

Life in the Valley

Hikers may add permits to their checklist



The new permit rules would apply to the Mount Jefferson, Mount Washington, Three Sisters, Waldo Lake and Diamond Peak wilderness areas. PHOTOS BY ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

14 facts about the new Oregon wilderness plan

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The final chance to comment on a plan that would fundamentally change the way people visit five Oregon wilderness areas arrived May 23.

The plan would require visitors have a permit before hiking or backpacking into a half-million acres of Oregon's most famous backcountry.

The new rules would apply to the Mount Jefferson, Mount Washington, Three Sisters, Waldo Lake and Diamond Peak wilderness areas.

A final decision is expected this summer, and the new system would begin summer 2019.

I've put together 14 important points about the plan below.

1: This is happening because of too many people

The plan was developed because the number of people hiking and backpacking into Central Cascade wilderness areas has skyrocketed.

Visits have almost tripled in the Three Sisters since 2011, leading to increases of trash, human poop and other problems.

The main driver is Oregon's population growth, particularly in the Bend area, which is only expected to continue.

This plan seeks to remedy the problem by requiring people buy a permit in advance. Only a certain number of permits would be available for each trailhead.

2: This isn't new to Oregon

A limited entry system is a common tool used by the Forest Service and other agencies across the West and in Oregon.

In fact, the system under consideration is already being used at two trailheads — Obsidian Trail (Three Sisters) and Pamela Lake (Mount Jefferson).

To enter those places, you need to purchase one of a limited number of permits.

This new plan takes that idea and expands it to lot more trailheads. The question being considered right now is how many new trailheads it should apply to. There are five different scenarios the Forest Service is considering.

3: Cost of permits unclear

In previous stories, I've written that the permits would likely cost \$6 to \$12. That was based on the



A sign on Pamela Lake Trail marks the entry into the Mount Jefferson Wilderness.

current cost at Obsidian and Pamela and projections from Forest Service officials.

However, the Forest Service is now undergoing a different process to determine the permit cost and officials didn't want to commit to a dollar range.

So, at this point, who knows?

Forest Service officials also said it's possible children below a certain age would be allowed free entry. Permits will be available on Recreation.Gov.

4: Some groups, like hunters, could get exemptions

The Forest Service would likely offer exemptions to some groups, such as hunters and through-hikers on the Pacific Crest Trail.

Both groups are already required to purchase a license and tags (hunters) or a permit (PCT hikers).

The Forest Service might also offer exemptions to hunters for "scouting trips" under limited circumstances.

5: The plan would ban fires in additional areas

In addition to the permit requirement, the plan would also ban campfires in new areas.

Most of the alternatives include banning campfires above 5,700 feet in Mount Jefferson, Three Sisters and Mount Washington and above 6,000 in Diamond Peak. Waldo Lake wouldn't change.

The goal here is to stop all the trees and important wood from being stripped in sensitive alpine areas.

6: Some permits would be available for 'same day pickup'

One of the big concerns is that the permit requirement eliminates "spur of the moment" hikes, especially for locals.

Forest Service officials said they'll likely keep a certain number of permits for "same day" pickup. Meaning, people could pick up a permit at a local ranger station and go hiking the same day.

7: Part of the goal is spreading people out

One of the fascinating things about the current situation is that the vast majority of people have crammed themselves onto a handful of trails.

More than half the use in the Three Sisters, for example, is confined to five trailheads — including the Green Lakes Basin and the South Sister climbers trail.

But there are 48 trailheads in the Three Sisters, many of which get little use.

"This plan would have a big impact on those very popular trailheads," Deschutes National Forest spokeswoman Jean Nelson-Dean said. "But we have plenty of room for people to have an awesome experience, and getting people a little more spread out, I think, would be a good thing."

8: The rules will be different for day-use and overnight

Under all the plans, there would be two different types of permit: one for overnight use, and one for day-use.

In general, there would be fewer overnight permits available.

9: Different trailheads would have different permit quotas

Each trailhead impacted by this

plan would have a different quota for people it would allow in.

For example, there would be nine overnight permits and 30 day-use permits available each day for Whitewater Trailhead, into the Mount Jefferson, east of Detroit.

At Green Lakes Trailhead, into the Three Sisters, there would be 17 overnight permits and 80 day-use permits available.

10: Designated campsites eliminated

Currently, there are designated campsites at many popular areas, including Jefferson Park (Mount Jefferson) and Green Lakes Basin (Three Sisters).

These are places backpackers are required to camp, to minimize impact in sensitive areas.

The proposals would eliminate those designated campsites. In their place, there would be wider "camping zones" where people could camp anywhere they chose.

11: The penalty is steep

Currently, anyone caught in a limited entry use area — like Obsidian or Pamela — faces a \$200 citation, which typically becomes \$230 with court fees.

12: Longer hike to Broken Top

The plan would pull the trailhead for Broken Top and Crater Ditch back to Road 370. That would tack on an additional 1.3 miles onto the popular hike to Broken Top's crater.

The reason: the current road to the trailhead is so awful that contractors who pump the toilet at the trailhead will no longer do it because of damage to their vehicles, officials said.

13: Oregon only getting more popular

Oregon's population is growing, and is likely to continue growing, according to population estimates.

This plan takes that into account — it plans for a future with more people and more demand on the landscape, officials said.

14: A range of possibilities

The Forest Service studied five different scenarios that could be implemented. They range from "no change" to "every hike and backpacking trip requires a permit." There are three in between.

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