

Rocky Mountain Region Specialty [Horse and Mule] Pack String

General Information

The Regional Pack String originated in 1989 on the Shoshone National Forest (NF) in Cody, WY. This new resource was formed in response to the Yellowstone fires, as a need for more traditional skills and abilities became apparent when air support was affected by those fires. The South Platte Ranger District of the Pike NF was home to the Rocky Mountain Region Specialty Pack String (RMRSPS) based at the AG Ranch in Shawnee, CO from 1992-2018.

Horses and mules based out of these stations played trails and aided their packers in teaching lessons on horsemanship, packing and low impact techniques for backcountry use. The packers of the RMRSPS provided specialty packing and educational outreach throughout the Rocky Mountain Region.



Packer on lead mare

The RMRSPS consisted of twelve highly trained pack mules and two saddle horses along with their equipment and tack. Working as two mule strings, the pack string used special packing equipment such as gravel bags, lumber racks and swivel bunks to carry loads into work sites. Able to be utilized anywhere within the United States, the RMRSPS utilized two semi-tractors with 27-foot trailers to haul the mule teams.

The pack string supported a wide variety of projects on the national forests, including hauling materials and gear to support Forest Service and volunteer trail crews, assisting in building bridges and other structures, packing sand or gravel for trail maintenance and reconstruction, loading timbers, hauling junk out of backcountry areas and hauling fish to stock remote streams and lakes. The pack string was authorized two packers – a lead packer and an assistant – to accompany the string to shoe, pack, lead and care for the livestock. In addition to scheduling work to support on-ground projects, the packers also conducted a variety of classes such as packing and “leave no trace” training, as well as providing educational outreach presentations to the public about the pack string, its history, capabilities and uses.

Finally, the packers and their mules supported a variety of community events, and public outreach such as parades, rodeos and fairs.

Packing a mule string...some history & background

Pack strings are valuable tools in managing the 191 million acres which make up the national forests, America's Great Outdoors. These lands were set aside over 100 years ago to provide for the needs of the American people in ways that also protect the environment.

Today, while there are numerous smaller mule teams serving the wilderness needs of individual forests, there are only two* full regional specialty pack strings serving USFS needs throughout multiple states: the RMRSPS (Region 2), supporting forests in CO, Eastern WY, Nebraska, KS and SD; and the Northern Region Pack Train (Region 1), serving MT, northern ID, ND and northwestern SD. *Regretfully, 2018 was the last season for Region 2 Pack string operations at the AG Ranch in Shawnee. The animals and equipment have now been transferred back to the Shoshone NF.



Pack string

Mules in the Forest Service

Cowboys, trappers and woodsmen--outdoorsmen of every variety--filled the early forest ranger ranks. A good pack animal was an equal partner in protecting the forest reserves from timber, theft and fire. Often, that animal was a mule. Mules were preferred because they possess intelligence, agility and stamina. It was only a matter of time before several pack mules were tied together, creating a working pack string. These working strings became lifelines to the crews who fought fires, carved trails, built fire towers and bridged rivers in the backcountry.

Able to carry roughly twenty percent of its body weight, a 1,200-pound mule can comfortably carry 150-240 pounds of materials. Because of this carrying capacity, the best use of mules today is packing supplies into and out of the wilderness where mechanized equipment is not allowed.

Start with a good mule...



Mules are the hybrid product of a male donkey and a female horse. Male mules are called johns and female mules are called mollies. This pack string uses mollies because they generally have a gentler disposition than johns. Intelligence, agility and stamina are all characteristics of mules. These qualities combine with a quirk of nature to make mules excellent pack animals. Unlike horses, which carry about 65 percent of their weight on their front legs, mules carry 55 percent on their front legs. This makes them very well balanced and surefooted, just what you want on backcountry trails!

Some people think stubbornness is a mule characteristic... stubborn as a mule! Mules are intelligent and possess a strong sense of self-preservation. You just can't make a mule do something it thinks will hurt it, no matter how much persuasion you use. So, some people confuse this trait with stubbornness. What do you think?

Mules form close bonds with horses, especially mares. The bond is so close that mules willingly follow a mare. That is why you may often find a mare, wearing a bell, leading a string of mules. A wrangler, or mule skinner, can usually control an entire pack string simply by controlling the bell mare. At night in the backcountry mule skippers can picket the bell mare and turn the mules loose. The mules will disperse and graze freely yet remain close to the mare. Environmental impacts are reduced, and the mules are easy to gather in the morning. The RMRSPS does not use a bell mare; however, the bond with the pack horses remains strong and they are equal partners in the team.

...then add specialized tack and equipment



Pack string waiting by building

Routine equipment for the string starts with packsaddles. The FS uses the Decker model, popular since the 1930's. Each mule's saddle is custom fitted to its back. Next are different size bags that attach to saddles. Extra-large bags, called panniers, haul big loads of food or equipment. Finally, there are plenty of ropes for hitching everything together. In fact, making loads secure with rope hitches is a skill that approaches art. Packers and mule skinner take great pride in their ability to "throw" nearly a dozen standardized hitches.

Backcountry projects often call for specialty equipment to move materials. Bottom-dump aluminum panniers haul gravel, concrete and sand. Insulated aluminum panniers pack ice or food. These panniers are "bear proof," especially important in grizzly country. Lumber bunks allow a mule to pack bridge timbers and posts up to 14 feet in length. For longer timbers, overhead swivel bunks are used to tandem pack loads between two mules.



Pack string hauling timbers

With all this equipment, what can the pack string do? Haul fish for stocking in remote streams and high-country lakes. Pack gravel or sand for trail maintenance and reconstruction. Load timbers and even windows to maintain fire lookouts, carry out all kinds of unnatural junk--airplanes, cars, equipment, and scrap--out of wild and natural places.



Pack string