

FS responds to objections over wilderness permits

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It's looking more and more like 2019 will be the last year that the public will have free and unfettered access to local wilderness areas.

Two years ago, prompted by the perception that wilderness areas were being too heavily used, the Forest Service began the bureaucratic process of restricting trail use in the three wilderness areas in Sisters Country: the Mt. Jefferson, Mt. Washington, and Three Sisters wilderness areas.

Referred to as the Central Cascades Wilderness Strategies Project, the proposed change was announced in 2017 and was followed by informational meetings and a comment period in the spring of 2018. After those required steps, the intended proposal was formally floated last fall, which, in summary, would require limited permit access for most wilderness trails in the Sisters area. The wilderness trail permits are to be allocated in comparatively small numbers for an as-yet unspecified fee, reservation, and application process.

Last fall's "Decision

Notice" on the matter was followed by an opportunity for interested persons to file objections to the decision. Only parties who had previously filed comments during the earlier comment period were deemed to have standing to raise objections. This past week, the U.S. Forest Service formally responded to the objections filed in opposition to the project.

Although the official response noted that "many objectors suggested more rule enforcement" of existing rules, rather than sweeping changes that would restrict all general access, this common objection was not directly addressed.

Following the past two years of required meetings, comments, and objections, the scope of the project was whittled down a bit. Most significantly, the number of trailheads requiring limited entry permits for day-use has been reduced from 30 trailheads to 19. However, popular wilderness trails near Sisters will still require limited-access permits if the plan is put into place as currently defined.

The 11 trailheads removed from the limited-entry permit system are Woodpecker,

Triangulation, Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) Santiam Pass, and Cabot Lake in the Mt. Jefferson Wilderness; PCT Big Lake in the Mt. Washington Wilderness; and Linton Lake, Lucky Lake, Six Lakes, Elk Lake, Chush Falls, and Black Crater in the Three Sisters Wilderness. The PCT trailhead segments were removed from limited-access requirements in order to facilitate travel between wilderness areas by through-hikers.

One other revision, which was billed as a concession to shortening the permit season, changed the last day of the limited entry permit requirement from September 30 to the last Friday of September, a reduction of zero days or as many as six days, depending on the calendar year. This change also has the effect of eliminating the permit requirements during the general rifle deer hunting season.

Forty-four formal objections were considered by the objection reviewing officer. Those objections were mostly from concerned individuals, although five organizations were also among those filing documents constituting a formal objection. Other objectors were turned away

because they had not filed comments during the official comment period that ended in the spring of 2018 and were therefore considered to be "without standing" to object.

The Wilderness Strategies Project was inaugurated in an effort to reduce negative impact caused by increased public usage of the wilderness areas in the central Cascades. The region selected for restricted access automatically placed Sisters at the epicenter of the most heavily impacted areas.

Another issue which the Forest Service reviewer discussed in the analysis was that of hunting access. The review firmly states that hunting is a "valid use of wilderness" and that "Responsible Officials took hunting concerns into consideration" in the formulation of their decision.

Although a "permit exemption for hunters with the W. High Cascade deer tag" is mentioned, the letter, itself, is somewhat vague as to exactly how hunting exemptions will play out on the larger scale. For example, archery, black powder, advance scouting, and other hunting issues were not specifically addressed, other

than to say that "The Forests will monitor visitor and hunting use in wilderness areas and will make changes as necessary."

Although the specific numbers for the limited-entry permits at each trailhead have been assigned, information involving application, cost, and distribution of the permits has yet to be revealed. It is expected that these administrative details will be addressed between now and the expected implementation of the project.

In this regard, the reviewing officer stated that the "Forest (Service) has only begun research into permit administration options and will involve the public during the implementation planning process beginning in the spring of 2020."

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