In an effort to further safeguard natural resources and enhance the experience of all trail-users, the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources has announced local changes affecting horseback riding will be forthcoming along the Thunder Mountain Equestrian Trail in Elk State Forest, Elk County.

“Since its inception in 1994, the Thunder Mountain Equestrian Trail has become increasingly popular with horseback riders, hikers and bicycle riders, and year-round use of the trail system has grown tremendously,” said Bureau of Forestry Director Daniel Devlin. “Although such growth is gratifying, this intense use has presented negative impacts as well.”

The state forester said the bureau is taking gradual steps along the 26-mile, non-motorized, shared-use trail to better accommodate horses, bicycles and hikers while addressing equestrian impact that includes: users developing trails on state and private lands without permission; soil erosion; safety concerns; group and commercial riding without required agreements; and trespassing reported by private land owners.

“Addressing these issues and directing recreational resources in a more sustainable direction remains a top bureau priority,” Devlin said. “We plan to promote more directed and sustainable use of the resource; create a safer environment for visitors; and encourage respect for private landowner rights, all in an attempt to improve our visitors’ experience.

“To accomplish this, we will work with the Pa. Game Commission to establish year-round game land connectivity to the Thunder Mountain Equestrian Trail; create one map featuring both the Game Commission and DCNR trails; improve trail sustainability for a better riding experience; close user-generated trails not associated with the Thunder Mountain Equestrian Trail; and require all riders to remain on approved roads and trails.”

Driven by the area’s elk-herd growth and promotion of the surrounding Pennsylvania Wilds, trail popularity has skyrocketed in recent years, Devlin noted. The bureau’s Elk State Forest District will work to effectively communicate information to the public on these changes as they occur. It also will cooperate with local businesses to gain an accurate measure of trail use; assist in educating their clientele; and promote volunteer efforts.

“We know equestrians often travel long distances to Benezette to enjoy the world-class attraction of Pennsylvania’s elk herd and to enjoy the stunning beauty found throughout Elk State Forest,” Devlin said. “Fall weekends, especially, attract hundreds of animals and riders to the many locations both in and around the forest.

“These changes are directly in line with the bureau’s ongoing efforts to provide all visitors with a quality outdoor experience and conserve our forestlands for sustainable use, both now and in the future.”

For more information, contact Elk State Forest District at 814-486-3353, or visit www.dcnr.state.pa.us or www.dcnr.state.pa.us/forestry/recreation/equestrian/index.htm.

Facebook page: www.facebook.com/elkstateforest.
1. **Do I need insurance to ride on state forest lands?** No, but businesses operating on state forest lands must have a Commercial Activities Agreement and liability insurance.

2. **Can I ride anywhere on the Elk State Forest?** No. In the local closure area, riders must remain on the TMET system, which consists of approved trails and roads.

3. **How do I know where I can ride?** DCNR blazes approved roads and trails with a 2” x 6” red rectangle. The TMET Guide also contains a map of approved roads and trails.

4. **What if I don’t have access to the TMET system?** A day-use parking lot exists along East Hicks Run Road, approximately 3.75 miles north of SR 555. In addition, you may reserve overnight campsites in either of two camping areas on state forest lands - Gas Well and Dark Hollow.

5. **Can I ride on Pennsylvania Game Lands trails all year long?** No. The PGC prohibits riding on PGC lands during hunting season, except on Sundays.

6. **Can I hunt while riding my horse?** Riders legally engaged in hunting may use State Game Lands. Please check with the PGC for more specific information. Horses must remain on the TMET system while hunting within the local closure area on state forest lands.

7. **As an individual, do I need a permit to ride on DCNR or PGC lands?** At this time, neither DCNR or PGC require bridals for using our trails.

8. **Do I need an agreement to have a group ride on DCNR and/or PGC lands?** Yes, both agencies require different forms of agreements.

9. **Can I hire an equine guide on state forest lands?** Yes, as long as they have a Commercial Activities Agreement with DCNR.

10. **Are there equine camping opportunities?** Yes, the Elk State Forest has two camping areas with a total of 15 sites. Contact the Elk County Chamber of Commerce for private camping opportunities.

**Planned Actions**

- Mitigate negative impacts to State Forest Lands
- Close and repair unsustainable trails
- Improve the Thunder Mountain Equestrian Trail (TMET) system
- Enact a local closure that prohibits open/cross-country riding in a defined area around the TMET system
- Provide additional connections and trail loops
- Connect the PA Game Commission (PGC) trails to DCNR trails
- Develop a cooperative agreement with PGC for riders to access the TMET system during hunting seasons
- Develop one trail map with both DCNR and PGC trails
- Reduce/eliminate private lands trespass issues
- Work with groups and businesses to acquire necessary agreements
- Communicate information to visitors through various media
- Educate users using State Forest Officers and DCNR Rangers
- Enforce the local closure within the pre-defined area

**Rider Advisory**

- Riders must stay on the Thunder Mountain Equestrian Trail System, which consists of approved trails and roads
- Trails are under construction so use caution
- [http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/forestry/stateforests/elk/index.htm](http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/forestry/stateforests/elk/index.htm)