



# Central Cascades Wilderness Permit System Implementation and Adaptive Management Report

*Fiscal Years 2021 - 2023*

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# Central Cascades Wilderness Permit System Implementation and Adaptive Management Report

The Central Cascades Wilderness Permit system covers the Three Sisters, Mt Jefferson and Mt Washington Wildernesses on the Deschutes and Willamette National Forests. Between June 15 and October 15, limits on the number of day users are in place at 19 of 79 trailheads that access these wildernesses and for overnight use, all 79 trailheads have use limits. An additional 60 day-use trailheads require 'self-issued' day use permits at the trailhead, which are not limited.

The permit system was created to reduce recreation-related impacts in these wilderness areas, while continuing to provide opportunities for current and future generations to access and experience these wilderness areas.

The two forests began developing a permit system in 2016 based on data showing decades of increasing visitation was resulting in steadily increasing impacts to wilderness character, which includes the physical, natural, and social environments of these areas; visitation impacts were especially pronounced in the early 2010s, with some sites seeing increases of 200-500% in just a few years.

Public outreach for the proposed permit system began in 2016 and continued through to the final permit decision with planned implementation in the summer season of 2020. Implementation was delayed until 2021 due to the covid-19 pandemic.



USDA Forest Service Photo

## Permit Numbers

MOST COMMON GROUP SIZE:  
2 - 5 PEOPLE

TOTAL PER YEAR	2021	2022	2023
Overnight Permits	10,653	10,551	13,440
Day Use Permits	22,962	28,884	28,838
People with a Permit	96,913	103,013	110,486

\*In 2023, the total permits cancelled by visitors and made available to other users was 4,565.

This report summarizes lessons learned from the first three years of permit implementation, recognizes the role of volunteers and staff in the success of the permit system, identifies issues to monitor and describes the adaptive management actions taken in response to users' experiences.



## A Message from the Forest Supervisors

Your input during the planning process and over the past three years of implementation has helped shape the permit system and provided concrete suggestions for making adaptive management improvements. In this report, you'll find summaries of the 2021, 2022 and 2023 CCWP seasons, a review of the significant changes we made between years one and two, and some challenges we are monitoring in future years. In addition, there's information about the incredible support these wilderness areas receive from volunteers, and how we're working to increase equity of access to the permit system through partnerships, such as with local libraries.

Overall, we couldn't be happier with these first years, especially with how the system has worked in 2022 and 2023. The changes from year one to two were a direct result of feedback from visitors like you, so please continue to share with us your experiences, ideas, and suggestions. Thank you for your feedback and your support in wilderness stewardship.



USDA Forest Service Photo

## Year One of Implementation *May 28 – September 24, 2021*

On April 6, 2021, the first batch of Central Cascades Wilderness Permit day use and overnight permits were released on recreation.gov. Popular trailheads sold out in minutes, and initial user feedback was split between visitors who secured a permit being happy with the system and visitors who were concerned and frustrated about not getting access to the locations and dates they had hoped to book.

As the season progressed, wilderness rangers, interns, volunteers, and users reported a reduction in natural resources impacts, including significantly less trash and fewer illegal campfires.

By the end of the first season of implementation, the forests were also receiving reports of wildlife returning to some areas, improved opportunities for campsites, and feedback on concrete ways to improve the permit system.

Overall, the first year of implementation met the intent of reducing recreational impacts to the Central Cascades wilderness areas, although there were some notable challenges. In preparation for the next year, the forests implemented several adaptive management actions to improve the overall ease of use and effectiveness of the permit system.

### 2021 Volunteer and Intern Service

- **61** Volunteers
- **3,284** Volunteer Hours Served
- **4** AmeriCorps Team Members
- **2,677** AmeriCorps Hours Served

## Top 3 First Year Challenges

**Challenge: “No-shows” – an unacceptably high level of people who made reservations but did not use them**

While the permit system is not able to quantify no-shows, a number of indicators suggested that a higher-than-expected number of permit holders were not actively using their permits. In many cases, the most obvious examples were parking lots that should have been near capacity and instead were only partially full, even on peak summer weekends. Rangers, interns, and volunteers also reported seeing far fewer visitors on trails than the number of permits reserved, as well as empty camping spots that are typically very popular. The data available through recreation.gov suggested that permits reserved in early April were the most likely never to be “issued” by the permit holder, suggesting that they were less likely to have been used.

