

## **Williams Creek Gravel-Hauling Project**

San Juan Back Country Horsemen (SJBCH) of Colorado secured a national grant to partner with the San Juan National Forest on a priority project to fix a 200-foot mud-bog section of the popular Williams Creek Trail (587), in the Weminuche Wilderness. The bog posed a threat to vegetation, water and visual quality as trail users were creating alternate routes to skirt the mire.

The result was the construction in August 2016 of a turnpike overlain with nearly 12 tons of gravel that solved the environmental and aesthetic problem on Williams Creek Trail—a well-traveled gateway to the Continental Divide. The week-long project involved SJBCH members, volunteers from other BCH chapters and multiple entities of the U.S. Forest Service.

Pagosa Ranger District Trail Foreman Tyler Albers and Wilderness Program Manager Ros Wu discussed with the SJBCH Trails and Projects Committee the idea of using the district's Trail Crew to construct a raised turnpike through the mud bog on Williams Creek Trail. The initial concept entailed the SJBCH chapter purchasing the needed gravel and utilizing volunteer packers to haul the material to the worksite.

As soon as the idea was presented to the SJBCH board, there was agreement to proceed. At the same time, a grant opportunity presented itself. The National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance (NWSA) had just announced a matching grant offering. Even though the final plans had not been completed, the Trails and Projects Committee outlined a budget they felt was reasonable, and the board gave the nod to complete the grant application. The deadline for the application left less than two weeks to prepare the application for the grant. During the time between the initial grant submission and the chapter's successful award, the project itself and the budget were refined and augmented.

In May, the National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance awarded a "boots-on-the-ground" grant to the San Juan Back Country Horsemen that enabled the chapter to commit \$3,000—plus volunteer hours—to the Williams Creek gravel-hauling project.

"The NWSA is thrilled to see such a strong partnership between the San Juan BCH and the Forest Service and feel the restoration of the Williams Creek Trail in the Weminuche Wilderness will benefit a diverse user group, including hikers, hunters and horseback riders," said Darcy Shepard, NWSA Boots-on-the-Ground Committee chairwoman. The NWSA promotes stewardship of the nation's Wilderness areas by working in partnership with volunteer organizations, the U.S. Forest Service and other federal agencies that manage Wilderness areas.

It soon became apparent that the gravel tonnage that needed to be hauled nearly 3 miles up the steep Williams Creek Trail made the original volunteer packer idea untenable. So, SJBCH

and the Pagosa Ranger District turned to Glenn Ryan, lead packer for the USFS Rocky Mountain Regional Specialty Pack String. Glenn and his 10-plus pack mules spend each summer work season fulfilling just the sort of mission we had in mind. Ros Wu contacted Glenn and reserved him and his pack string for the week of August 15th-19th. The SJBCH Trails and Projects Committee felt that with the commitments from the San Juan National Forest and the Rocky Mountain Region of the USFS and the Pagosa Ranger District, the chapter would be able to supply the necessary funds to complete the project. That is exactly how things played out.

The Pagosa Ranger District Trail Crew prepared the worksite during the week prior to the gravel packing. The crew used its backcountry skills to hand-fell trees on-site for the 200-foot-long turnpike, but the big job was moving nearly 12 tons of gravel almost 3 miles up the trail. Glenn Ryan and his packing assistant Trepper Osburn took the reins leading loaded mules on the trail up to three times a day for a week to the remote worksite. They were joined by Ros Wu and five horses from the Pagosa Ranger District pack string that she manages.

In addition, the Columbine Ranger District on the San Juan National Forest provided all the weed-free hay for the working stock.

Volunteers from San Juan Back Country Horsemen (SJBCH), Four Corners Back Country Horsemen (4CBCH) and Front Range Back Country Horsemen (FRBCH) provided the meals for crews and volunteers; helped manage all the stock; pulled weeds from around the trailhead and within the adjacent Palisades Horse Camp; provided materials and tools to construct a large temporary pasture for the pack string; built shelters over the kitchen and dining areas of the camp; designed and built the gravel-weighting stations; provided all the buckets, scales, shovels and rakes required for loading and weighing the rock; and helped groom and saddle/unsaddle the mules and loaded them for each pack trip up the mountain. Throughout each day, volunteers hauled water to fill troughs and buckets for the animals. This was quite an undertaking, as the water had to be hauled by pickup truck with a 300-plus-gallon tank 28 miles, one way, over very rough and wash-boarded roads from Pagosa Springs to the Williams Creek trailhead.

