

WORTH FIGHTING FOR

**Colorado 600 Trails
Awareness Symposium
Showcases
Off-Road Paradise**

By James Holter

At 12,500 feet above sea level, a KTM 300 XCW doesn't feel like a 300cc dirtbike. It feels more like a 200cc dirtbike—one with a rag stuffed in the airbox. Elevation is absolute. Power, it seems, is relative.

But a lack of torque isn't stopping the 10 riders in this group, on a range of two- and four-stroke machines of multiple brands and displacements. A handful of the 80 or so participants in the 2012 Colorado 600 Trails Awareness Symposium, they are clutching, throttling, dabbing and, occasionally, pushing their way a few hundred feet higher toward the 13,200-foot summit of the highest point in Colorado's Rio Grande County.

It's a struggle for some. Not so much for others. One rider, eight-time AMA National Enduro Champion and Husaberg factory rider Mike Lafferty, makes the climb effortlessly. Unlike horsepower, talent apparently is the same at any elevation.

Eventually, all riders conquer the loose, rocky climb without much drama—although everyone's lungs get a tremendous workout. That's a good thing because the view at the top is breathtaking.

The summit provides a 360-degree vista of Colorado's San Luis Valley. To the northeast are the San Francisco Lakes—pockets of blue in the shadows of rocky cliffs and green-speckled mountainsides reaching toward a deep blue sky and puffy white clouds. To the southwest is more of the Rio Grande National Forest and, even better, miles of single-track trail, just below the tree line, that a few in this group will experience on the final day of this four-day trail ride.

It's an amazing place—one made all the more reachable because of off-highway motorcycle access.

One reason these trails remain open is Don Riggie.

The AMA Life Member could spend his afternoons in a rowboat somewhere, fishing and floating away his retirement. Instead, he prefers to clear trail, map routes, write letters, make phone calls, coordinate professional consultants, attend U.S. Forest Service meetings and



Don Riggle

do whatever else it takes to keep public land open for responsible off-highway motorcyclists in the state of Colorado.

Riggle's organizational vehicle for this effort is the Colorado Trails

Preservation Alliance, or TPA. The TPA (www.coloradotpa.org) is a volunteer organization that works to protect the right to ride public trails. The Colorado 600 Trails Awareness Symposium is part of that effort.

"People come to Colorado from out of state to ride here—from California, Arizona, Kentucky, Kansas, Texas, Oklahoma," Riggle says. "They come here and use the trails, have a good time and spend a little bit of money and leave. The local clubs are left with [the responsibility] of keeping the trails open. If you're coming to Colorado to ride, you need to help because if you don't help, the riding is not going to last."

The Colorado 600 contributes in two ways. First, riders pay a fee that includes

a donation to the TPA. The donation funds efforts to protect access. Second, the ride shows off the amazing trails and backcountry that make Colorado one of the world's most amazing places to ride a dirtbike. After experiencing the incredible riding, participants are persuaded to do even more. The trails sell themselves.

It works with Lafferty.

"I love riding dirtbikes, and having Brandi enjoy this with me and showing her what we do is important," says Lafferty, whose girlfriend, Brandi Hermanson, joined him. "The state of Colorado is epic. It has some of the best trails, and we've got to keep them open. We've got to fight for it. We've got to tell people that these trails are out here and that it's a great place to ride and keep open."

The Colorado 600 is not just a ride. It's an educational symposium that features representatives from off-highway vehicle rights organizations. Each morning before the group embarks on another perfect day of riding, they are treated not just to an impressive breakfast spread that includes all the calories they can eat, but comments from those directly involved in the fight to keep trails open.

This year, the speaker list included Riggle from the TPA; John Bongiovanni

from the Colorado Off-Highway Vehicle Coalition; AMA Board of Directors Chairman Stan Simpson, who also represented the Texas Sidewinders MC, which provided organization support for the ride; AMA Vice President for Government Relations Wayne Allard; and AMA Vice President for Industry Relations Jim Williams, who spoke about the need for individuals and businesses with a common interest in off-road recreation to protect the sport.

Allard's comments reflected Colorado's position as one of the country's most contested areas in terms of access.

