



One Common Bond | The Horse
One Common Voice | The Maryland Horse Council

Testimony of the Maryland Horse Council on SB 86
Department of Natural Resources – Lease Agreements – Trail Access Provision – **SUPPORT**

The Maryland Horse Council (MHC) is a membership-based, umbrella trade association of the entire horse industry in Maryland. Our membership includes horse farms, horse related businesses, individual enthusiasts, and breed, interest and discipline associations. As such, we represent over 30,000 Marylanders who make their living with horses, or just own and love them.

MHC supports SB 86 because the COVID pandemic has increased demand for access to Maryland's extensive park system, and because the public has a right to access those public lands and to be safe when using them.

The majority of Maryland's horseback riders are recreational trail riders, and the majority of those use the Department of Natural Resource's equestrian and multi-use trails. According to the American Horse Council, recreational trail riding in 2010 (the last year for which data is available) supported almost 5,000 jobs in Maryland and contributed \$234 million in value to the state's economy. The total economic impact of recreational trail riding in Maryland was \$382 million. The industry has grown since then – by almost a third in the last year alone due to the COVID-19 pandemic – so the economic impact of trail riding in 2022 is certainly much higher.

Almost any Maryland trail rider can tell a story about not being able to get to a trail head because something, or someone, was obstructing the public access. And too many Maryland trail riders can tell a story about the challenges faced by first responders trying to get to injured riders in places far off the roads.

When access to trails is blocked, first responders are unable to reach trail users in need of critical care. This affects everyone, not just equestrians. It affects hikers, bikers, skiers, cyclers, bird-watchers, joggers, and anglers.

Blocked trail heads mean first responders find it difficult or impossible to bring stretchers, back and neck stabilizers, oxygen, portable defibrillators, and other emergency first aid equipment to



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the person in need. Instead, first responders must move the person in need out to the public road – often in an ATV or four-wheeler -- before they can provide aid. Blocked access often means that medevac helicopters must be called in, which then land directly in fields or pastures, damaging crops and scaring livestock.

This issue is of particular concern now because more Marylanders than ever are turning to outdoor recreation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, there were 292 park closures due to capacity limits in 11 parks across the State, according to *Maryland At A Glance, Parks and Recreation*, <https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/01glance/html/parks.html>.

We at MHC regularly hear complaints about problems getting to public trails. Some recent examples include:

- *Fences or barbed wire set up by tenants.* It is not unusual for tenants of residences that are on DNR-leased property to put up fences or barbed wire to restrain their pets and livestock, or to keep people they perceive to be trespassers from crossing the land.

Sometimes these fences or wires are placed between the public road and a trail, or are placed right on the edge of woods near the trails. MHC members riding in the Henryton Road section of the Patapsco Valley State Park have had to disentangle themselves and their horses from barbed wire along a driveway that had broken and was buried by leaves. Barbed wire is extremely dangerous to horses – lower leg lacerations on a horse can be career ending and, at times, fatal.

- *Abandoned machinery, junk piles, downed trees, and wood piles.* Similarly, it is not unusual for tenants, whether tenants of residences or farmers leasing agricultural land, to leave equipment or debris on the edge of their leased properties.

Sometimes the equipment is rusty or otherwise degraded. MHC members riding on the Montgomery County side of the Patuxent River State Park, near both Elkton Farm Road and Brown Church Road, and on the Howard County side near Windsor Forest Road and Long Corner Road, as just two examples, have had to make wide detours around rusted out cars, abandoned refrigerators, tossed out bed springs, and large areas of broken glass in order to reach trails. Sometimes these detours require them to ride on the public road for a stretch, which is not safe for either the horses or vehicular traffic.



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Sometimes the equipment is rusty or otherwise degraded. Abandoned and rusty equipment is also a safety hazard if a horse, or human, gets injured on it, increasing the risk of infection and tetanus.

- *Crops planted right to the tree-line on leased land.* MHC members are not infrequently unable to reach public trails because a farmer leasing DNR land has planted crops right up to the tree line.
 - In the Patuxent River State Park area, crops are grown right up to the tree line on both the Howard County and Montgomery County sides of the Annapolis Rock area. This prevents not only equestrians but also hikers, bird watchers, anglers, and others from accessing the park from most of the area along the headwaters of the Patuxent.

It also prevents first responders from accessing the trails except at two designated parking areas at opposite ends of the park. In one recent incident, a rider was injured in the park almost within sight of the road, but the distance between the trail head and the road was blocked by crops – in this case it was soybeans. As a result, the emergency responders had to call in a medevac helicopter. The helicopter had nowhere to land other than right in the middle of the soybean field in order to get the medics as close as possible to the rider. Much of the crop was destroyed.

The Annapolis Rock section of the Patuxent River is in an area dense with horse farms. Because the prospect of having to trailer a horse miles away to trail ride when there are 450 acres of public trails right across the road makes little sense, some residents along the park's border have resorted to paying the tenant farmers to leave space for them to get to the trails.

- In the River Road section of Seneca Creek State Park in Montgomery County, MHC members who were riding as part of an organized fox chase were blocked from entering the park by crops grown up to the tree line on all sides. The hunting dogs had gone into the woods and the hunt staff could not reach them, either by horse or on foot, because every access point was obstructed. It took at



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least two days for the hunters to retrieve all of their hunting dogs – some of which had been picked up on the road by a stranger and taken to Virginia.

It is not just the equestrian community that wants better access to public land. The need for more and better access to our public lands is a priority for both the General Assembly and the Governor.

In August, the General Assembly convened the Glendenning Commission to advise on access to Maryland's state parks. The Glendenning Commission recommended, among other things, that DNR consider improving the accessibility of natural resource management areas and natural environmental areas. "Natural resources management areas, comprising 27,617 acres, are managed for the primary benefit of wildlife habitat, sustainable farming, and passive, nature-based recreation such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, and boat access," and they "can also provide non-motorized trail use, including hiking, equestrian uses, and mountain biking." Glendenning Commission Final Report at 4.

Several weeks later, in late September, Governor Hogan created the Office Outdoor Recreation (ORR) within the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. ORR's mission is to "enhance outdoor recreation opportunities and the economic benefits they produce," which will include implementing the Maryland Outdoor Recreation Economic Commission's (MORE) recommendations on how to strengthen Maryland's outdoor recreation industry.

None of the State's efforts to improve park access and invest in outdoor recreation can be realized if the public cannot get into the public parks. Requiring DNR tenants to leave access to trail heads open is a fair and reasonable way to help keep public land open for public use.

Public lands are not public if the public cannot access them. And the public is not safe on public lands if first responders cannot reach them.

Respectfully submitted,

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