Central Cascades Wilderness Strategies Project

Proposed Action

Introduction

As part of the National Wilderness Preservation System, Congressionally-designated wilderness areas are special places accorded a very high level of protection. Wilderness is an area where lands are “designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition” and “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man...retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvement or human habitation.” A place with “outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation.” This direction, from the 1964 Wilderness Act, sets wilderness apart from other public lands because the imprint of man’s work is substantially unnoticeable. The Wilderness Act also establishes a mission objective of the agencies managing these lands to preserve wilderness character.

Wilderness areas on the Deschutes and Willamette National Forests provide a great diversity of outdoor recreation opportunities. However, they continue to face increasing recreational demands that can degrade natural resources and impact the wilderness experience. Current trends suggest that the character and condition of these wilderness areas are being negatively affected to the degree that
changes to visitor management area warranted. This document briefly describes the existing conditions of the wilderness areas and impacts related to recreational use within their boundaries. It also describes a proposal to address concerns for degraded wilderness character from existing levels of use. Public comments generated from this proposal will be used to revise the strategy and to potentially develop management alternatives to be analyzed and compared in an Environmental Assessment.

The project comprises a surface area of 536,368 acres in the central Cascades of Oregon, managed jointly by the Deschutes National Forest (DNF) and Willamette National Forest (WNF) (Map 1). The five wilderness areas being considered in this project, from north to south, are Mount Jefferson, Mount Washington, Three Sisters, Waldo Lake, and Diamond Peak (Map 2, Page 4).

Management Direction

Legislative Direction: The Wilderness Act of 1964 directs federal land management agencies, including the U.S. Forest Service, to secure for the American people an enduring resource of wilderness for the enjoyment of present and future generations. It defines wildernesses as areas untrammeled by people that offer outstanding opportunities for solitude and directs agencies to manage wilderness to preserve natural ecological conditions.

The wilderness areas of the Central Cascades in Oregon were legislated in 1964, 1968, and 1984:

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- **Forest Service Regulations and Policy:** Pertinent sections of the Code of Federal Regulations include 36 CFR 293.2 Objectives: Except as otherwise provided in the regulation in this part, National Forest Wilderness shall be so administrated as to meet the public purposes of recreational, scenic, scientific, educational, conservation, and historical uses; and it shall also be administered for such other purposes for which it may have been established in such a manner as to preserve and protect its wilderness character. In carrying out such purposes, National Forest Wilderness resources shall be managed to promote, perpetuate, and where necessary, restore the wilderness character of the land and its specific values of solitude, physical and mental challenge, scientific study, inspiration, and primitive recreation.

  Forest Service Manual 2323.14 Visitor Management states “Plan and manage public use of wilderness in such a manner that preserves the wilderness character of the area. Provide for the limiting and distribution of visitor use according to periodic estimates of capacity in the forest plan.”

- **Land and Resource Management Plans:** Through the goals, standards and guidelines, and management area direction, the Land and Resource Management Plans (LRMPs) for the two Forests provide overall guidance for management of the wilderness areas. The wilderness areas are divided into Wilderness Resource Spectrum (WRS) zones (transition, semi-primitive, primitive, and pristine). Each zone has its own management objectives and desired future condition. Forest Plan excerpts and maps of the WRS zones are available online at: [http://data.ecosystem-management.org/nepaweb/nepa_project_exp.php?project=50578](http://data.ecosystem-management.org/nepaweb/nepa_project_exp.php?project=50578).

It has been 27 years since the Deschutes and Willamette National Forests have undertaken comprehensive planning for visitor use in these wilderness areas. The environmental assessment and implementation plan that were completed in the early 1990s resulted in the current management situation including the trailhead permit system, which requires a free self-issue permit at all wilderness trailheads, and the Pamela and Obsidian limited entry areas with some visitor use management tools being modified and added over the years. The trailhead permit system has provided a great deal of information on the amount of use that has been occurring within the wilderness areas.

