



Position Statement

HB 4610 – Right to Ride

Sierra Club OPOSSES this bill. Votes pertaining to this bill may be included on the Sierra Club's Legislative Scorecard.

Issue Background

In 2008, the Department of Natural Resources closed parts of the 118,000 acre Pigeon River Country State Forest to horseback riders and mountain bikers. The restrictions placed on these two user groups were due primarily to two factors:

- 1) Concern over losing \$25 million in federal funds due to an inconsistency between the funding source and the permitted uses of lands the funds support.
- 2) Damage to the natural resources due to horseback and bike traffic.

This bill is an effort by horseback trail riders to regain access to the Pigeon River Country State Forest for horseback riding, as well as expand access to public land statewide. The bill would require the state to re-open all previously created horseback riding trails (both authorized and unauthorized) for pack and saddle animals and to establish a statewide network of trails for horseback riders.

Sierra Club Perspective

While the Sierra Club fully supports efforts to make Michigan's natural resources accessible to all users, this bill has a number of significant problems:

- 1) The bill bypasses existing land management decision-making processes and prioritizes the needs of the trail riding community over all other user groups.
- 2) The bill ignores the state's need to protect its natural resources and sensitive ecosystems by requiring trail riding access, despite the damage this use can inflict.
- 3) The bill requires the state to establish a network of pack and saddle trails throughout the state. This network would likely require purchase of easements, trail construction and maintenance, and signage. There is no money in the budget for this activity.

Horses have a unique ability to do damage to sensitive lands. Unrestricted horse and bike traffic create unauthorized trails which can damage ecosystems. In addition, widespread trail networks fundamentally change the natural characteristics of the park and can lead to significant erosion problems.

When managing public lands, the state must strike two delicate balances: the balance between the many user groups who enjoy our public lands (trail riders, mountain bikers, bird watchers, etc.), *and* between all user groups and protection of the natural resource.

This bill goes too far and puts one of Michigan's premier wilderness areas at risk.

*Please contact the Sierra Club Michigan Chapter office at (517) 484-2372 for more information.
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