SJBCH project leader Bob Volger organized several planning meetings to finalize meal preparation and to identify appropriate sites for the kitchen and setting up the stations for weighing and loading the gravel so that all components of the project would flow smoothly.

All the advance preparation helped make this project special and successful. SJBCH volunteers provided a hot breakfast every morning for the Pagosa Ranger District Trail Crew with one of the largest frying pans ever seen. The Trail Crew stayed in tents just outside the campground not far from Williams Creek. In addition, every evening a campfire was built for volunteers and the Trail Crew to gather around to warm up and dry out while the kitchen crew prepared a hot

meal for the Trail Crew and all the volunteers to enjoy! SJBCH provided the food for the main meals, with many donated desserts from members of SJBCH, 4CBCH and FRBCH. Meals were served to approximately 30+ people every night!

At the end of the day on Friday, August 19th, our collaborative effort resulted in almost 12 tons of gravel packed to the site and the trail problem solved. The volunteers and packers and 18 stock animals worked tirelessly at high altitude, from early morning cold to the afternoon heat and from sunshine through thunderstorms, hail and rain into the early evening.

“There was no way we could have done it without our partners,” said Tyler Albers, Pagosa Ranger District Trail Crew boss. “They did the majority of the work; we just went in and did our normal job of trail maintenance and provided technical and logistical support.”

“Work on bigger projects like this in Wilderness just wouldn’t get done without the expertise of the Specialty Pack String,” said Glenn Ryan, who has been lead packer for 26 years.

In addition to delivering materials into national forests and Wilderness areas, the mules also routinely haul out tons of trash.

“The pack string is integral to the agency’s mission,” said Paul Cruz, the Forest Service’s recreation business program manager for the Rocky Mountain Region. “Not only can it do the work of many as the only way to haul heavy things deep into the Wilderness, it also serves an important function in teaching the public about the heritage of their public lands.”

Trepper Osburn of the Rocky Mountain Regional Pack String said, “CEOs for Fortune 500 companies are a dime a dozen, but we’re one of only five such operations worldwide that do what we do. We’ve got a great office view, but the roof leaks a little.”

In addition to the participants already mentioned, many more individuals contributed in one form or another. The volunteers who camped at the Palisades Horse Camp for the entire week and worked every day included: Kristie Hefling (SJBCH), Laurel Penwell (SJBCH), Bob Parsons (SJBCH), Larry Fields (FRBCH), Randy and Joanne Senzig (SJBCH), Todd Rodas and Judi Hurley (4CBCH), Ken and Denise Bachman (FRBCH), and Bob and Laura Volger (SJBCH and project leaders). Nancy Seay of SJBCH drove out each day to help and brought her horse to assist Ros Wu in leading the Pagosa Ranger District pack string. SJBCH members Tara McElhinney, Bev Warburton, Cheryl McCelvey, Pat Moffitt, Rodney Pepper, Dan Liccardi, Larry Hefling, John and Lisa Nelson, and Ted Wortman helped at times throughout the week. Vern and Kathy Jahnke of SJBCH loaned the chapter a cook stove and a huge skillet and provided desserts. John and Lisa Nelson of SJBCH initiated the project planning with the Forest Service and wrote the NWSA grant proposal.

Palisades Horse Camp hosts Bo and Olinda Reneau, helped every day and in every possible

manner. Ann Bond, Public Relations Officer for the San Juan National Forest, documented the project and wrote articles for the *Pagosa Sun* and *Durango Herald*. Paul Blackman, Pagosa Ranger District recreation manager, was instrumental in helping utilize the Trail Crew an extra day. Thank you also goes out to the Pagosa Ranger District Trail Crew, who were outstanding: Stephani Kopfman, Kristina Schenk, Zach Staley, Sky Martin, Eric Freudenberger, Ian Birdsell, and Cody Milihran.

Projects of this magnitude may begin with a conversation, but they only reach fruition through the hard work and extensive planning and collaboration of many individuals and entities. SJBCH tips its (cowboy) hat to all those involved in the Williams Creek project who shared a common vision to protect and maintain access in the Wilderness.