

IMPROVING THE TRAILS

Group offers camaraderie, job satisfaction

By Steve Tool
Wallowa County Chieftain

The 1,200 miles of hiking trails in Wallowa County are one of its main attractions, but up to 75 percent of the miles are impassable because of a lack of maintenance.

A group of locals has decided to do something about it and formed the Wallowa Mountains Hells Canyon Trails Association, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

“This collaborative of volunteers and the U.S. Forest Service was the brain-child of forest service staff,” board member Rick Bombaci said. “There was a desperate need,” added board member Jim Akenson.

Both men credited Donna Mattson and Kris Stein of the USFS for initiating the concept. Vicki Searles of the Wallowa County Chamber of Commerce was also involved.

The original members met weekly, studying the templates of similar groups and putting the organization together before the first official membership meeting took place a year later.

One marked difference from many of the national groups is that the association doesn’t offer catered restoration trips to members who pay for the privilege.

“This is all volunteer, and it’s all local,” Bombaci said.

He added the group has members from Baker and Union counties. It is also under the umbrella of the Eagle Cap Partnership that includes Eastern Oregon University, Wallowa Resources and the USFS.

Because of the group’s work, this area is one of only 15 in the country recognized and designated as national priority trails area because of deferred trail maintenance and high popularity.

The organization’s first project took place in March 2017 with work on the Imnaha River Trail that runs from Cow Creek Bridge to the mouth of the Imnaha.

“It was very labor-intensive work, like much of the work we’re doing, because the trails need brushing, and the brush is especially obnoxious in Hells Canyon — blackberries, poison ivy, the whole bit,” Bombaci said.

Originally, someone from the USFS supervised the trips and trained members until the organization learned the ins and outs of trail clearing.

“Enough of us have gone through the necessary training and have enough experience that the Forest Service feels comfortable working with us as a peer,” Bombaci said.

The members are not reimbursed for mileage or food and accept donations and seek grants to fund their work.

Trail crew participants have a minimum age of 16. Participants can expect to utilize a variety of tools including chain saws, crosscut saws (for wilderness areas) axes, long-handled loppers and pruning and bow saws. The association will provide tools while workers are expected to provide gloves.

One of the major projects already completed this year is in the Minam Corridor. Akenson said sportsmen have been complaining about conditions there for years. To get the 9.5 mile task accomplished, the group split into two units.

One group, with packing and riding stock, started from



Courtesy Photo

Members of the Wallowa Mountains Hells Canyon Trails Association pose at the Dug Bar monument celebrating the Nez Perce crossing of the Snake River during their historic 1877 trek that ended in tragedy for the tribe. The crew cleared several miles of previously inaccessible trail to the site earlier this year.

Working outside together really does create a bond. It’s hard work, but it’s also a lot of fun.”

— Rick Bombaci
Wallowa Mountains Hells Canyon Trails Association board member



Courtesy Photo/David Jensen

Association member Holly Akenson leads the packstring on the lower portion of trail clearing near Minam.

a dozen projects slated for the year and has completed a half-dozen already.

The group is trying to get more universities involved and along with EOU, the University of Idaho has sent students on trail projects. Trail Keepers of Oregon has also requested a partnership with the group.

Volunteers can expect a lot of hard work.

“There’s a lot of satisfaction to be gained from cutting through a three-foot tree with one other person and a saw,” Bombaci said.

Trails are cleared from six to eight feet wide and 10 feet high to accommodate horse and mule travel.

Certification is also required

for chain saw use. Akenson said he hopes to train more certified instructors within the group.

Another component of the group is interest in historic sites and cultural resources. For example, the group already started restoration work on the Lick Creek Guard Station.

Prospective members can expect to meet a wide variety of people in the organization.

“We’re a bit of an eclectic group from diverse backgrounds,” Bombaci said. “We have folks from academic urban environments to folks with livestock backgrounds and folks from rural environments. The group also includes trail bikers, backpackers, trail runners and skiers.”

Even juveniles assigned to community work service and high school students participate. The group would like to see more youth participation.

Bombaci explained that the organization is not an advocacy group. It does not engage in political debates, lawsuits or lobbying.

“We’re interested in boots-on-the-ground, getting work done on the ground,” he said.

The group now has more than 40 members and would like to expand its Union and Baker County memberships. Member Holly Akenson said the group is also expanding its horizons toward the Umatilla National Forest as the organization took on a four-day project in the Wenaha Wilderness earlier this year.

“If you’re from Pendleton you could be interested in the opportunities,” she said.

Membership dues are \$20 per year for an individual, \$30 per family and \$10 for students. Prospective members can email info@wmhcta.org for information or visit the groups Facebook page or wmhcta.org.

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