

# Forest service eyes limiting use in Three Sisters Wilderness

By Mike Morical  
The Bulletin

BEND (AP) — Climbing to the summit of Oregon's third-tallest peak is supposed to be a wilderness experience, as the South Sister Climber Trail is located in the Three Sisters Wilderness.

But when hundreds of other hikers are also trekking to the summit, it is hard to consider the climb as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man," as reads part of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

Officials with the Deschutes National Forest and the Willamette National Forest are considering changes to possibly limit use in the most popular areas of the Three Sisters Wilderness in order to maintain the wilderness character of those locations.

"One of the things we are mandated to do under the Wilderness Act is to preserve and protect wilderness character," says Lisa Machnik, the recreation, heritage, lands and partnerships staff officer for the Deschutes National Forest in Bend. "And part of that is opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation. And when you're sharing the trail up to the top and the summit with 300 of your closest friends, we do hear from people that that's not consistent with a wilderness experience."

Planning will likely start this winter, and it will eventually include multiple opportunities for public

input, according to Machnik. Areas in the Three Sisters Wilderness along the Cascade Crest could be affected. The most popular spots include Devils Lake Trailhead, where a 6-mile nontechnical trail allows beginner climbers the opportunity to reach South Sister's 10,358-foot summit, and Green Lakes Trailhead, where a 4-mile hike features waterfalls, canyons and emerald pools near South Sister and Broken Top.

The two trailheads are just a 30-minute drive west of Bend along Century Drive and Cascade Lakes Highway. The Deschutes National Forest requires self-issued wilderness permits (at no charge) for anyone entering the Three Sisters Wilderness.

In 2012, about 14,600 visitors were recorded at the South Sister, Green Lakes and Moraine Lake area, based on wilderness permits filled out. That number dramatically increased to about 22,800 in 2015. (These numbers only reflect the hikers who actually filled out a permit, and not all of the hikers who filled out the permit identified the number of people in their group.) A nice-weather weekend in August and September can often mean more than 400 hikers attempting to climb South Sister.

"Just looking at the increase in visitor use that we've seen over the past couple of years, I really don't expect interest in climbing South Sister to fade anytime soon," Machnik says. "Looking back over the

past few years we've seen a steadily increasing level of use."

The Three Sisters Wilderness extends nearly 300,000 acres across both sides of the Cascade Range and includes some of Oregon's most spectacular scenery.

Options abound for limiting the number of hikers entering the wilderness from certain trailheads.

"Those range from the reservation system, which opens on a certain date and on that day people can start calling in or applying," Machnik explains. "Or it might be a system where every day the next chunk of dates opens, sort of a rolling system. And some (permits) you can reserve online or by calling in and there's a certain percentage every day that are open for walk-ups. There certainly are options out there, and nothing is off the table."

One option for limiting high use in the Three Sisters Wilderness is a permit-controlled, limited-entry system.

The Obsidian Trail Limited Entry Area, on the Willamette National Forest side of the Three Sisters near McKenzie Pass, requires a permit to hike or backpack. Each day from May 1 to until snow shuts down state Highway 242, 30 day-use and 40 overnight permits are issued for entry. It is the only trailhead in the Three Sisters Wilderness with limited entry.

Reservations and permits

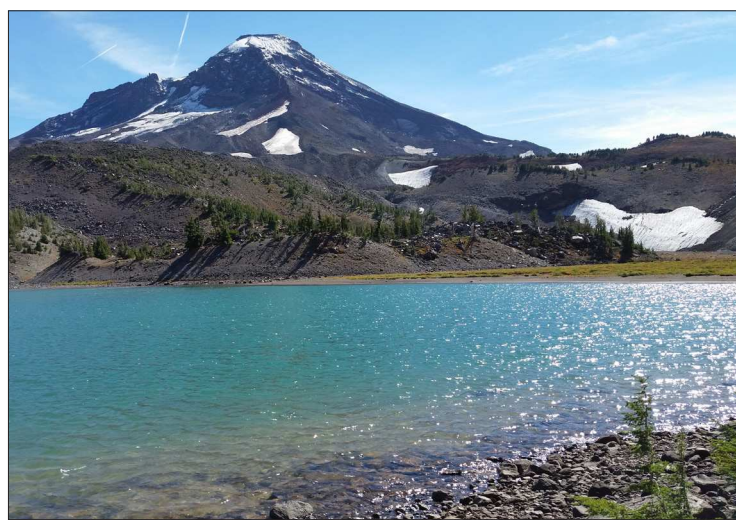


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Are limits needed to preserve the character of the wilderness?

are used to regulate the number of climbers on Mount St. Helens and Mount Adams in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest in southwest Washington.

On Mount St. Helens, climbing permits costing \$22 each are required for climbers going above 4,800 feet on the volcano from April 1 to Oct. 31. The Forest Service limits the number of climbers going above that elevation to 100 per day between May 15 and Oct. 31.

On Mount Adams, climbing permits are required for anyone going above 7,000 feet between June 1 and Sept. 30. Cost varies: a weekend pass for anyone over age 16 is \$15; an annual pass is \$30.

"We'll look at what the issues are in terms of visitor expectations and experience, resource protection, wilderness character, and really considering all the options on

the table in terms of how to best manage that area going forward," Machnik says of the Three Sisters Wilderness. "A big question is resource protection, and what does it mean to have a group walking together on the trail, and how do trails expand and get braided? What is the impact on the physical environment?"

Machnik emphasizes that the Forest Service will be looking at the entire Cascade Crest area of the Three Sisters Wilderness, not just the South Sister Climbers Trail.

"It's like squeezing a tube of toothpaste," she says. "If you restrict one trailhead, then you've got all this displaced use that will just go someplace else. With all the outdoor recreation opportunities, things are getting busier and busier as the tourism market is recovering and people are exploring outside a little bit more."

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