

# McKenzie River Valley: Partnering with the Forest Service to Improve Mountain Biking Trail Network

**THEME:** With the goals of encouraging more drive-through travelers to stop in the region, and reducing congestion on a highly visible multi-use trail, a group of small unincorporated communities built a strong partnership with the Forest Service to make an underutilized network of backcountry trails in the Willamette National Forest more accessible and attractive for mountain biking.

## **PROJECT IMPACT:**

- Strong working relationship established with Forest Service as basis for other long term mountain biking initiatives
- Many diverse partners bringing volunteers and market knowledge to the project
- New Epic Ride designation by IMBA for the O'Leary Loop, which was the focus of the Rural Tourism Studio action team
- Concept plan in place for future trail system development to connect the McKenzie River Valley with adjacent mountain biking destinations and increase the collective draw for visitors
- New business development associated with new trails and promotion

## **PLACE:**

The McKenzie River Valley is located in eastern Lane County, in the western foothills of the Cascade Mountains. Located in the ancestral territory of the Kalapuya and Molalla Indians, the area was first settled by non-Indian pioneers for mining and transportation services along what was a wagon trail traversing the Cascades. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was already a significant tourism sector related to fishing and guiding.

Today, it includes five unincorporated communities that lie between mileposts 10 and 60 of Oregon Highway 126 along the McKenzie River; Walterville (Cedar Flats area), Leaburg, Vida, Blue River and McKenzie Bridge. The McKenzie River is an internationally recognized fly fishing river: the McKenzie River Trail is a 26.5 mile National Recreational Trail along its banks that is a popular destination for hikers and mountain bikers. Beyond the river, especially to the south and east, there are many other less utilized hiking and biking trails.

Many people travel the McKenzie Highway from the Willamette Valley to Central Oregon in pursuit of outdoor recreation, but the McKenzie River Valley is primarily a pass-through destination. In terms of the potential for increasing the economic impact of tourism, most of the region's attractions can be enjoyed without an overnight stay. The challenge has been to build up and link experiences to give visitors more reasons to stop and stay overnight.

## **STORY:**

Unlike the typical course of development for new mountain biking trails in Oregon, the McKenzie River initiative was driven by community leaders interested in tourism, rather than a community of local mountain bike riders seeking new routes. It would also be safe to say that one community leader in particular, retired professor and avid cyclist George Letchworth, was an early and persistent advocate for bicycle tourism. His personal enthusiasm and knowledge helped to solidify a critical mass of partners to make tangible progress. This is not to say that any one

person should be credited with the project's success, but rather that a single champion can get the ball rolling in a significant way.

Bicycle tourism development was one of two projects funded through the Rural Tourism Studio Matching Grant program. The project had several elements:

- Mapping a coherent mountain biking trail system in the "hills littered with old Forest Service trails" (in George's words) to the south of the small community of Rainbow, to entice mountain bikers already coming to ride the McKenzie River Trail to extend their stays.
- Developing a concept plan for future mountain biking trails in the region, with an eye toward connecting to the nearby mountain biking hub of Oakridge
- Creating promotional maps and information for visitors seeking road cycling and mountain biking experiences

George identified twelve existing Forest Service trails for which further use could be cultivated through better mapping and signage. These were evaluated by the International Mountain Biking Association, which had been hired to develop the trail concept plans. According to IMBA's Chris Bernhardt, only one trail, the O'Leary Loop, "was close enough to the McKenzie River Trail, different enough, and of sufficient length to be appealing to the market," so it was prioritized for initial attention. IMBA also advised on market trends with respect to road biking, mountain biking and gravel biking, recommending a strong focus on mountain biking as the best opportunity for competitive advantage given the area's assets.

The O'Leary Loop, and its role as a connector of several other trails on the Olallie Ridge, was subsequently honored in 2013 as an "Epic Ride" by IMBA, in the company of three other awardees that year from Pennsylvania, Utah and Switzerland. As it exists now, the trail is suitable only for very fit and experienced riders: as described by IMBA, it is "the burly backcountry brother to the nearly and more famous McKenzie River Trail". Because it was for a long time rarely used, it is not well-maintained, and portions are in need of rebuilding and repair.

The Forest Service has been a necessary and engaged partner for building the region's draw as a mountain biking destination. While there was initial community interest in focusing on trail improvements and trail expansions, Forest Service staff recommended an initial focus on signage because that could be done with existing resources. Based on the District's involvement with the RTS process, it prioritized improved signage within its own budget, so the community did not have to seek outside funds for that aspect of the project.

As Tyson Cross, a Forest Service Program manager notes, "The reality is that the FS knew the signs needed to be replaced, but I think RTS and the collaborative group were a catalyst for the prioritization of the project, and they deserve credit". Even that, however took three years to fully implement: from ordering over 100 new signs to addressing archeological and environmental regulations associated with the site disturbance needed to install new posts and finally to allocating staff time for installation (starting with the McKenzie River Trail and then to the Olallie Ridge). Good communication between community leaders and Forest Service staff helped maintain momentum.

