

New Mammoth Cave Hike/Bike Trail Update:

By Johnny Johnson

On November 19th Anne Ellis, Dr. Tom Compton, Kentucky IMBA Rep. Mike Dulin and I met with Mammoth Cave Park Superintendant Pat Reed and his staff to review what has been accomplished with the back country trails to date and discuss what the next steps should be to get the new hike/bike trail built and opened at Mammoth Cave.

This process has taken a considerable amount of time and many of you may not be familiar with the entire story, so I've drafted a short history below to help everyone understand where we've come from, where we're going and how we plan to get there.

History: In 1999 the Bowling Green League of Bicyclists (BGLOB) entered into a two-year agreement called a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the National Park Service (NPS) Mammoth Cave unit. This agreement allowed bikes on the Buffalo Rd. Trail, Turn Hole Bend Trail and Sal Hollow Trail. The majority of the work on the original MOU was handled by BGLOB members Jeff Rose and Richard Larson. It's worth noting that the only reason bicycles were allowed on these trails is that they are technically considered old farm roads that were there when the park opened. National Park Service regulations prohibit bicycle use, except on "park roads" that are deemed appropriate for bicycles by the acting park Superintendent. Bicycle use can only be allowed permanently if authorized through the passage of a "special regulation", per 36 CFR 4.30. It's a cumbersome legal process designed to protect our National Parks, but slowly – through projects like ours - bicycles are gaining acceptance on and off road. More information about the regulations is available at the following websites:

<http://home.nps.gov/applications/npspolicy/search.cfm>

http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/cfr_2008/julqtr/36cfr4.30.htm

With hundreds of volunteer hours by BGLOB members and other dedicated trail enthusiasts, approximately 60% of the Sal Hollow Trail was rerouted and is now considered the best trail in the park. Because of our efforts, mountain biking was seen as a positive activity compatible with the values of the National Park Service. While mountain bikers had proven their commitment to the Mammoth Cave park management, the national regulations still needed to be met. The original MOU expired in 2002; however, we have been allowed to ride the designated trails without a new MOU.

In 2004 - after many complaints from hikers and bikers about the damage horses were doing to the trail, the park managers made the decision to discontinue horse use on the Sal Hollow trail. The horse folks of course did not like this and organized a group called the Mammoth Cave Equine Trail Riders Association and began petitioning the park to



reopen Sal Hollow to horses. The horse group also began showing up for trail maintenance days and repairing their trails (which is a good thing).

In 2005 the park managers initiated a planning process (mandated for all parks), which included a long term plan for their back country trails. The Back Country Trail Users Group was formed, which included representatives from the equine group, hiking groups and mountain bikers. Soon after forming the group, the park management released 5 proposed alternatives for back country trail configurations and asked the public for comments (most of you remember, thanks for your comments). We worked closely with leaders from the local equestrian and hiking communities and agreed that, while it was the most expensive, Alternative #4 offered the most desirable options for each user group. Alternative #4 allowed for a new hike/bike trail to be built and reopens Sal Hollow to equestrian use. The park staff took the user feedback into consideration and shortly thereafter, they completed their Environmental Assessment and released their final report – also known as a Finding of No Significant Impact – or FONSI. After the release of the FONSI, the Superintendent met with the Back Country Trail Users Group once again to determine when equestrians would be allowed back on Sal Hollow. After considering the amount of time generally required to pass a special regulation and reviewing the comments submitted by BGLOB members and other mountain bikers from around the state, Park Superintendent Pat Reed set the reopening of Sal Hollow for September 1, 2011 or whenever the new trail opens, whichever comes first.

Current Updates and Future Plans: The proposed trail - currently being called the Big Hollow Trail - is an 8 + mile, multi-loop trail (per GPS readings) on the north east side of the park. If anyone wants to hike the new trail, it's well flagged and it's accessible between the Green River Ferry Road and the Green River. Entrance is on the right, after crossing the Green River ferry; look for the orange or red flagging. If anyone has any route suggestions please let me or know and I'll pass them on to Larry Johnson at the park. Any changes to the route must be done by the end of this year because the archeological assessment will be completed in January. The special regulation for the new trail will be heading to Washington D.C. shortly, and as the park staff has been incredibly supportive throughout the process, we expect the special regulation to be approved.

The next step is determining who is going to build this new trail and how is it going to be paid for. At the meeting on Nov. 19th it was decided it would be best if we first formalized the partnership between the National Park Service, BGLOB, KYMBA and IMBA. (There's a standing agreement in DC between IMBA and the NPS, which we'll be using as a model). BGLOG will be the local representative, KYMBA will be the state representative and IMBA will be the national representative. Representatives from each organization expect to have a conference call with the NPS Partnership Coordinator in Atlanta sometime in mid to late December. Following the call, our intention is to secure a



new MOU with the park, which will outline the roles and responsibilities of the park management and the local mountain biking community.

At the meeting we also decided that the trail should be professionally built by a certified trail builder who does this type work day in and day out. The park staff wants this new trail to be a precedent-setting project for other National Park Service units and they fully expect it to be built to the highest possible standards of sustainability and provide exceptional user-experiences. We went on to discuss how we would go about paying for the trail construction and we came up with a number of solutions. A large portion of the funding will most likely come from federal grant money with additional money raised through private non-profit partners (i.e. either KyMBA or Friends of Mammoth Cave) The NPS has already paid for all the NEPA compliance and they've committed to building the new trail head parking area, restrooms and campsites (a huge contribution) BGLOB will take the lead on maintaining the trail once it has been built, however, as it will be professionally built, sustainable trail, we don't expect much maintenance for many years.

Some Key Points:

- 1. Mountain Biking will be allowed on Sal Hollow until August 31, 2011 or until the new trail is complete, whichever comes first.**
- 2. The trail will be open to hiking and biking ONLY. Forever.**
- 3. Getting a new Hike/Bike trail in a National Park is a slow process, but we have an incredible relationship with the park staff and they are just as excited about the success of this project as we are.**
- 4. Start looking around for possible funding sources: employers, large local corporations, local schools (WKY), church groups, etc. We will send out a fundraising kit electronically so when the time is right, asking for money will be that much easier.**

