

The High Picket Line

It's up to you! There is only so much backcountry and a growing population continues to put increasing pressure on these limited areas. It is in the interest of all those who enjoy the backcountry to impact it as little as possible. The alternative is escalating regulation and restricted use.

There is no single act which brings the horseman more poor marks or leaves a more lasting effect than tying a horse to a tree. When a horse is tied to a tree for a long time, the surrounding ground is pawed away from the roots, the tree's bark is damaged and the adjacent ground cover is broken and torn. Manure and urine are concentrated and contaminate the immediate area.

One of the preferred methods of restraining halter broke horses is with the use of a "high picket line". This is a line, approximately seven feet above the ground, tightly stretched between two trees. Lead ropes are tied to the high line at the drop knots.

The high picket line prevents the horse from getting around the tree where the bark or root systems are damaged. Horses are relaxed and content when tied to a high picket line. They seldom pull against the line because there is nothing solid to pull against. With the knot above their heads even the most skilled horses cannot untie their lead ropes or slip their halters.

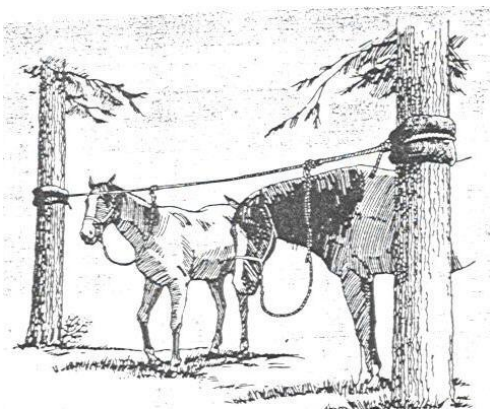
Rope Selection

The same cotton rope used to stake out a grazing horse can be converted to a high picket line. However, fifty feet of 3/8-inch multi-filament polypropylene rope makes a better choice as it is strong, light and doesn't soak up water. Nylon is stretchy (although the braid-on-braid variety greatly overcomes this drawback) and stiffens in lower temperatures. While some horsemen use their pack lash ropes caution should be used since a broken lash rope will cause other problems.

Location

The high picket line should be set up away from the immediate campsite. Away from the trail and back in the trees where the least ground cover will be disturbed is the best location. Rocky soil shows less impact than softer areas.

Move the line before the trampling damage reaches the point where smoothing out the topsoil and debris doesn't erase the impact. Since one of the objectives is to protect the tree, use straps, a cinch, sacks or stick spacers to keep the rope off the bark.



Set up

The high picket line can be set up properly very quickly. Select a tree and wrap it with a tree saver strap approximately seven feet above the ground. Fasten one end of your picket line to the strap's D-ring with a bowline knot. String your picket line towards the other selected tree. Tie the drop knots, or insert the accessories, to which you will tie the lead ropes. Space these knots far enough apart so neighboring horses won't get tangled. Five or six feet (distance depends on rope length and stretch) from the second tree saver strap, tie a dutchman or butterfly knot, run the end of the picket line through the D-ring and back to the dutchman or butterfly knot. Pulling slack between the D-ring and this knot will allow the high picket line to be pulled as tight as a fiddle string (it'll still be drooping in the morning). Get it tight – problems develop when the line gets slack.

Tying Lead Ropes

While a lead rope can be directly tied to the high picket line, there are better methods which will prevent the lead rope from sliding along the high picket line. Drop knots can be tied with either a picket line loop or a butterfly knot. A carabineer snapped into the drop knot makes a convenient and strong connection to tie to.

Tie the dutchman or butterfly knots tightly. If there is slack, tightening the high picket line will draw the slack out of the drop knot and can bind the lead rope.

The lead rope should have a swivel in it. Tie the lead rope short enough that neighboring horses can't tangle up each other. Tie it just long enough so the horse can get his head to the ground. Any longer would allow the horse to step over the lead rope and probably cause a wreck.

Summary

The Forest Service claims 80 percent of the damage to the environment from horsemen is due to improper restraining techniques. By utilizing the high picket line, horsemen can effectively eliminate the irritant most likely to lead to restrictions in their use of the backcountry.

Bridgerland Back Country Horsemen
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