Beyond signage, many other partners stepped up to address some of the immediate maintenance issues on the O'Leary loop and the Olallie system as a whole. The Eugene-based Disciples of Dirt (an IMBA affiliate), the Blue River Community Development Corporation and its partnerships with the Northwest Youth Corps, and private companies such as Horse Creek Lodge and Bend-based CogWild tours, have provided volunteers and volunteer support. In May 2014, Alyssa Brownlee of Horse Tree Lodge provided free lodging and food for volunteers at a successful Memorial Day weekend trail maintenance work party, and now plans to repeat this annually. She also reports that her lodging

business is booming, largely as a result of increased awareness of bicycling opportunities. The McKenzie River Chamber of Commerce, which earlier took the RTS Steering Committee under its wing as the Chamber's Tourism Committee, provided cash and in-kind support for marketing the trail system. Travel Lane County has promoted the area as an up-and-coming mountain biking destination as well.

The Forest Service is now providing grant-writing assistance for further development of mountain biking on Forest Service lands. A \$90,000 application to the Recreational Trails Program—federal funds administered by Oregon Parks and Recreation-- was submitted in June 2014.

In addition to the trail signage, mapping and improvements, the project yielded maps of the area's road and mountain biking routes, as well as a concept plan for connecting the McKenzie River Valley to the Oakridge area via new trail improvements and linkages through Forest Service lands. The ability to keep these longer range aspirations in mind while carving out distinct, smaller scale projects with many partners at the table has been the key to success for the McKenzie River Valley.

## TIMELINE



## LESSONS LEARNED:

- Work closely with partners to identify discrete projects that can build toward bigger goals, and communicate proactively with the Forest Service as ideas develop. It's all about relationships!
- Resources for mapping hard to find- the University of Oregon proved to be a cost-effective and timely resource, but it would have been helpful to have been pointed to them earlier.
- This type of project is feasibility without a large local mountain biking constituency, but need to consult with market experts if you do to know what really will draw folks.
- Never underestimate the value of persistence.

## BUDGET:

The final cash expenses for this project totaled \$6,000: \$4,600 from Travel Oregon, matched by \$1,300 in local funds. The budget also included another \$2,650 in in-kind resources. The actual budget included more cash (\$6,900) and fewer in-kind donations (\$1,750) as shown below. These numbers do not include the cash cost of the actual new trail signage, which was covered in the McKenzie District Ranger's budget from the Forest Service.

<b>Revenue</b>	<i>Cash Budget</i>	<i>In-kind Budget</i>	<b>Cash actual</b>	<b>In-kind actual</b>
Oregon Tourism Commission Matching Grant	\$4,600		\$4,600	
Local match (McKenzie River Chamber of Commerce and Harbick's Country Store)	\$2,300		\$1,300	
Donated time for project evaluation and documentation (Letchworth)		\$1,250		
Donated meeting rooms from McKenzie Mountain Resort		\$500		\$200
Donated time for administration and route documentation, printing maps and other materials, assembly into notebooks for lodging facilities (McKenzie Chamber of Commerce)				\$1,250
Donated GPS equipment (purchased by George Letchworth)				\$300
Donated meeting rooms and meals for associated trail construction event (Horse Creek Lodge)				\$900
<b>Total revenue</b>	<b>\$6,900</b>	<b>\$1,750</b>	<b>\$6,000</b>	<b>\$2,650</b>
<b>Expenses</b>				
GPS Equipment	\$900			\$300
IMBA O'Leary Trail Concept Plan and mapping	\$3,000		\$3,000	
Adventure maps consultation	\$500			
Signs, maps, brochures materials	\$1,500			
Meeting rooms	\$500	\$250		\$200
Community kickoff event	\$500	\$250		
Donated time for project evaluation and documentation (Letchworth)		\$1,250		
University of Oregon Office of Research Services and Administration for 3 maps of 7 road cycling routes			\$3,000	
Administration and route documentation, printing maps and other materials, assembly into notebooks for lodging facilities (McKenzie Chamber of Commerce)				\$1,250
Lodging and meals for trail construction event				\$900
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$6,900</b>	<b>\$1,750</b>	<b>\$6,000</b>	<b>\$2,650</b>

## TOOLS/RESOURCES:

Map available online at:

- <https://www.imba.com/model-trails/epics>
- <http://www.mtbproject.com/trail/3387063/oleary-trail-loop>
- Olallie Ridge Trail System featured on Ride Oregon Ride- includes the O'Leary Loop Trail and nearby trails <http://rideoregonride.com/olallie-ridge-a-descent-worth-climbing-for/>

Additional trail maps included in PDF resources materials

## CONTACTS:

George Letchworth	Community leader	geoletch@aol.com	541-822-3744
Terry Baker	McKenzie River Ranger District Ranger		541-822-3381
Tyson Cross	McKenzie River Ranger District; Wilderness, Trails, Winter Recreation Program Manager	etcross@fs.fed.us	541-822-7231
Alyssa Brownlee	Horse Creek Lodge	reservations@horse-creek.com	541-822-3243
Chris Bernhardt	International Mountain Biking Association	Chris.bernhardt@imba.com	503-913-9623