



Special Recreation Permit Plan, Mount St. Helens Climb

Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument

May 2022 (updated January 2023)

Purpose and Background

This management plan and proposal seeks to increase the existing Special Recreation Permit (SRP) fee for Mount St. Helens Climb. This document describes the rationale for the SRP fees, the locations where an SRP is required, the specialized services, the enhanced management activities offered at each site, and how the SRP revenue is used.

The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (REA) authorizes a Special Recreation Permit (SRP) fee for permits issued for specialized recreation uses of Federal recreational lands and waters, such as group activities, recreation events, and motorized recreational vehicle use [16 U.S.C. 6802(h)]. SRP's are issued to allocate capacity or disperse use, protect natural and cultural resources, provide for health and safety of visitors, and help cover the higher costs for providing these specialized services.

In August of 1982 Congress passed Public Law 97-243 which created the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument (Monument) and directed the Forest Service to manage the Monument to protect the geologic, ecologic, cultural resources, and in accordance with the provisions of the Act allow geologic forces and ecological succession to continue substantially unimpeded. The Act also provided for the Forest Service to protect the significant features of the Monument; reduce user conflicts; and ensure visitor safety; to control times and means of access and use of the Monument.

Prior to its dramatic 1980 eruption, Mount St. Helens was a common destination for climbers. Records from the 1970s indicate that more than 10,000 climbers attempted to reach the summit each year. The May 18, 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens physically altered the mountain, transforming the symmetrical 9,677 foot peak into a truncated cone 1,300 feet lower. Subsequent smaller eruptions continued to pose health and safety hazards until 1987 when the mountain was reopened to climbing, several years before Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument received its monument designation.

Both the summer and winter climbing routes require visitors to have excellent physical stamina and knowledge of technical mountaineering skills and equipment. Depending on the conditions, climbers must possess and know how to use snowshoes or skis, crampons and ice axes. Knowledge of self-arrest techniques is essential, as well as the ability to descend using skis or by glissading. Mount St. Helens is a popular destination for this specialized recreation activity and visitors from around the world strive to obtain a climbing permit. In the summer season, as snow melts, it is not uncommon for visitors with less mountaineering experience to attempt a climb of Mount St. Helens.

Rationale

In 1987, permits were first issued for climbing Mount St. Helens at a cost of \$15 per person per day. The recreation fee for the permit is still \$15/climber. The vast majority of climbers attempt this climb in one day. A Forest Service closure order prohibits going into or being up on the volcano above 4800 feet, or the Loowit Trail, without a permit, for the following reasons:

1. Protect biophysical features and processes from unacceptable resource damage
2. Provide climbers with an uncrowded, privative to semi-primitive recreation opportunity
3. Provide the climber with important information on regulations, ethics, safety and current conditions
4. Allow the Forest Service to collect information on the amount, type and location of use in order to better manage the climbing program and the National Volcanic Monument.

Initially, a limit of 100 climbers per day was decided upon. Monument and forest staff have continued to monitor conditions over time, and changes to this number have been made since then. Currently:

- April 1 through May 14: 350 climbers per day,
- May 15 through Oct 31: 100 climbers per day
- Nov 1 through March 31: No limit on climbers

Mount St. Helens climbing permit sales for April 1 through October 31 shifted to Recreation.gov in 2019. Climbing permits are released in one month increments on the first day of the preceding month. There is also a non-refundable \$6 reservation fee for every permit transaction, which is retained by Recreation.gov.

From November 1 through March 31, risk to natural resources is mitigated by snow, and permits have been unlimited and self-issued at no charge at the Marble Mountain Sno-Park and trailhead. The Marble Mountain area is currently not a Forest Service fee area; during the winter a Sno-Park pass, issued by Washington State Parks, is required to park at the trailhead.

Climbing above the 4,800-foot elevation of Mt. Mount St. Helens is considered a specialized recreation activity because it requires technical equipment, experience, and good physical conditioning by the visitor in sensitive alpine environments. It also requires specialized management to address health and safety issues associated with the recreational use and address damage caused by recreational activities to an environment sensitive to changes caused by recreational use.

Proposal

The Forest Service is proposing to increase the fee from \$15/climber to \$20/climber.

	Number of Climbers (from Recreation.Gov)	\$15 per climber	\$20 per climber
2019	24,441	\$366,615	\$488,820
2020	20,629	\$309,435	\$412,580
2021	25,061	\$375,915	\$501,220



Climbing route during the winter season

Use of Special Recreation Permit Fee Revenue

Recreation fees are used for the following. Additional detail is in the table below.

- Forest Service staff (up to four seasonal employees) to patrol the climbing route visitor safety and information, natural resource protection, compliance with special orders, and associated duties.
- Partially fund both a Forest Service Recreation Assistant, and a Backcountry/Interpretation Ranger to provide program support (such as general administrative tasks, planning, cross program coordination, etc.) and supervision of the seasonal employees.
- Partially fund a front desk employee to provide visitor services and information
- To support partnership efforts with Mount St. Helens Institute (MSHI) volunteer Mountain Steward Programs.
- Maintenance, such as maintaining climbing registers, garbage services, toilet pumping, signs, etc.
- Waste Alleviation and Gelling (WAG) Bag Program.

Item	Cost	Description
GS-9 Recreation Assistant – 25 days	\$8,750	Duties include: Maintain program support for the climbing and backcountry program's administrative tasks (e.g., hiring, budgeting, ordering, NEPA, and cross program coordination).
GS-7/9 Backcountry/Interp Ranger – 65 days	\$22,750	Duties include: Supervision of the climbing rangers.
Up to four GS-4/5 Climbing Rangers FPO – 115 days each	\$82,800	Duties include: Patrol climbing routes for compliance, natural resource protection and interpretation.
GS-4 Front Desk Staff – 30 days	\$5,100	Duties include: Provide visitor services, answer questions, maintain website
Fleet (2)	\$10,000	
Volunteer and Visitor Services Support (MSHI)	\$82,500	40 active Mountain Stewards
Cowlitz Tribe Representation*	\$39,000	Maybe a video about TCP and why mtn important and make part of required video to watch to get the permit.
Volcano Rescue Team	\$10,000	Support for Skamania County EMS/SAR efforts
Training	\$10,000	Includes FPO & mountaineering training, WAFA/WFR training costs.
Materials and Supplies	\$5,000	Includes maintaining climbing registers.
Toilet Pumping*	\$10,000	\$1000/vault, 4 vaults, 2 times per year. One additional pump included during winter season.
WAG Bag Program*	\$20,000	Allows for bags for 20% of total climbers. Cleanwaste WAG bag, 100 pack = \$305. Math = 34100 climbers MAX x 20% = 6820/100 bags = 68.2 packs x \$305 = \$20,801
Update climbing video	\$30,000	
Secure storage facility for SAR equipment	\$20,000	
Trailhead and Facilities Construction*	\$1,000-\$100,000	Replace/Update: Signs, Kiosks, Fee Tubes, Gates, Trash Receptacles (for trash and WAG bags). Rebuild tent pads, replace fire rings, maybe delineate a few more bivouac sites.
Trail and Facility Maintenance*	\$2,000	Includes Ptarmigan/Worm Flows Trail and Developed Recreation Site Maintenance
Total with RANGE	\$358,900 - \$457,900	



Climbing Rangers practicing mountaineering and winter travel skills.

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