

Trails too limited?

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In the first year of a sweeping new program designed to stop overcrowding in three of Oregon’s most popular wilderness areas, U.S. Forest Service officials say they’re facing an ironic problem: not enough people showing up on the trail.

This summer, hikers and backpackers were required to purchase a special permit to enter the Three Sisters, Mount Jefferson and Mount Washington wilderness areas under a plan designed to limit skyrocketing crowds, trash and damage across 450,000 acres of Oregon’s most iconic backcountry.

But the new system was plagued by what forest officials are calling “no-shows.” Put simply, people purchased overnight and day-use permits in droves but often didn’t use them or cancel them, leaving the permits to essentially go to waste, officials said.

The result was frustrated hikers and backpackers unable to visit their favorite places because the permits sold out, while at the same time, trailhead parking lots and backcountry campsites sat half-filled.

Forest Service data indicates around 30 to 50 percent of the permits purchased were never used, a figure forest officials said was backed up with observations from the field.

“Many weekends a popular place like the Green Lakes were totally sold out — meaning we should have seen around 100 people at the trailhead or on the trail. But frequently, we saw only 40 to 50 people show up. For most of the summer, only about half the backcountry campsites were filled,” said Jason Fisher, wilderness specialist for

Deschutes National Forest.

“It was frustrating for the public and for us,” he said. “When you buy a permit and don’t use it or cancel it, that means someone else doesn’t get to go. And when it happens in such large numbers, it drags down the entire system.”

There were plenty of positive comments about what’s officially known as the Central Cascades Wilderness permit system, which began May 28 and ends this Friday. Many said they had no trouble getting permits and were thrilled by solitude at camps and on trails.

But figuring out how to limit no-shows and ensure more people have access to the backcountry is the top priority as officials look to tweak the system for 2022.

“It was definitely a learning year,” said Matt Peterson, who helped design the system for the Forest Service. “A lot of things did work well, and ultimately it served its purpose in reducing recreation impacts. We heard a lot of positive comments. But the bottom line is that we want all the permits to get used. We want people out on the trail having a wilderness experience.”

“We’re already brainstorming things we can do. There will definitely be changes next year.”

How does the permit system work again?

Known generally as a “limited entry,” the system works by applying a quota of permits to each trailhead in the three wilderness areas.

At Marion Lake Trailhead in the Mount Jefferson Wilderness, for example, there are 10 overnight permits available. Once they’re gone, no one else can enter, thus limiting

crowds.

The day-use permit is only required for the 19 most popular trailheads. Overnight permits are required everywhere.

An overnight permit costs \$6 and a day-use permit is \$1.

The system is just one of a growing number of limited entry systems across the United States and especially the West, where fast-growing crowds have flooded national parks and wilderness areas over the past decade in numbers that overwhelm parking, trail space and campsites.

Permit systems have been a common tool in national park backcountry for decades along with famous rivers, such as Oregon’s Rogue and John Day. And in the Central Cascades, Obsidian Trail (Three Sisters) and Pamela Lake (Mount Jefferson) have required similar permits since the early 1990s.

But the system applied this year expanded the idea of a permit system far wider than most places, across a disjointed collection of highways and forest roads, as opposed to a single destination like Glacier National Park.

Frustration with getting permits

By just about every account, once the permits were released, they went fast. But there was also frustration, confusion and bugs with the website, especially in April, when 40 percent of overnight permits and 20 to 50 percent of day-use permits were released, according to multiple users.

“It was a disorganized rollout,” said Erik Badzinski of Redmond. “Several people had issues booking overnight permits. There was little instruction on how to use the system. Many people didn’t realize they had to highlight and click on every day they planned to be out there, leading to either just a single overnight permit when they wanted multiple days or someone snagged the available days in the confusion.”

Alex Moore, who lives in Bend, said she tried numerous times to get permits for Devil’s Lake Trailhead from different phones, computers and Internet providers, but always struck out.

“It would show a bunch of dates and times available, but when you tried to add the permit to your cart, you got an error message repeatedly and for hours,” she said. “We even took a laptop down to Starbucks in case our internet was messing up, but still the same error message.”

Adding to the confusion was where to find the right permit. The hike to Canyon Creek Meadows in the Jefferson Wilderness, for example, was listed as “Jack Lake Trailhead,” which took

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people a while to figure out in some cases.

Another issue was permits going on sale for hikes that were still snow-covered, such as permits for trails on McKenzie Pass in May or early June. Peterson said that issue would be corrected in 2022.

The bugs in the system appear to have improved as the summer got underway and permits went on sale seven days in advance, but numerous people said they still couldn’t get the permit they wanted, even if they logged onto the computer at 7 a.m. and seven days in advance.

“I have given up on hiking in permit-required areas,” said Trent Thomas of Corvallis. “I’ve tried getting on the site, but nothing is ever available even at 7 a.m.”

