

A HERCULEAN TASK



Turning adversity into opportunity, volunteers and Forest Service crews hone their skills while cleaning up a gigantic mess left by a freak wind storm in Oregon.

By Kit Dickey and Janet Fullwood

In spring of 2009, **Wayne Chevalier**, Trail Crew Supervisor for the McKenzie River Ranger District of Oregon's Willamette National Forest, was assigned a daunting task. A freak wind storm in October 2007 had mowed down a 150-foot-wide swath of old-growth timber along the main equestrian-access trail leading up to the Pacific Crest Trail and the Three Sisters Wilderness Area from the west side of the Cascades.

"It was like a big tornado had come over the mountains. It traveled straight down the Foley Ridge Trail for about two miles at a location about three miles from the PCT," Chevalier explained during a presentation given at the Pacific Crest Trail Association's recent Trail Operations Conference in Eagle Creek, Ore.

Along a 1.5-mile section of trail in the most severely impacted area, between 300 and 400 old-growth trees were uprooted and fell, essentially closing the route. An equestrian hunting party camped nearby told rangers of huddling in their tents, listening to the incredible crash of falling trees. The following day they discovered their exit route impassable, forcing them to take a detour of more than 20 miles.

The High Cascades receive heavy snowfall, and the winter of 2007-2008 experienced above average precipitation. It wasn't until mid-August that members of the **Forest Service** and the Emerald Empire Chapter of the **Back Country Horsemen of Oregon** (BCHO) could conduct a scouting trip to assess the damage. The extent of the devastation was staggering.

"It was solid blowdown; you could walk from tree to tree," Chevalier said.

Becky Hope with the BCHO put it this way: "From *Google Earth* it looked like footprints left by a huge giant that had stomped its way through the forest."

Clearing the trail would require a large crew working for a long period of time, perhaps years. The Emerald Empire BCHO pledged to take on the project in tandem with the Forest Service. Through the efforts of **Marlene Orchard**, BCHO's Public Lands chair,

and **Steve Otoupalik**, Wilderness and Trails Manager with the McKenzie River Ranger District, Oregon's Title II program, which funnels timber revenues into community development projects, approved a grant to reopen the trail.

A project of this scope requires not just strategy and faultless logistical planning, but creative outreach. Chevalier, seeing a way to turn adversity into opportunity, decided to market the project as an advanced crosscut saw training event. He sent out an e-mail soliciting volunteers interested in honing their skills on large, technical trees with multiple binds in rough, remote terrain.

"We had volunteers lining up to get on the list and get out there and cut these logs," Chevalier said. "I had Helitack teams from

Eastern Oregon calling to see if they could bring crews out to train. Opportunities to train on trees like this are hard to find."

Chevalier's request also was picked up by **Dana Berthold**, the PCTA's regional representative for the Columbia Cascades Region. The event was announced at the annual PCTA-Forest Service training weekend at Allingham Station in mid-May. More than 40 volunteers committed to the late-June project.

Mother Nature had other ideas, however. A late snowmelt postponed the scheduled work party, and only six PCTA representatives were able to free up time to participate when work actually got under way later in the summer. The Emerald Empire chapter of BCHO provided stock and experienced packers who made multiple trips transporting maintenance tools and camp supplies.

"They brought in just about everything but the kitchen sink," Chevalier said. "We had hoists, jacks, saws, Peaveys, block and tackle and pry bars to go around. Without the support of the Back County Horsemen, the project would have been a flop. There was no way we could have hauled all that gear up there, so we were real grateful."

In July, three Forest Service cutting teams along with the PCTA and BCHO volunteers simultaneously tackled the job. "Most of the trees were over 24 inches; it was pretty technical. There was a lot more to it than just cutting," Chevalier said. "Removing the cut log rounds alone was a challenge."

In terms of education, the difficult exercise was a smashing success.

"Classic log jams teach quite a bit about where and why and how," Chevalier explained. "Using this kind of thing as an opportunity for training is really worthwhile. You'll learn more cutting

trees like this in a week than you will in a whole summer or two of cutting smaller trees."

In the end, a log-out project estimated to require two seasons was accomplished in just 60 days with the help of the previously mentioned crews and a special tread reconstruction crew from the **Northwest Youth Corps** that spent more than three weeks on site building new sections of trail around some of the worst areas of blowdown.

The trail became passable to hikers and stock users by September. Remaining tread problems are due to be resolved in June, or as soon as snowmelt permits.


Previous page, left to right: Maintenance crews work to open a portion of the Foley Ride Trail obstructed by hundreds of trees that fell across it during a freak wind storm in October 2007.

Bottom: Packers with the Emerald Empire Chapter of Backcountry Horsemen of Oregon transported more than 500 pounds of tools and supplies to the Foley Ridge Trail work site.

Below: A work crew member hiking in gets a first look at the damage.



Memorandum of Understanding



In 2009, the **Pacific Crest Trail Association** renewed its "memorandum of understanding" with the **U.S. Forest Service**, the **National Park Service**, the **Bureau of Land Management** and **California State Parks**. The purpose of this agreement is to facilitate management of the Trail, coordinate the development and distribution of educational materials, encourage volunteer involvement and recognize the PCTA as the government's major partner in the operation of the **Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail**.

In the agreement, the PCTA and the government agencies agreed to coordinate in the management and operation of the PCT and feeder trails, including signing, condition surveys, trailhead and trail use surveys, water development, adopt-a-trail programs, and construction and maintenance activities.

