

# Something to “Mule” Over – the Forest’s Magnificent Packers

They go where no vehicle has ever been before. They climb the steepest terrain, walk the narrowest trails and push through deep snow, all that while carrying 200-pound loads. They move camps, deliver tools and evacuate injured hikers with utmost precision. They are the pack mules of the Shasta-Trinity National Forest in northern California.

“The majority of the mules were purchased in Tennessee from a reputable source and came with a guarantee in case we found a mule with a defect that made the animal unserviceable,” said Shasta Trinity National Forest Wilderness and Trail Program Manager Mike McFadin.

## **Going for Breed and Disposition**

McFadin’s team sought mules with the same breeding, and the packers wanted a bunch with the same capabilities. They chose Haflinger mules because of their durability and size. The packing team consists of Ken Graves who is the Wilderness Manager for the Hayfork District and packers, Erik Cordtz and Matt Carson.

“These animals are considered light draft mules that can work for a long time. They are stout animals that can walk in the straight up, straight down terrain that we work in, scrambling through rock and water. They are hardy animals,” McFadin said. “Many of the areas we work in, the mules have to be hardy and creative. They’ll fall off the trail and they’ll have to grab on to something and scramble back on to the trail. It’s just part of the job. “

Another reason for choosing the Haflinger mules was because of their gentle nature. “They pretty much bred the meanness out of draft horses generations ago,” McFadin explained. “Bringing this gentle trait into the mule line makes these animals easier to work with.”

“We do have some fine boned mules that we use when we’re into some extra steep country and we know we would be going off trail quite a bit because they’re a little more nimble and are also nicer to ride,” Mcfadin said.

## **It’s all in the Training**

The first couple of months of working those mules required patience and repetition. They started the training with a routine of being caught, groomed and saddled. Then they were introduced to being led in a string and finally introduced to carrying loads. “Instead of just one lead rope in the front, **we** put two lead ropes coming off their sides to prevent them from trying to pass each other and keep in line,” McFadin said. “We towed them along through trees, obstacles and noise in a controlled environment. Before a month was up these mules were working in the woods with full loads.”

The Forest uses a unique style of sawbuck pack saddle with Arapaho covers locally called Salmon River saddles. The Salmon River saddle allows tying the load to the saddle and cinching the load tightly. A tightly cinched load lifts the load off the animal’s ribs allowing for more breathing room.

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Once the mules are trained to walk in a line, they go through exposure training. McFadin and his crew expose the mules to elements that might spook them. “Training is ongoing,” McFadin said. “The other day, I ran into a lady unloading a llama. I her asked her if it would be okay to bring the llama into our corral. For whatever reason, the mules are terrified of those llamas. We can’t risk running into a llama on the trail and having someone hurt whether it be mule or human. We led that llama up to the fence and instantly we had a dozen huge animals cowering into the corner. Repeated exposure is the kind of training that works to acclimate the mules to what they may encounter on the trail whether it be an animal or an OHV riding the trails of the forest.”

The ongoing training paid off for McFadin and his crew. The mules know exactly what is expected of them. “Usually when packers get into camp, they break each string apart, untie every animal from each other and then tie them individually off to the high line. We don’t need to get into this time-consuming shuffle because the mules know exactly what to do,” McFadin said.

The packers use quick releases or breakaways between the animals in case one of them falls off the trail and needs to separate. McFadin says a breakaway is a safety mechanism to break loose. “If we are crossing an obstacle and get a whiplash affect when the mules wait and then they jump, the last mule can get pulled forward hard. At that time, the breakaway will snap. This safety device can save lives in the event of a wreck or misstep by one mule in the steep terrain we work in.

The mules do well with the horses. When they are turned loose and the horses are tied up, the mules will not leave the horses and will stay around camp to graze.

Most of the time, the packers use a gentler, positive reinforcement method of training. At the same time, certain behavior is not tolerated. “We don’t beat them into learning. Mules are very smart animals and you can’t let them get away with a bad habit, but once they figure out what they’re supposed to do, they just do it,” McFadin said.

## **The Facts and Nothing but the Facts**

In 2011, the packing crew carried 1,440 loads, weighing about 201,000 pounds. Each mule carries an average of 40 pounds of pad and saddle and 150 pounds of materials. The packing crew can work anywhere in the State of California and staff an incident within 24 hours.

“Mules are the best tools for the work we do in the Wilderness. We work in Roadless areas inaccessible to motorized vehicles and often inaccessible to helicopters because of the terrain or because of poor visibility,” said McFadin. “We can take these mules off trail and cruise through the woods. We can supply firefighters under a very thick layer of smoke. We’ve had situations where our mule teams were working in fires that were so smokey, we’d actually rotate them out for rest and recuperation to the coast. Generally, we are able to rotate our animals out on a fairly frequent basis. Just like people, they get tired. So, we may run a string for a week if the terrain is very steep or the haul is very long, and then, we’ll rotate fresh animals in.”

