CFR251, subpart B (regarding special-use permits), and the policy objectives of Forest Service Manual (FSM) 2340.3 (on privately provided recreation opportunities). A short-term special-use permit would limit the impact of equestrian recreation on the Forest while additional site-specific analyses for the development of a designated trail system are completed.

Description of the Proposed Project

The Broken Wheel Ranch property has recently been purchased and the new owner is seeking a special use permit so that his overnight clients can utilize the surrounding Shawnee National Forest for hiking, and equestrian riding. The majority of the use would be in the Bald Knob and Clear Springs Wildernesses, with access by the River to River Trailhead immediately adjacent to the private property boundary. Hikers and equestrian riders will be able to leave the overnight rental property and immediately enter the River-to-River trail system. Some overnight horse accommodations are available, although limited. During times when the wilderness is not available for horse use, the Cedar Lake and Kincade Lake trail systems will be highlighted as an alternate riding location.

A special use permit that would allow for this activity to occur would be issued. By issuing this permit, the Forest will be improving upon the now unregulated use, improve resource protection while, at the same time, assist in providing for a growing business opportunity in association with the demand for hiking and horse riding within the western portion of the Shawnee National Forest.

In order to ensure the protection of wilderness character during the relatively short term of the permit, the following resource protection measures would be incorporated within the permit:

- ❖ Broken Wheel Ranch clients will only be allowed to ride trails identified in the permit (Appendix A) within Bald Knob and Clear Springs wilderness areas.
- ❖ Broken Wheel Ranch clients will be allowed to ride April 1 – November 30 in Bald Knob and Clear Springs Wilderness Areas (the wilderness would be closed to Broken Wheel Ranch clients from December 1st to March 31st).
- ❖ The Forest Service shall determine the extent of moisture impacts on the trails within the Bald Knob and Clear Springs Wilderness Areas and exercise its authority to temporarily close those trails it deems unreasonably wet for equestrian traffic until drier conditions prevail.
- ❖ The Broken Wheel Ranch will also be responsible for determining if trails are unreasonably wet and would notify clients when the trails are unsuitable for horse traffic. The Broken Wheel Ranch may suggest other non-wilderness trails as alternatives.
- ❖ Broken Wheel Ranch clients shall limit group size within the Bald Knob and Clear Springs Wildernesses to no more than 10 people at any one time.
- ❖ Equestrians from the Broken Wheel Ranch will display bridal tags on their horses in a visible place.
- ❖ The Broken Wheel Ranch will inform clients of the forest order not to harm/harass snakes on the Forest.

Effects of the Proposed Action

Wilderness - The operation of a commercial enterprise in proximity to two wilderness areas and would probably result in an increase in visitor use in Bald Knob and Clear Springs wilderness areas. While the cabin rental site has been in operation in some fashion for the past ten or fifteen years, the new owner has improved the facilities and intends to increase the business compared with the past use.

Trails – With increasing recreational use comes an increased potential for impact. The terms and conditions for operating under the special use permit limit these impacts to that portion of

the trail system that is in relatively good condition. Some trail maintenance issues have been addressed on this trail system in the past several years. Most trails in Bald Knob and Clear Spring Wilderness Areas were established on old roads along the ridge tops and still retain some of their old road character. Of the trails designated for this permit, the Godwin/River to River Trail, the Hutchins Creek trail, the King Hollow Trail, and the 'old' River to River Trail have received some level of maintenance. All trails were cleared from extensive blowdowns in 2006. The Godwin / River to River Trail is a linear trail that transects both wilderness areas. Connections to the River to River with other system trails provide equestrian 'loop' opportunities of both short and long distance experiences. By restricting these users to this permitted trail system resource impacts should be less than past impacts created by previous cross-country use. The distances between these trails segments improves the opportunity for a wilderness experience by lessening the chance of encounters with other wilderness visitors. While overall use may increase, a positive for wilderness recreation, the impact of this use will be confined to the permitted trail system.