Mount Washington Wilderness
Photo from America’s Wilderness Areas Flickr Group
Map 2: Map of wilderness areas included in the Project.
Current Conditions and Trends

Visitor use trends have been documented using data collected from required free self-issue wilderness permits that are available at wilderness trailheads, and substantiated with in-field permit compliance checks. Data from wilderness permits shows that overall visitor use trends across the project area have increased tremendously in the past six years, with 2015 and 2016 seeing the greatest increase in visitors. Within some travel corridors use has increased over 500% in the last two years, and over 800% over 16 years. The peak use occurs in July, August, and September which concentrates the social and physical resource impacts over a short period of time.

The following two charts compare the number of visitors entering the wilderness areas in 2011 to 2016 (Figures 1 and 2). Three Sisters Wilderness is displayed separately because its size and amount of visitor use is on such a larger scale than the other wilderness areas (Figure 1). Waldo Lake is not represented in these charts because of a lack of complete data.

Figure 1: Number of visitors entering the Three Sisters Wilderness 2011 and 2016.

![Figure 1: Number of visitors entering the Three Sisters Wilderness 2011 and 2016.](image)

Figure 2: Number of visitors entering Mount Jefferson, Mount Washington, and Diamond Peak Wilderness Areas 2011 and 2015.

![Figure 2: Number of visitors entering Mount Jefferson, Mount Washington, and Diamond Peak Wilderness Areas 2011 and 2015.](image)

These trends in visitor use increases can be expected to continue, although the rate of growth is unknown. Oregon’s population is growing faster than the national average and the U.S. Census forecasts a 19% increase over the current population in 2026. Of the counties where the project area is
located, Deschutes County has the highest growth rate by far at 14.9% between 2010 and 2016. The city of Bend, Oregon is currently the 6th fastest growing city in the country, of cities over 50,000 people (see recent Bend Bulletin article: [http://www.bendbulletin.com/localstate/5332569-151/bend-90k-people-and-counting?referrer=carousel1](http://www.bendbulletin.com/localstate/5332569-151/bend-90k-people-and-counting?referrer=carousel1)). As populations increase, so does the visitor base for the Central Cascades wilderness areas. Other factors that may maintain the increasing use trends are ongoing promotion of outdoor recreation by land management agencies, ongoing tourism advertising by local, regional, and state entities, and social media.

**Three Sisters Wilderness**

The largest wilderness area included in this project, Three Sisters, has experienced the greatest increase in recreation use (Figure 1). The Three Sisters Wilderness saw an increase in use of 181% from 2011 to 2016. Some travel corridors in the Three Sisters Wilderness have seen the highest rates of growth in visitor use of any of the five wilderness areas in the project area.

The top five trailheads accounted for 55% of all of use in the Three Sisters in 2016, with Green Lakes Trailhead alone receiving over 21,000 visitors in 2016 from June through September. Table 1 displays the percentage of increased use at the high-use trailheads since 1991, which is the year when visitor use planning was last completed for this area.

Parking at certain trailheads along the Cascade Lakes Highway is beyond capacity, even on weekdays. It is resulting in dangerous conditions as visitors park along a highway where the speed limit is 55 miles per hour. The increase in use has generated a proliferation of user-created trails and campsites throughout the wilderness areas.

With more people comes increased resource damage: people build structures, damage trees, fail to pack out garbage, and leave human waste unburied. A partial survey has recorded nearly 100 miles of user-created trails, about a third of which see a complete loss of vegetation and/or soil erosion or disturbance that is obvious and significant. In 2015-2016 Wilderness Rangers packed over 1200 pounds of garbage out of the Three Sisters Wilderness and buried 830 incidences of human waste. Rangers also spent their time dismantling 590 structures and naturalizing over 600 fire rings.

### Table 1: Percent increase in use at five high-use trailheads.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trailhead</th>
<th>Increase 1991 to 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Green Lakes</td>
<td>249%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devil’s Lake</td>
<td>459%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tam Rim</td>
<td>878%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six Lakes</td>
<td>329%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken Top</td>
<td>559%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Full trailheads create overflow parking on shoulders of busy highway.
The South Sister climbing trail is of particular concern because of the proliferation of campsites where much trash and human waste is left behind. Visitors often attempt the climb without being prepared, which can be a safety issue and has led to search and rescue efforts. The level of use is causing the trail to become widened and braided.