"Colorado and its off-highway motorcycle trails are one of the world's treasures, and it's important that we work together to protect and promote access to this region," said Allard, who served as a U.S. senator from Colorado before he came to work for the AMA. "Wilderness designations remain one of the most active threats against responsible off-highway vehicle access, and Colorado is on the front lines of this fight."

Bongiovanni spoke about the need for the off-highway vehicle community to make itself heard. He said that most agencies do not see off-roaders as enemies but sometimes see closing down



The AMA's Wayne Allard addresses riders on the Colorado 600.





trails amid a vocal anti-access push as the path of least resistance.

"Many people at the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management have said to me, 'You guys need to speak up,' Bongiovanni said during his talk. "There has to be a more vocal group on the pro-motorized side. We've got to get involved. That's what I'd like you guys to go out and preach."

The Colorado 600 stages out of a small inn in Southern Colorado. The community welcomes the riders with open arms. Locals smile and wave. Drivers are courteous. Signs in front of gas stations acknowledge the event and thank participants for coming.

But although the riders stay and eat (for the most part) locally, the ride also sees them patronizing several other small towns in the area.

One favorite loop includes a small convenience store/restaurant/gas station. The hamburgers are excellent, the fuel is combustible, and the service is Herculean—particularly when multiple groups of hungry dirtbikers arrive over the course of a few hours on a Tuesday afternoon.

This route, followed by nine riders on the second day of the Colorado 600, includes a trip over a 12,000-foot pass and back down several thousand feet to a rocky valley of two-track and challenging single-track trail. One tight section,



complete with hair-turn switchbacks, parallels a postcard-perfect mountain stream. It's an unforgettable reminder that you're not in the Midwest anymore.

"Starting out from one central location each morning and, depending on how you feel that day, being able to take a different route is really neat," says Jon Eide, who works for Bell Helmets and is on his second Colorado 600. "The guides, who are local, can take you out and give you a beating or take you into some of the most beautiful country you can see anywhere."

Base camp is around 8,200 feet above sea level. Routes can go lower, but most extend as much as 5,000 feet higher, above the tree line and into the oxygen-thin, horsepower-sapping atmosphere that defines the region.

"What can riders expect who have never ridden here? Rocks, and rocks and a couple more rocks," says Jason Elliot, a TPA board member and one of the Colorado 600 trail guides. "But we also have some excellent single-track, some good two-track and some fun forest roads. I love this ride."

Riggle says he knows exactly who will save off-highway motorcycle trail riding. "Everything revolves around money,"

Riggle says. "You can't expect a 25-year-old kid or a family man with kids in college and a house payment to give a lot of money. But there are a lot of 50-, 60-, 70-year-old guys who want to protect the future for their grandkids. They want their grandkids to enjoy riding motorcycles on public land, and they are willing to put some money out. I saw the 600 as an opportunity to bring these guys together and use their resources to help the TPA."

The next step, he says, is evolving the TPA from a reactionary organization into a proactive one. To do that, he says, there must be a top-to-bottom network of organizations, with each level having a clear role in the fight to keep trails open.

"You need local clubs in the area to work with the district ranger. You need regional clubs like the TPA or Colorado Off-Highway Vehicle Coalition to work at a state level, and then you need organizations like the AMA to work in Washington, D.C.," he says.

Riggle's rationale for getting involved is simple. It's how he wants to use his time.

"I've been putting rides on in this state for 32 years," Riggle says. "I've done industry rides. I've done charity rides, and now I'm doing rides that will save the sport of off-road motorcycle riding."



Ride The Colorado 600

Want to be a part of the Colorado 600 in 2013? There may be a spot for you.

However, don't wait to the last minute and try to sign up.

Rob Watt, who helps organize the event, says currently the Colorado 600 can only accommodate 75 to 90 men or women riders due to constraints of the host hotel and the permit issued by the Forest Service.

But anyone can apply to participate, he says. Selection is not necessarily on a first-come, first-

served basis, however. Riders must be properly insured and licensed, and motorcycles must be registered and meet the state of Colorado's street legality laws. Those who meet the requirements move to the head of the line.

One thing is true, though. The sooner you get in your application, the better chance you'll have to get accepted for the ride.

"If you want to get involved in this ride, just go to our website—www.colorado600.org—and fill out an application," Watt says. "Applications will usually be available Feb. 1 the year of the ride."