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The Shasta-Trinity National Forest mules are also used to resupply field camps, fire camps or to remove garbage left behind marijuana growers. “When these illegal growers are taken down by law enforcement, there are still stacks of fertilizers and large amount of black irrigation pipes left to get rid of,” McFadin said.

“We try not to go over 200 lbs. for a load on an animal. These animals are capable of packing three or four hundred pounds, but then the animals will begin showing signs of injury. We treat our animals with the same safety ethics that we treat our employees. They’re part of the team,” McFadin explained.

Another advantage to using the mules is that it allows the packers and stockmen to see places that need improvement. “Our packers and stockmen are often some of the only employees to go in and out of areas. They carry saws and axes to clear trails on the way. In the Trinity Alps alone, we have 440,000 acres without roads. Using the mules is also phenomenally cheaper. A day’s helicopter time is a month’s worth of mule time. By running our own program we were able to flex as needed without costly contract amendments and last year, we saved the tax payers approximately \$63,700,” McFadin said.

## **Mules to the Rescue**

Nothing demonstrates the relationship between man and mule better than times of need.

A group of hikers had gone into the wilderness early in the season. There was a considerable amount of snow on the ground and later in the day warm rain came pouring down. When the hikers woke up in the morning, the stream that they tip toed over the day before was now a raging torrent. They were stuck on the wrong side of the river and had to stay a few days longer, running out of food and experiencing hypothermia. One of them was able to get across the river and nearly died doing it. He called for help.

“They tried to fly them out with a helicopter several times, but the weather conditions were prohibitive,” McFadin said. “We grabbed what we needed and took off with enough ropes, pulleys and materials to make a safe way across for the hikers and their dog. The dog’s owner did not want the dog to swim across. He was convinced that the dog would drown. We put the dog inside of a backpack, put it up on a pulley and zipped him across the river. It was pretty comical to see.”

## **Cause You Got Personality**

The guarantee that the mules came with not only covered any defects, but also covered the disposition in the event that an animal was ornery and its personality wasn’t working out. “We don’t have any of these animals identified, but the animals sure have their different personalities ranging from the gentle Mr. Sandstrum to prankster, Ivan the Terrible,” McFadin revealed.

“Ivan is always up to something. Last year he ended up ripping a gate off one of the corral panels and had it hung around his neck. He could have easily gotten it off, but he was having too much fun chasing and scaring the other mules with it. You could just see the grin on his face, thinking it was the funniest thing,” said McFadin.

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There are those who want to lead and those who want to be at the very end of the train. “If we put a mule named Bo Weevil in the front, he’d be trying to kick the mule behind him because he doesn’t like being crowded from behind. So, he’s a great mule to run at the whip. If the breakaway snaps, he stays right there with the pack. He’ll give us a mile to fix it if we need,” McFadin said. “By contrast, a mule named Heywood doesn’t want to be in the back. He wants to gets everybody moving at a good pace.”

McFadin believes that Heywood may have been a pulling mule prior to coming to the Forest. “Heywood and a mule named Hector were purchased together and are always hanging out with each other. I believe they actually worked together shoulder to shoulder before we bought them, and when going down the trail that’s a foot and a half wide, it’s hard to have two mules going shoulder to shoulder. We had to teach them to walk nose to tail, and it was a challenge to get it into their head that they are no longer supposed to work side by side,” McFadin said.

## **A Slice of History**

From the beginning of the Forest Service, packing of horses and mules were the traditional way to get work done or manage the national forests. In 1905, there were few roads so most travel was over trails developed by Native Americans, mountain dwellers, ranchers and sheepmen. Pack trains moved all the materials and supplies to build the phone lines, lookouts for fire detection, cabins and guard stations for fire and trail crews working throughout the Forest Service.

In the 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was founded to build and repair thousands of miles of trails in the backcountry. These crews were supplied by pack stock. At this time, there was 1000+ head of Forest service Stock in California - maybe as much as 1500 and at least 100 true packers in the region. Almost everyone in the Forest Service had to have some knowledge of stock and packing because that is how they got their jobs done.

As the automobile got better and as roads were developed the stock program declined. By the 1950s the stock program was half of its heyday size. In the 1960s and 1970s, it had fallen to 250 head, Forest Service wide. Ten years ago, we had 15 packers in the region. Today, we are down to less than 5. At present there’s only 100 head of Forest Service stock left. Half of this stock is old and worn out.

A couple of years ago, Shasta-Trinity National Forest Supervisor, Sharon Heywood, saw the value of our program and the need to keep it going and the Forest purchased 13 new mules and two horses. This influx of new blood has saved the Shasta-Trinity National Forest stock program. The support from management has also allowed McFadin and his crew to save the taxpayers a considerable amount of money while providing field crews with the support they need.