Mount Jefferson Wilderness

Mount Jefferson Wilderness is the second largest in the project area and is also experiencing an increasing visitor use trend (Figure 2, Page 5). Several high use trailheads are experiencing large increases in visitation with are causing parking congestion and resource damage to meadows and riparian areas from a proliferation of campsites and user-created trails (see Table 2).

Solitude monitoring conducted in 2013-2014 at six areas in the Mount Jefferson Wilderness suggests that four of them were outside of Forest Plan standards for encounters on weekends and holidays. This monitoring occurred prior to the sharp increase in use during the 2015 and 2016 seasons. In 2015-2016, Wilderness Rangers were faced with burying over 700 incidences of human waste, packing out over 1,200 pounds of garbage, and dismantling 385 structures. When there are too many people seeking to stay overnight in an area, campsites proliferate. Campsites within riparian areas or meadows can damage fragile ecosystems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trailhead</th>
<th>Increase 1991 to 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jack Lake</td>
<td>118%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitewater</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breitenbush lake</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Breitenbush / Crag</td>
<td>203%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mount Washington Wilderness

Mount Washington Wilderness saw a 119% increase in visitors between 2011 and 2016 (Figure 2, Page 5). Use at several trailheads has more than doubled. Solitude monitoring at Benson/Tenas trailhead in 2013-14 suggests that the number of encounters is outside compliance with forest plan standards throughout the week. Campsite inventories show that some campsites are located inappropriately which can damage fragile habitat. The wilderness area provides 43 miles of trail, but users have created an additional 21 miles that often are not properly located and can cause impacts to sensitive areas and wildlife.

This wilderness area has the potential to become more utilized as people seek out uncrowded trailheads, since it is located adjacent to the Three Sisters Wilderness.

Diamond Peak Wilderness

Sixteen trailheads provide access to this wilderness which has seen a 97% increase in visitation since 2011 (Figure 2, Page 5). At only about 52,000 acres, Diamond Peak is a relatively small wilderness area and the total amount of visitors is also low; however, natural conditions are experiencing degradation in some areas. As with Mount Washington Wilderness, Diamond Peak has the potential to become more utilized as central Oregon populations grow and people from larger population areas seek out more remote locations to explore or search for solitude. Solitude monitoring from 2013-2014 suggests that the areas monitored are not exceeding encounter guidelines from the Forest Plan, but monitoring did not occur in 2015-2016 when visitor use sharply increased. Currently the wilderness rangers have minimal presence here, which limits the opportunity to contact visitors about wilderness ethics.

Waldo Lake Wilderness

Waldo Lake is the newest and smallest of the wilderness areas in the project area at 36,572 acres. The Forest has a limited amount of permit data because the ten trailheads have not been routinely stocked with the self-issue permits due to a lack of personnel; therefore, use for Waldo Lake Wilderness is not
Purpose and Need for Action

Recreational use in wilderness affects vegetation, soil, animals, and water. With large increases in visitation, there is a proportional increase in the number of people leaving behind trash, abandoned gear, human waste, toilet paper, and dog waste. Some visitors damage trees for firewood, build structures for shelter, introduce invasive plants, and leave other evidence of their visit. These issues affect the natural quality of wilderness character. High levels of use also minimizes opportunities for solitude and unconfined recreation.

There is a need to manage visitor use in the five wilderness areas in order to reduce recreation-related resource impacts, prevent further degradation, improve visitors’ wilderness experience, and to protect and enhance wilderness character. Actions to reduce impacts are required to meet the purpose of the Wilderness Act and the direction in the Deschutes and Willamette Forest Plans. The strategy will seek to balance the preservation of natural conditions by addressing physical impacts from recreation.

As outlined in the Wilderness Act, our mandate is to preserve and enhance wilderness character.

Wilderness character has the following qualities: natural, undeveloped, untrammeled, opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation, and other features of value. Other features of value may include ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic or historical value.
use, while continuing to provide opportunities for visitors to experience solitude and unconfined recreation in the wildernesses. The purpose of addressing the five wilderness areas together is to ensure consistency in approach, and to be able to consider the potential for visitor displacement from high use areas to lower use areas.

