

Criteria for Equestrian Trail Use in Iowa State Parks

There are currently 640 miles of trails in state parks, recreation areas and state forests. While equestrians make up less than 10% of all trail users, 40% of the state trail system is open for equestrian use, which constitutes approximately 250 trail miles.

A statewide trail policy is under development that will include criteria for consideration for a variety of different trail types. It ultimately is an analysis of an area's suitability and sensitivity for various types of trail uses, most of which vary in their impacts to the natural resources. While not all having equal value, initial criteria includes:

- Size of area
- Soil types – some are more erosive than others
- Slope – probably one of the most critical for the development of sustainable trails
- Existing trail types – whether there are trail structures such as steps or boardwalks
- Presence of state threatened or endangered plant or animal species

Charged with responsibility to balance resource protection with recreational uses, the Department of Natural Resources has an incredibly difficult time keeping up with current trail maintenance and repairs. The Department annually spends approximately \$600,000 combined from three funding sources, Americorps, DOT Recreational Trails grant and DNR funding through REAP. To keep up with all current needs, three times that amount would need to be spent. To maintain one mile of trail costs \$400/mile between labor, equipment operation and materials. For intensive trail restoration the costs can range from \$10,000 - \$24,000/mile.

Ultimately, the goal is to create a trail system that is sustainable. Horses can cause some of the worst damage that is difficult and costly to repair/maintain unless the trail is properly located on suitable soils and slopes, in an area of suitable size to withstand and distribute the use. These costs underscore the necessity of proper trail alignment and appropriate allowable trail uses in creating and maintaining a trail system that is less costly to maintain and best protects the natural resources for future generations of trail users.