

Horseman riding from sea to sea brings attention to land conservation

By
Annette McGee Rasch
IVN Contributing Writer

Alex McNeil and his horse, Pepper, are crossing the country on an unsupported 3,500 mile coast-to-coast expedition to bring awareness to land conservation issues. Sixty-three miles into their journey, they recently spent several days in O'Brien, and a night in Selma before riding on to Murphy.

McNeil,, 36, initially hitched a ride with the service transporting Pepper to Brookings, Oregon, from his home in Bozeman, Montana. The pair soon entered the Siskiyou National Forest and "bushwhacked through a whole lot of Manzanita" before heading north over lands burned by the 2002 Biscuit Fire and trekking up the western side of Biscuit Hill.

"It looked like a wasteland," McNeil said. "There's a lot of erosion. And places where four-wheelers are doing even more damage. If places like that get logged, what's left of those thin soils would drain down into the river. I also encountered small islands of forested areas and really hope they're protected."

Then, after negotiating Saddleback Mountain, McNeil forded the Smith River before encountering heavy snow at 3,200 feet while riding along a ridge east of the river. "Up there, Pepper was 'post-holing' through the snow," he said.

"Sometimes I hop down and lead Pepper," McNeil said. "When we encounter obstacles, I find the best way and talk to her. She follows me like a dog."

Once in O'Brien, McNeil met Jim and Kathy Hicks, who manage the Lone Mountain RV Resort and they showed him some of the local sights.

"What a great place. Great people. I stayed in a heated tee-pee and that helped me kick a cold I'd developed," McNeil said. "I really appreciate the Hicks' friendship."

To learn about local trail conditions and discern his route, McNeil connects with chapters of Back Country Horsemen of America and people he meets along the way. He usually camps out to keep his costs down.

McNeil also networks with small land conservation organizations in states he plans to traverse, hoping to help increase their donations.

"There's land trusts all over the nation near rural areas doing important work," McNeil said. "I feel strongly about bringing critical attention to these smaller groups who never get as much funding or recognition as the big outfits like the Sierra Club or the Nature Conservancy."

McNeil, who has worked as an outdoor guide and instructor and has a degree in environmental science, is dedicating his ride through Oregon to the 35-year-old Southern Oregon Land Conservancy that he says, "works cooperatively with landowners and communities to save the region's special places for today, tomorrow, and beyond."

Previous solo journeys across the United States that put McNeil in touch with the land include going 20 miles-per-hour on a moped. He later made a cross-country trip on a motorcycle. Then he crossed Canada on a bicycle, from British Columbia to the Bay of Fundy in New Brunswick. Also, to get the bird's eye view, McNeil flew a small airplane, a Cessna 150, from Orcas Island, Washington, to New Hampshire.

"When I see places like the Frank Church Wilderness Area in Idaho and some spots in Montana, it blows me away, how wild they still are," McNeil said. "Thank God there's people out there working to protect these areas."

Last year, McNeil took a horseback trip into Montana's Crazy Woman Mountains, where Jeremiah Johnson roamed in the mid-1800's. There, he began pondering his next expedition-- and the 'America on Horseback, Sea to Sea for Land Conservation' concept was born.

"When I pull the trigger on a new project, I tend to go all the way in," said McNeil, who then bought Pepper, his first horse, a 15.1 hand, 1,100 pound Tennessee Walker with a calm disposition.

"We did a lot of round-pen work, rode along roads, climbed the foot hills near Bozeman and crossed streams and snow fields," McNeil said. "We took long rides to build up Pepper's cardio-endurance and hone her trail skills. We've worked almost

everyday since last December."

"She's real willing and has performed flawlessly," said McNeil, who uses Easycare Boots and mineral hoof supplements to help Pepper maintain sound feet over the miles. "And we've benefited hugely from all the people who've given me great horse advice and donated equipment."

McNeil is picking his way across the southern end of the state, making his way towards Keno, Oregon. Then he intends to ride through

Idaho, Wyoming, Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York and Massachusetts before finishing his expedition on the Atlantic coast in New Hampshire, where he grew up and his mother still lives.

To follow McNeil's and Pepper's progress, see their Facebook page titled: America on Horseback, Sea to Sea for Land Conservation. McNeil is also developing a blog while on the trail that can be found at <http://americaonhorseback.org>.



(Photo by Tristan Stocker, Illinois Valley News)

Alex McNeil and his horse Pepper get back on the road after a few days rest in O'brien

O & C ... Continued from A-1

Now, the proposed O&C Trust, Conservation and Jobs Act, which secured broad support from Oregon's legislators, fifteen county boards of commissioners, the Oregon State Sheriff's Association and labor and industry groups, will be examined in the upcoming hearing.

"One thing is clear. The status quo isn't working for our rural communities. There's a better way. Our forests need to be managed so we can put people back to work in the woods, create healthy forests and communities, and provide certainty for essential local services like schools and law enforcement," said Walden. "Momentum for changing federal forest policy has been building in Oregon's counties, the legislature, and in Congress. We have a historic opportunity to get this done now, and we look forward to being a part of this effort."

Solutions are also being explored within state government. At an informational hearing on April 3, members of Oregon's House of Representatives Task Force on O&C counties provided testimony in favor of Senate Joint Memorial 10, a resolution that, "urges Congress to transfer management of O&C lands to a newly established board of trustees consisting of representatives from local government, environmental organizations and the timber industry."

Sen. Herman Baertschiger (R-Grants Pass), said SJM 10 is "a great concept" and added that discussions at the federal level for the past eighteen months have emphasized "finding solutions to

the problems involving a lack of funding for critical services at the county level." Baertschiger said the trust called for under SJM 10 would have a nine-member board with a flexible structure.

"This is the most critical issue facing the people of Josephine County," State Representative Wally Hicks said. "We need a science-based approach to managing the natural resources of our federal forest lands."

The House Natural Resources Committee hearing in Washington D.C. will be streamed live on April 11 at 7:00 a.m. PST at: <http://naturalresources.house.gov/live/>.

DUTCH DEALS

CAVE JUNCTION, OR ONLY APRIL 2013

UPGRADES DUTCH BROS. BUILT HERE!
RUBY-RED GRAPEFRUIT
#MAGIC
IT'S IN THE CAN

EARLY BIRD SPECIAL
Every Sunday in April,
Open to 7am -
Get any large drink for just \$2!

EARTH DAY SPECIAL
Monday, April 22nd - Any drink
for \$1.00 if you bring in a
Dutch Bros. Mug!

DB

[FACEBOOK.COM/DUTCHBROSCAVEJUNCTION](https://www.facebook.com/dutchbroscavejunction) →

**Stop in and see
Kate or Mamie!**

**12235 Redwood Hwy
Wonder, OR
541.476.8990**

"Serving the Best Cheeseburger, with an Attitude!"

**Tuesday - Sunday
Noon - 8 p.m.**

NOW OPEN SUNDAYS!

MOM'S SUNDAY DINNER - APRIL 14
RIB-EYE MADNESS NIGHT APRIL 19

Dos Gringos

MOST EXCELLENT MEXICAN RESTAURANT

SPRING HOURS
**MONDAY - THURSDAY
11 AM TO 5 PM**
.....
**FRIDAY
11 AM TO 7:30 PM**
.....
**SATURDAY & SUNDAY
CLOSED**

100% rating by the JoCo Health Department

541-592-2200

131 N. REDWOOD HWY