### **Challenge: Significant spikes in recreation use after the end of the permit season**

The permit season was initially designed to end on the last Friday of September. In 2021, that was September 24. With beautiful weather for an extended period into October, many areas saw a significant spike in use as soon as overnight and day use permits were no longer required. This was particularly acute at popular trailheads and destinations. For example, on October 2, Green Lakes trailhead saw over 500 visitors, resulting in:

- ~ 100 vehicles roadside beyond the capacity of the parking area
- Increased user paths through riparian areas(?) to the trailhead
- Trampled vegetation
- Unsafe pedestrian and dog activity along roadside
- Increased trash and uncollected dog waste throughout backcountry areas
- Overwhelmed trash and toilet facilities

While most trailheads did not see numbers of this magnitude, they did see numbers substantially over what was allowed during the permit season, with similar impacts at trailheads, along trails, and in the backcountry.

### **Challenge: Navigating the permit system in recreation.gov**

The initial design of the CCWP system reflected the NEPA planning process along with significant public input. Translating that intention to fit the existing capabilities of recreation.gov presented some practical and logistical challenges. Specifically, the initial roll out required three separate sites where users could make permit reservations: two sites for overnight permits (one for the full/early season release and one for the 7 days in advance opportunities) as well as a separate site for day use permits. Additionally, the original overnight system was designed to track the total number of nights for each permit, where quota was used for each night a group was in the wilderness. The unique elements of the system as originally implemented proved challenging for many users. Specific concerns included general confusion on how to make reservations, the two overnight sites required visitors to check both sites to see if permits were available, and users reserving a permit that extended for multiple nights beyond their actual use, causing that quota space to be unavailable to others.

## **Adaptive Management Actions Implemented for the Second Season (2022)**

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Based on significant public, ranger, intern and volunteer feedback, the two forests made several changes to improve access to the permit system and wilderness for 2022 and beyond. The changes, as well as assumptions behind them, are described below.

- Overnight permits were changed to a daily entry-based system, adding more opportunities and reducing the impact of no-shows and extended bookings

- Increased permit quotas for day use and overnight
- Permit season shifted to June 15-October 15
- Day use permits no longer released in April
- Change to hunting license exceptions

### **Assumptions that framed our adaptive management response included:**

- No financial incentive to cancel permits, as the processing fee is non-refundable and there is no additional permit fee
- Many permits were reserved early, on or shortly after April 6. Recreation.gov did not have the functionality to send reminders to permit holders
- In the first year, many regular wilderness users were concerned that they would not be able to hike and thus made the maximum number of reservations as early as possible
- The novelty of the permit system led to overnight users planning for more days than they ended up using
- The summer of 2021 saw significant smoke impacts from wildfires, as well as unusually high temperatures for an extended period, so many permit holders chose not to take their planned trip(s)



*USDA Forest Service photo*

### **Overnight Permits – Change to Daily Entry-based System**

Starting in 2022, users only needed to find available permits for the day and trailhead where they would like to start their trip. Previously, the system worked like a hotel room – once an overnight permit was taken, that ‘space’ was unavailable every night until the group completed their trip and exited the wilderness. Under the new entry-based change, new availability is released every day. This change also allows all overnight permits to be housed on one website. Benefits of this change include:

- Limits the impacts of no-shows; now a no-show only impacts the day that a permit was reserved
- More intuitive and easier to use, similar to most other wilderness permit systems
- Reduces the confusion from having two different overnight permit websites (there is now only one ‘overnight’ web page)

### **Increased Permit Quotas**

Starting in 2022, overnight and day use quotas at almost every trailhead were increased. The first year of the system did not adequately account for a base level of no shows and the new quotas are intended to better match opportunities available with levels of use consistent with the NEPA decision.

### **Permit Season Dates Shifted to June 15 - October 15**

The permit season originally started on the Friday of Memorial Day weekend and ended the last Friday of September. After the permit season, visitors were still required to use self-issued wilderness permits available at trailheads through the end of October. Starting in 2022, the permit season was shifted to

June 15 to October 15 every year, with self-issue permits no longer required after the CCWP permit season. Benefits of this change include:

- Better consistency with visitation patterns – many trailheads remain inaccessible due to snow until mid-June and the season of use for hiking, stock use, and backpacking often extends well into October
- Reduced confusion and administrative burden by eliminating the late season shift to requiring self-issued permits.

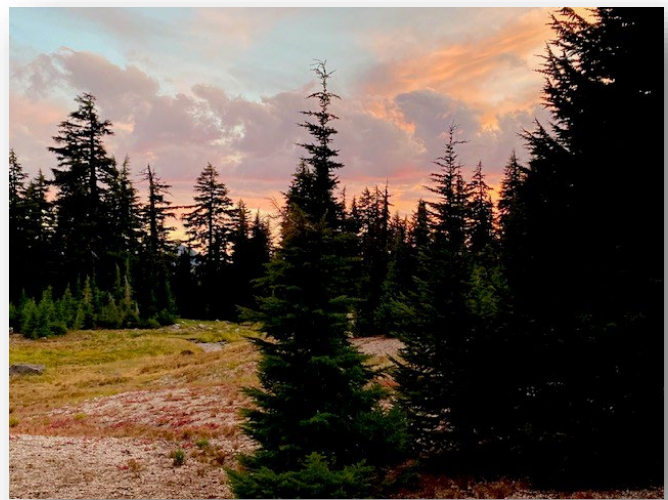
### Day Use Permits No Longer Released in April

For the first year of the permit, 20% of day use permits were released in April, along with the first batch of overnight permits. Because many of these early release permits went unused, and based on public feedback, the release of day use permits was changed to be closer to the dates of use.

