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Back Country Horsemen of Big South Fork continues trail work

Pam Kardeen

Keith Holley, president of Back Country Horsemen of Big South Fork Tennessee, opened the group's local meeting June 9 after recently being voted onto the Executive Committee of the National Back Country Horsemen of America.

The local chapter has more than 80 members and is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to preserving and enriching the trail riding experience in the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area, as well as the Smoky Mountain recreation area.

Holley said, "We are devoted equestrians who love to ride and explore new trails. We assist with trail maintenance and improvement projects, keeping trails clear for all user groups. We welcome riders of all types, ages and interests into our chapter."

In April 2026, the local chapter assisted the Smoky Mountains area with tree removal and clearing trails after storms paralyzed park trails. This is work members volunteer for each year in April.

Trees that grown men could not get their arms around were chain-sawed into manageable logs and removed from trails that were completely blocked. To operate a chain saw in a federal park requires special training, and Holley has the certificate to participate in the work. He holds a Class C sawyer card, which allows him to train others for certification. More members soon will undergo the training to earn the certificate as well.

The horsemen ride horses and mules to the locations with chain saws and all their equipment on pack mules or horses — no small feat, given the landscape they encounter. It takes a well-trained and disciplined animal to enter these forests. The rider needs to be well seasoned as well, and it is not advised for the faint of heart to participate in these activities.



PACKING - Back Country Horsemen of Big South Fork Tennessee members use horses and mules to pack equipment into forested trail areas.

Sixty-three miles of trails were cleared by these horsemen and women. Women are just as active in the work as men. There are approximately 300 forest employees and about 1,800 volunteers in the Smoky Mountains area. Not only do the local horse folk benefit from the efforts of these teams, hikers also are able to enjoy the trails.

In the Big South Fork area last year, work included the building of upgraded horse stalls and the removal of metal stanchions that were dangerous for horses. Twelve-by-12 panels were placed instead, and pads were built. Ten campsites were updated and improved by the group. This year in September, the members will update another 10 campsites at Station Horse Camp in Oneida, a part of the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area.

Each year, the members travel and pack into the Smoky Mountains area to bring mulch for the privies on the Appalachian Trail. The Appalachian Trail runs from Georgia to Maine. This group works on local areas of the trail.

In October 2026, Holley and his wife, Tammy, will hold Mule Days at East Fork Stables. There will be mule-drawn wagons, food, music and an auction to support the work done by the Back Country Horsemen of Big South Fork. All donations will benefit the continued work and effort to ensure the enjoyment of horse folk and hikers on these trails.

Holley especially wants to thank the Park Service and its employees for allowing the Back Country Horsemen of Big South Fork the opportunity to assist with this work and make sure the trails continue to be available to all.