

Spirit Lake Outflow Safety Improvement Project

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

Project/DEIS Questions

Q: Why is the Forest Service acting on this now?

A: The existing Spirit Lake outflow tunnel is aging and requires significant repairs. This Draft EIS explores long-term options to maintain safe water levels and prevent future risks.

Q: Is Spirit Lake in danger of flooding now?

A: No. There is no immediate threat. This effort is about proactively addressing aging infrastructure before it becomes a crisis.

Q: What alternatives are being considered?

A: Two preferred alternatives are under review: full rehabilitation of the tunnel, or the creation of a new pressure tunnel with the potential for a natural channel. Seven other alternatives are also presented.

Q: How can I provide input?

A: Submit public comments by October 30, 2025. The draft environmental impact statement and information about how to submit comments can be found at on the [Spirit Lake Project Page](#)

Q: Who is involved in this planning effort?

A: This is a coordinated effort between the Forest Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Geological Survey, tribes, local governments, and many stakeholders.

Q: What happens if the tunnel fails?

A: A failure could cause Spirit Lake's water level to rise uncontrollably, increasing pressure on the natural debris blockage. This could eventually lead to catastrophic flooding affecting tens of thousands of people downstream.

Q: Why hasn't this been fixed already?

A: Previous repairs were short-term. In 2018, Congress directed agencies to explore lasting solutions. This EIS is the result of that in-depth technical and stakeholder work.

Q: What's the cost of this project?

A: Costs will vary by alternative and phase. However, long-term repair is far more cost-effective than emergency response or disaster recovery following failure.

Q: Will this impact the natural environment or the Monument?

A: All alternatives are designed to minimize impacts on the ecological and cultural values of the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument while maintaining public safety.

Q: What role does science play in this decision?

A: This plan is based on decades of geological, hydrological, and engineering assessments. The 2018 National Academies report and multiple federal evaluations informed the alternatives.

Q: What opportunities exist for public engagement?

A: In addition to submitting comments online, the Forest will host a public meeting on October 7, 2025 from 4pm-7pm at the Cowlitz County Event Center continues to engage both technical experts and local communities.

Q: How does this project fit into broader Forest Service goals?

A: It reflects the agency's core values of safety, sustainability, and science-based management—protecting lives and landscapes through long-term planning.

Additional Spirit Lake Questions

Q: Why was the Spirit Lake Tunnel constructed in 1985, and what challenges has it faced?

A: The tunnel was built as an emergency solution after the 1980 eruption blocked the lake's natural outlet. Over the decades, structural issues to include underground rocks being pushed to surface, and cracking have required frequent maintenance, prompting the need for a long-term fix.

Q: What are the risks associated with a failure of the Spirit Lake debris blockage?

A: Tunnel failure could cause catastrophic flooding and mudflows downstream, affecting approximately 50,000 people and disrupting critical infrastructure along the Columbia River and I-5 corridor.

Q: What unique opportunities does the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument provide?

A: The monument serves as a living laboratory for ecological recovery, geologic study, and cultural preservation—balancing safety, science, and stakeholder priorities.

Q: Why is Mount St. Helens listed as a Traditional Cultural Property?

A: The site holds deep spiritual and cultural significance for multiple tribal nations, which have recognized it as sacred since time immemorial.

Q: What is the Spirit Lake Intake Gate Replacement Project and how is it related?

A: The intake gate project (2024–2027) addresses short-term infrastructure needs. The project ensures tunnel operability while the broader Outflow Safety Project identifies long-term solutions.

Q: What role did the 2018 NASEM report play in this effort?

A: The National Academies concluded that existing risk mitigation measures were insufficient for long-term safety. This led to Congressional support for deeper analysis and long-term alternatives through the current environmental analysis process.

Q: What's the role of the Spirit Lake and Toutle/Cowlitz River Collaborative?

A: Formed in 2021, this collaborative brings together federal, state, and local agencies to coordinate solutions for sediment and water management following the eruption.

Q: How is the Forest Service ensuring tribal and stakeholder input?

A: Through government-to-government consultation, public meetings, and targeted outreach, the

agency is ensuring that tribal voices, underrepresented communities, and local partners are part of the planning process.