(There was also concern about “bots” — internet programs — buying up permits. Forest Service officials said Recreation.gov is designed to avoid that).

The no-show problem

One of the reasons people couldn’t find permits was that popular ones were snapped up as soon as they went on sale, and during the April release. But often, the permits ultimately went to waste, the Forest Service said.

There were a variety of good reasons that people purchased permits but then didn’t use them, from heavy smoke ruining the experience to injuries to simply forgetting about the reservation, conversations with hikers and Forest Service employees indicate.

And many held onto permits as long as they could, in hopes of the smoke clearing or conditions improving, because they couldn’t get another date.

“Life happens and it was a smoky summer,” Peterson said. “We understand that plans change. We’d just hoped that when they did, people would cancel their reservation more frequently so that others could use them.”

The highest number of no-shows came on reservations made during the April permit release. Of the permits sold during April, 52% were not used nor canceled, going to waste, Forest Service data says.

Rates of using permits were far better in the seven-day window, when the percentage of no-shows dropped to 27%.

The Forest Service compiled the data on no-shows by looking at the number of people that clicked on the link to print off the permit itself. They also had volunteers and rangers at popular trailheads that ground-truthed the rates they were seeing.

People buying but not using permits is a common issue across permit systems, and it’s dealt with in different ways. On Southern Oregon’s Rogue River, for example, people who no-show for a permit can

get “black listed” — prevented from buying future permits.

That type of hard-line is unlikely and probably impractical in the Central Cascades, but with little incentive to cancel and good reason to hold on as long as possible, many said the situation was predictable.

No refund or economic incentive to cancel, and good reason to wait until last minute

Originally, the Forest Service planned to charge a higher fee for the permits, but that plan was scuttled and left the current \$1 or \$6 charge.

(The \$1 and \$6 cost is a processing fee charged by Recreation.gov, a vendor owned by Booz Allen Hamilton that distributes all permits and reservations on federal lands. None of the money actually goes to the Forest Service or to support the permit system).

Hikers who buy a permit and then decide they can’t use it for one reason or another can’t get a refund, meaning there’s no real economic incentive to be careful with permits.

“I don’t want to be too harsh because the first year is always challenging, but it was foreseeable that when they required such a minimal investment, it’s not a big leap to expect people to just snap them up and not worry about canceling because they have no real skin in the game,” said Sarah Bradham, acting executive director of the Mazamas, a Portland-based outdoor club.

While it might have been predictable, that didn’t make it any easier for hikers shut out of their favorite places who then drove past half-empty parking lots, particularly locals.

“The few dates I was able to plan time off for, I wasn’t able to get a permit on,” Mara Carnes said. “It was frustrating trying to plan any trips. Then I’d drive by the trailhead to a few I had tried unsuccessfully to get a permit and there weren’t any cars there!”

“I was just a solo hiker and couldn’t get a single permit for my trip.”

Good experiences, less trash

While there was a high amount of frustration with the new system, many said they were able to get permits without issue and appreciated the level of solitude.

“I don’t discount the challenges that others have had, but my experience was pretty positive,” said Stephen Jenkins. “Using the 7-day window, I was able to obtain overnight permits for both of the trips I wanted to complete. It was a slight inconvenience but worth it for me.”

The reduced crowds also brought a measure of peace to backpacking trips, bringing less anxiety about finding a good camping spot,

even on a weekend, which hikers with children said they appreciated.

Forest rangers said the amount of trash and human poop left near campsites was also down this season.

“In the places where we historically see tons of trash and human waste, that decreased dramatically,” Fisher said.

Citations on the trail/compliance

Despite some frustration with the new permits system, most people had them when checked by rangers this season.

As of last Saturday, the compliance rate — or the number of people checked — was 74 percent.

“That’s pretty good for a first year,” Fisher said.

Forest Service issued 315 verbal warnings in the wilderness areas.

“This was a big education year, so if our rangers came across someone who didn’t have a permit, they’d usually just direct them to a different trailhead where it wasn’t required,” Fisher said. “Obviously we had some conflicts and some people who were really ready to get into it and some heated situations did take place.”

“But I’d say it was a gentle year all things considered.”

What next?

Peterson said the Forest Service will look at tweaking the system for 2022, but it’s unclear how much will actually change.

“It’s really good for them to acknowledge their bumps and bruises and come back to the table and talk to user groups, to share data and look at how we can solve this,” Bradham, with the Mazamas, said. “How can we work together to achieve the original intent of minimizing overcrowding without practically closing it off?”

Others thought the system should just be scrapped.

“My hope is that sooner rather than later, we look back on this decision with great embarrassment and find a better solution to protect access for everyone, not just people who can sit on their computer 6 months in advance and reserve all their paid permits,” said Jess Beauchemin of Bend. “User fees are not the answer for systemic problems. They’re a distraction. They’re pitting people against each other when we should be working together to change the mission of the Forest Service and lobby for adequate funding so that they can do their job.”

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