I. Current condition of permitted trails:

1) Clear Springs / Bald Knob Wilderness

- a) Godwin /River-to-River – 1.86 miles from intersection w/ Bridgeman trail has been relocated to meet trail standards (FY 06 & 07); St. Louis Americorps installed water bars the length of the trail in the early 2000's; gravel has been placed by volunteers in the east section, in good shape; an approximate 4,000' segment is scheduled to be realigned and reconstructed this fall with AmeriCorps; additional work will be done by volunteers.
- b) Bridgeman – established on old road; lower segments need realignment; high priority for designation and realignment after Watershed Analysis is complete.
- c) Lyerla Chapel – Additional access from Broken Wheel; old road; has been brushed, not high priority
- d) Hutchins Creek – Old county road, meanders with Hutchins Creek, in fair shape
- e) King Hollow – old roadbed, in fair shape
- f) *North Segment (Old River-to-River – checking on official designation)* – needs to be marked, brushed, unpermitted trails blocked, and entrance off roadway improved; will accomplish in '07 / '08. Switchback actual enters Clear Springs Natural Area buffer (on the ground) for very short way – otherwise outside of the protected area.
- g) *North Segment Spur* – Follows the boundary of Hutchison and LaRue Pine Hills Natural Areas

In 2006, all permitted trails proposed were inventoried by Shawnee National Forest wilderness rangers. Documented visitor contacts through the summer of 2006 indicate a relatively low use rate by both hikers and equestrians in both wilderness areas. The inventory indicates that the trails are in fair condition given the reduced level of maintenance these trails have received since wilderness designation. Problem areas were identified on all trails and were found to be associated with the lack of trail design (i.e. old roads converted to trails), not the result of over-use.

II. Concentrated Use Area and Alternate Equestrian Trail Systems

A concentrated use area is designated outside the wilderness area boundaries as an equestrian confinement area. This area is a dispersed camping/picknicing area surrounded by, but not within, the Clear Springs Natural Area.

Two trail systems are suggested to act as alternatives to the permitted trails when conditions warrant closure to preserve the wilderness character in Bald Knob / Clear Springs. The Cedar Lake / River to River trail and the Little Cedar Loop Trail are part of the designated trail system open to hiking and equestrian use. Some segments of the River to River Trail were reconstructed in 2001 by the Forest Service and gravel was added to the reconstructed area in 2004. The Lirley Cemetary Trailhead was improved in 2005 with approximately a quarter mile of gravel added to the the River to River trail. The Little Cedar Loop Trail was adopted by the Southern Illinois University chapter of the Society of American Foresters in 2007 and accomplished brushing work and signing. The Southern Illinois Mountain Bike Association continued the trail brushing and YCC completed the brushing. Since 2004, the district mechanized trail crew has completed blow down tree removal on the Cedar Lake / River to River trail as well as other non-wilderness district trails.

The Kinkaid Lake trail system is another area that broken Wheel equestrian clients can ride. Since 2004, trail improvements on Kinkaid Lake Trail System include:

- 1) Gum Ridge Trail: 3 miles tread reconstruction and 180 tons of gravel
- 2) Deer Run Trail: .75 miles of tread reconstruction, realignment, gravel
- 3) Waterfall Trail: tornado blowdown removal, tread reconstruction, gravel
- 4) Kinkaid Lake Trail (Hidden Cove to Crissenberry Dam) : Tornado blow down tree removal on the system trails was completed early summer and late fall.

A North American Trail Ride Conference (NATRC) event has been held in for the past two years with an average of 24 equestrians in each event. Monitoring has shown no negative impacts to the permitted trails or conflicts with other users during this event.

Other Recreational Uses - There could be be some effects from increased equestrian use to other recreationists such as hunting, birdwatching, camping, fishing, nature study, photography, etc., if this permit increases use at all. By designating the trails and limiting the equestrian numbers allowed in the study area, these conflicts should be kept to a minimum, and actually may decrease due to more regulation of both legal and illegal activities at present.

Determination

From a recreational standpoint, issuance of the Broken Wheel Recreational Special Use Permit is a positive measure. Under the proposed special use permit and it's associated operation and maintenance plan, the monitoring of trail and wilderness conditions, improved oversight over the currently under-regulated trail systems would be achieved. This special use permit will provide a stop-over for the River-to-River Trail users, while assisting a small business owner. Additionally, the permit will allow the Broken Wheel Ranch to operate while additional studies are being conducted to further designate the trail systems and wilderness area use, all while meeting the Shawnee National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan objectives.