**Components of the Proposed Action**

The management strategies outlined below are designed to address the current conditions and trends occurring within each wilderness area. The Forest Service wants to engage with the public to refine these ideas. We are interested in hearing alternative strategies for addressing the purpose and need of the project. A preferred strategy will be one that preserves opportunities for solitude, maintains the natural conditions of pristine areas, reduces natural resource impacts, and prevents further degradation of wilderness values, while preserving opportunities for unconfined recreation.

The proposed action strives to provide a consistent approach across the wilderness areas while also acknowledging the variability and range of use levels and associated impacts to natural resources and wilderness character. The general theme of this strategy is to offer an experience inside wilderness areas that is as unconfined as possible. The initial focus will be on reducing use levels in some areas, contacting the public to increase visitors’ wilderness awareness prior to their entry into the wilderness, and increasing ranger presence while maintaining visitor freedom within wilderness. Below is a general description of the main components of the strategies, followed by Table 3, Page 12 which compares the existing situation and the strategies for each wilderness area.

**Permit System**

Overnight Use: Overnight camping generally has more impacts than day use; campers seeking new sites create trails, cause new impacts to previously pristine areas, and concentrate human waste and garbage. The proposed strategy for the five wilderness areas is to establish a wilderness-wide overnight limited entry permit system. Depending on current use levels the number of permits available for each trailhead would either accommodate fewer visitors, the current number of visitors, or allow for some expansion in number of visitors.

Day Use: In areas with large numbers of day users and where those users are causing increasing impacts, the proposed strategy is to establish a day use limited entry permit system. The areas that would initially have these limits include trailheads along Highway 46 and Highway 242 in the Three Sisters Wilderness and Highway 22 along the Mount Jefferson Wilderness (see bottom of Table 3, page 12 for trailhead names). Self-issue permits would be required at other trailheads, without limit. This system would be subject to modification over time.

The daily number of overnight and day use permits available for each trailhead would be determined using established protocols that evaluate the natural and social capacity of each area. This will include looking at existing campsite impacts, miles of trails, number and type of destinations in an area, and resiliency of the surrounding natural systems. A reservation system would be in place so the public can plan trips in advance with designated amount retained for day-of, walk-up permits. A subset of permits for the Devil’s Lake Trailhead would be issued specifically for people climbing South Sister.

Implementation of a Permit System: The Forest Supervisors will consider implementation methods based on: legal authorities, feasibility, and US Forest Service physical and financial capabilities and contractual obligations. A permit system could be implemented in phases for wilderness areas or zones within wilderness areas as administrative capacity allows.
Generally, any permit system would be administered through “Rec.gov” since this is the one-stop shop for federal lands-based recreation. Implementing a fee would require a secondary public process in accordance with Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA).

**Campfire and Camping Regulation**

Rather than the existing situation of having campfires banned a certain distance from lakes, designated camping areas in some areas, and camping setbacks in other areas, this strategy will involve restricting campfires above a certain elevation, across all wilderness areas. The elevation will be based on vegetation sustainability and the range of western white pine (which a candidate for federal listing under the endangered species act).

Camping setbacks and designated campsites will not be a part of this strategy; rather, the focus will be on raising awareness of the public before they enter the wilderness about how to select the most appropriate campsite using leave-no-trace principles. Existing designated site systems would be removed.

**Visitor Education**

Visitor education cannot solve overcrowding, but by increasing awareness of wilderness values and promoting leave-no-trace principles, visitors to wilderness would have a better understanding of how to preserve naturalness and wildness by not leaving impacts. The intent with the proposed action is to increase presence of wilderness rangers, volunteers, and interns above existing levels. Trailhead hosts can present visitors with useful information prior to entering wilderness. Those who register for a day use or overnight use permit online would be required to view educational information prior to receiving the permit.

