

Tourism, Outdoor Recreation and Natural Resources Committee Hearing
SB 578 January 26, 2010

Thank you Chairman Sheltroun and committee members for giving me the opportunity to speak to you this morning. My name is Joan Duncan and I would like to speak about the Blueberry Ridge Pathway, located in Marquette County, Upper Peninsula, where I live.

Blueberry Ridge is a trail system used by many different kinds of people. It is on state land and managed by the DNR. In the past, the area was logged and is criss-crossed with haul roads and skid trails. I lived near there and rode all through it on a dirt bike in 1974 thru 1976, when I lived in Sands Trailer Park.

Recently, in 2005, I was riding the trail with friends on horses and heard, for the first time, that there was an antagonistic series of confrontations by skiers and hikers toward horse riders. They wanted no horses on this trail.

I was surprised to hear this because I worked for the DEQ and previously for the DNR and knew that public land was available for all users and that the complainers were out-of-line.

However, within that same week, I received a call ^{to} from one of my horse riding friends who said that the DNR was holding a meeting the following evening to "discuss" issues at Blueberry Ridge, including user conflicts. I attended that meeting which had a large turnout considering the extremely short meeting notice. The DNR lead the evening off with a prepared power point program which focused on areas of the trail which showed loosened sand on hills and described this as erosion due to horse damage.

In my work for the DNR and DEQ (Land and Water Management Division) it was my job to write permits for bridges, culverts, and to advise folks, even the DNR (Forest Management Division) about ways to control erosion and stabilize soils. By law, erosion is only a real problem when the sand or erosion products reach a stream, lake or wetland. For the previous 20 years in that job, I had visited numerous trail systems including ATV, snowmobiling, logging roads, dirt bikes, etc. all over the U.P. on these trails soil erosion or loose soils did not warrant closing the trail.

As a result of the public meeting held by the DNR, a working committee was formed to resolve the "problems"....I was on that committee. During the working committee sessions the horse riders requested a parallel trail to separate horses from walkers or skiers. We also suggested making a spur trail to go around the area that had loose sand.

Very little support was evident for these suggestions. It seemed that the conclusions favored the skiers desire to get the horses off the trail entirely. It was surprising to see how quickly the DNR came up with a new site for a totally new trail system and parking lot. Most surprising was the immediate availability of the money to construct this new trail, given the weakness of Michigan's economy and the state budget.

It was decided by the DNR to close the trail to horses-which satisfied the demands of the skiers. Now they could have a perfect trail all to themselves.

There were no DNR tourism specialists or recreation planners involved in this entire process. I believe that Michigan cannot afford to favor one narrow user group and push away such a large group as horse riders, which are state wide; and also ignore the potential to attract tourists on horses. Blueberry Ridge was the only horse trail managed by the DNR and now it is closed.

Once the new trail became a reality, it was disappointing for many of us. It was laid out almost entirely on flat land and was accessed by a 3 mile bumpy and winding side road. I have heard it called a "beginners trail" because it is very easy on horses...

This whole fiasco has made me very sad to see the preferential treatment of skiers over horses. I know that a compromise could have worked and would have cost far less money if the DNR would have resisted the skier's demands.

A very dangerous and ugly precedent has been set here. Through bullying tactics the skiers have forced horses from a public trail and caused the DNR to make a short-sighted decision that is bad for this state.

I believe Blueberry Ridge Pathway should be re-opened to all users; and that sound scientific principles be applied to its management. A compromise should be developed which will minimize user conflict and require gracious conduct by all users.

I request that the financial burden of the new trail and parking lot be explained by the DNR.

Please re-open the trail to horses or at least follow due process so all voices have an equal say in its future. I and my friends still want to ride at Blueberry Ridge and we are very willing to compromise.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

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