

DOUBLE DIAMOND AWARD APPLICATION-

Submitted by Nancy Sluys- President - Back Country Horsemen of the Virginia Highlands

Virginia Highlands Horse Trail / Jones Creek Project Phase 1- AKA "The Hale Hole"

The Virginia Highlands Horse Trail is an iconic 87 mile long trail that runs east/west across the entire length of the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area (George Washington - Jefferson National Forest) in southwest Virginia. The multi-use trail is enjoyed by equestrians, hikers, mountain bikers and seasonally by motorcyclists in some areas. About 8 years ago a tree fell and blocked Jones Creek, which was then diverted into the trail in the middle of a remote 8.5 mile section, scouring 300' of tread down to bedrock, up to 5' deep in places, creating a dangerous situation for trail users. Dubbed "The Hale Hole", because it was in the Hale Lake area and really was a hell hole for trail users, the Forest Service did not have the staffing or funds to address the problem nor the maintenance on the rest of the trails in the area that had become degraded over the years of neglect.

The Back Country Horsemen of the Virginia Highlands (BCHVH) saw the need and sought solutions to address the problem, which had become serious enough to block safe access down the trail and was damaging to the environment. They planned a project around the washout and presented it to the Forest Service who approved of the idea. The Legacy Trails Grant program, administered by American Trails, looked like the perfect avenue for funding, as it addressed water quality where trails and streams impacted each other. The 8.5 mile section of the Virginia Highlands Horse Trail between Hwy-21 and Hale Lake Road crosses 4 different creeks that flow into the New River Watershed and numerous drainage issues were identified and documented. The project grew in scope as other problems were identified in the area and an additional 4 miles of connecting trails were also added to the project equaling 12.5 miles but this Double Diamond Award application is specifically for the Hale Hole and the adjoining 8.5 mile section of the Virginia Highlands Horse Trail accessing it that were completed in the fall of 2023.

It started becoming apparent that partnering with another organization to add capacity would be a good idea and a relationship was formed that would add to the success of the proposed project. BCHVH connected and partnered with the Appalachian Conservation Corps (ACC) who would add a 6 person crew of 18-30 year olds to assist our membership in the heavier hand work aspects of the project. The technical experts in both groups collaborated to help solve the complicated problem of the Hale Hole. The project was taking shape but there were many challenges yet to overcome.

The application was submitted and a \$75,000.00 grant was secured and an additional \$25,000.00+ of matching funds were raised throughout the year by BCHVH through crowdfunding, other small grants, fundraiser events and donations from businesses and community members to fund the project.

Now that the grant was secured the real planning started. The main problem (the Hale Hole) was in the center of the mountainous 8.5 mile section of trail and the only access to the middle was through a private land owner who, at first, was not forthcoming with permission. After several meetings a partnership was formed and an agreement was struck and the access to bring in equipment and materials to the west end of the Hale Hole was secured, insuring that the project could move forward. Other partners surfaced throughout the season from the surrounding community. Three local excavator operators, all equestrians and one who was also a motorcyclist, donated many hours of service. Six other motorcyclists volunteered on the job as well as other local community members. A nearby rock quarry owner, who also rides the trails on his mules, donated and delivered 80 tons of river rock. BCHVH members donated equipment such as tractors, UTVs and 2 dump bed trailers. Alex Uspenski from AK Trails LLC was also hired, thanks to the grant, with his Ditch Witch trail dozer to work in tighter areas and to put the finishing touches on the sustainability of the trail.

In the Spring of 2023 BCHVH was busy brushing the entire 8.5 mile trail segment and doing recon to identify all the drainage problems to be worked on in order to reach the Hale Hole and other problem areas from either end. By Summer things really kicked into gear with crews

working to improve the trail so materials and heavy equipment needed for the major repair of the Hale Hole could be brought in from either side. The Forest Service helped out by providing a 4 wheel drive dump bed pick up truck and driver to transport gravel down 4 miles of the wide trail to stockpile on the east end of the Hale Hole. Two volunteer excavator operators on rented equipment worked towards each other from both ends, grading and filling washouts and in a few days they met at the Hale Hole, 4 miles in, and proceeded to dig and push enough rocks and dirt to fill the 300' void in the trail to a point where the crews could take over to complete the repair during the September hitch. A 300' turnpike structure was planned to raise the level of and stabilize the trail.

Planning the actual repair of the Hale Hole was part engineering expertise and part wishful thinking as no one could predict exactly what the streams would do in high water but there was a lot of speculation. BCHVH members worked to transport the rocks, gravel and crusher run to the site and the ACC added the hand work to sort and place the rocks that were dug into the soil to form the anchor for the retaining wall. For 8 days the crews worked together, transforming the area from a dangerous washout to a sustainable section of trail that will last into the future. It was challenging to both groups to integrate and coordinate the mechanized and hand work together and stay out of each others way and somehow it all worked perfectly! The end result transformed an overgrown, storm ravaged, dangerous trail into a park like setting to be enjoyed for years to come.

The partnership between BCHVH and ACC was a huge success and the completed Hale Hole reconstruction was a big accomplishment, demonstrating that seemingly impossible things can happen when people work together for the same goal. Here are some of the stats...

54 volunteers have been involved since the beginning of the project totaling 2,200 volunteer hours with the following breakdown-

Basic Work Hours- 1029

Skilled Work Hours (Chain Saw, Equipment Operators etc)- 706

Recon- 184

Travel Hours- 169

Administrative- 112

Donated Equipment Hours- Power Equipment- 125, Heavy Equipment- 746

The value of all this work as determined by the Independent Sector is estimated at-\$155,251.60

Materials included 355 tons of gravel and crusher run, 80 tons of donated natural rock, 20+ tons of gathered natural rock, a culvert, safety equipment and trail tools.

Another hitch in the Spring of 2024 will address an adjacent section of trail to fulfill the entire grant, but the main problem of the Hale Hole and it's adjoining trail is completed. An inspection of the area a few months later, after several significant rain events this winter, showed little, if any, impact to the trail repairs, demonstrating the quality and sustainability the work.

Supporting Documents-

*Letters of support from Mt Rogers NRA Forest Service, Steve Coldron (Land Owner), Erin Hanley (ACC Crew Leader), anonymous trail user

*Picture report that was sent to the Forest Service

*Additional Pictures