**Adaptive Management**

Through continued monitoring, when there is evidence that areas are recovering and impacts are being reduced, the Forest Service would consider removing regulations. Conversely, if areas approach a condition that is unacceptable, additional management actions could be taken. For example, if education is not sufficient to prevent further proliferation of campsites in sensitive areas, an enforceable regulation would be implemented. Another example is the serious problem of human waste in certain areas – if reducing the number of users and increasing education does not improve conditions, other actions may be warranted such as requiring visitors pack out their human waste or installing primitive latrines. Some areas that are currently seeing very sharp rise in visitation at an unsustainable level such as Green lakes, Jefferson Park, or Broken Top will be priority for monitoring for anticipated improvements due to the permit system.

There are a number of management techniques available (many are outlined in the Forest Plans) that can be considered under adaptive management, including, but not limited to: quota adjustments for trailheads; designating campsites; changing the elevation of campfire restriction; adding campfire setbacks from water and/or trails; adding camping setbacks; installing backcountry toilets in high use areas; defining zones for special area permits; and initiating dog leash regulations.
### Table 3: Existing Management Situation and Proposed Strategies for Each Wilderness Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Existing Management Situation</th>
<th>Proposed Action</th>
<th>Mount Washington, Waldo Lake &amp; Diamond Peak Wilderness Areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reduce number of visitors at one time with a permit system</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overnight Use</td>
<td>Obsidian Limited Entry Area (LEA) Pamelia LEA</td>
<td>Remove Obsidian LEA Permit</td>
<td>Remove Pamela LEA Permit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Obsidian LEA Pamelia LEA</td>
<td>Initiate wilderness-wide, Trailhead quotas</td>
<td>Initiate wilderness-wide, Trailhead quotas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day Use</td>
<td>Obsidian LEA Pamelia LEA</td>
<td>Remove Obsidian LEA Permit</td>
<td>Remove Pamela LEA Permit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Obsidian LEA Pamelia LEA</td>
<td>Initiate trailhead quotas at Hwy 242 trailheads and East-side trailheads*</td>
<td>Initiate trailhead quotas at west-side trailheads*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Campfire Ban</strong></td>
<td>Isolated areas</td>
<td>Based on elevation and vegetation sustainability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Campfire Setback</strong></td>
<td>100 feet of trails and water</td>
<td>None. Increased user-education on appropriately locating campsites, campfires and Leave No Trace (LNT) principles.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Camping Setback/Restriction</strong></td>
<td>Designated camping and specified setbacks at certain areas</td>
<td>Increased user-education on appropriately locating campsites, campfires and Leave No Trace (LNT) principles.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td>Limited trailhead presence Wilderness rangers, interns, volunteers</td>
<td>Increase presence above existing; require educational information, such as watching video, with permit.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Three Sisters Highway 242 Trailheads: Linton Lake, Obsidian, Lava Camp Lake, and Black Crater.

*Three Sisters Eastside Trailheads: Millican Crater, Scott Pass, Pole Creek, Chush Falls, Park Meadow, Three Creek Meadow, Tam McArthur Rim, Tam McArthur Rim Horse Trail, Broken Top, Crater Ditch, Todd lake, Green Lakes, Soda Creek, Devil’s Lake/South Sister (subset of permits issued specifically for climbing South Sister), Wickiup Plains, Sisters Mirror, Quinn Meadow, Elk Lake, Six Lakes, and Many Lakes, Irish-Taylor, Winopee, Corral Swamp, Lucky Lake and Deer Lake.

Next Steps

The Forest Service will review comments on this proposal and use them to develop alternative management strategies. Instructions on how to comment are provided in the letter accompanying this proposal. Based on comments received on the proposed plan, alternative strategies will be developed and an environmental assessment (EA) will be prepared. The EA will be a comprehensive document that analyzes the impacts and compares the trade-offs of the alternatives. The Forest Service will provide an opportunity to comment on the EA.

Based on comments on the EA, the Forest Service will revise the EA and prepare a draft Decision Notice. The public will then have an administrative review opportunity whereby objections to the draft decision can be filed. The regulations provide a 45-day period for resolving objections before a final decision is made. The Forest Supervisors for the Deschutes and Willamette National Forests will make the final decision on a course of action for managing wilderness in the project area.