Starting in 2022, 40% of day use permits were released 10 days before the trip date (starting on June 5 for the June 15 permit season start date), and the remaining 60% were released 2 days (48 hours) before the trip date.

### Change to Hunting License Exceptions

For the first season of the permit system, a limited number of hunting tags allowed users access to the CCWPS area without needing to acquire a separate permit. In 2022, all deer and elk hunting tags were given the same exception and tag holders do not need to also obtain a CCWP permit. This will reduce confusion and improve consistency with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife hunting regulations for these areas.



USDA Forest Service photo

## Year Two of Implementation *June 15 – October 15, 2022*

***“The permits for Green Lakes were gone before I could get one. I’m so disappointed.”***

In the second year of the permit system, users saw significant improvements to the recreation.gov process. Competition for desirable dates and locations remained strong, with over 1,000 permits purchased in the first few minutes

of the system opening at 0700 Pacific Time. However, the change to an entry-based overnight system significantly increased the availability of overnight permits. The traditionally most popular dates and trailheads sold out quickly, but many mid-week starts, later season dates, and less popular trailheads had more than 50% of the quota remaining. Many favorable comments on this change were received, although not surprisingly, some users were disappointed at not securing their top choice permits for high demand locations.

The changes put in place in 2022 generally had the intended effects.



- Shifting the season mostly (but not completely) avoided early season challenges with snowed in trailheads and continued to manage use levels through another early October of nice weather
- The 10 day and 2 day rolling windows for day use permits reduced the number of no-shows
- Increasing the permit quotas to compensate for no-shows did not lead to areas being overrun or seeing too many visitors
- Combining the two separate overnight permit pages on recreation.gov into one page in 2022 helped avoid confusion and increased the ease of use
- Changing the permits to the entry-based system also helped avoid visitor confusion

***“Yes sir. I’m pumped. Hiking several sections of the PCT and doing a 3-nighter with my son. The system worked very well.”*** (When asked if they received what they needed from permit system)

Our incredible cadre of wilderness rangers, interns, and volunteers continued their efforts at trailheads and in the backcountry – checking permits, sharing leave no trace tips, and providing a range of visitor support services. Their work to maintain the quality of the wilderness experience and protect wilderness character is exemplified in activities such as:

- Log out on trails (over 1000 logs cleared over 3 years)
- Over 600 pounds of trash carried out in 2021 and 2022
- Significant reduction of inappropriately managed human waste
- Over 1000 campsites maintained
- Reduced incidences of illegal or unattended campfires
- Thousands of visitor contacts

### **2022 Volunteer and Intern Service**

- **94** Volunteers
- **7,178** Volunteer Hours Served
- **4** AmeriCorps Team Members
- **2,703** AmeriCorps Hours Served

## **2023 – The Third Year of the Permit System**

No significant changes were implemented for the 2023 permit season. Some modifications were made in recreation.gov, giving users an improved experience. These changes included increased reminders of upcoming permits, a more user-friendly format to confirm and cancel, and an easier process to make changes within a permit (if space is available).

***“Love the permit system! Easy to use, we knew we'd have a camp site when we got to the lake, and that it wouldn't be crowded. It should have always been this good.”***

The later permit season (June 15-October 15), releasing day use permits closer to the day of use, and the shift to the entry-based permit system all continued to function smoothly in 2023. The biggest impacts to the CCWP system in 2023 was a



large closure in the Three Sisters Wilderness due to the Petes Lake Fire and smoke from other fires in the region.

One minor challenge that continued from previous years was the impact of a late snowpack on access to some trailheads. A number of trailheads along the Cascade Lakes Highway, Highway 242, and the Broken Top trailhead were still inaccessible by vehicle on June 15, which required cancelling permits released in April.

## Challenges That We Will Continue to Monitor

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Additional changes and challenges will be monitored for potential future adaptive management needs. These include but are not limited to the impact from wildfires – both the impacts of smoke and the potential for active fire within these wilderness areas; climate and weather – for example, different levels of snowpack year over year, record high and low temperatures outside of normal seasonality; ongoing pandemic and social patterns of use – how do user patterns change and evolve?

### Compliance

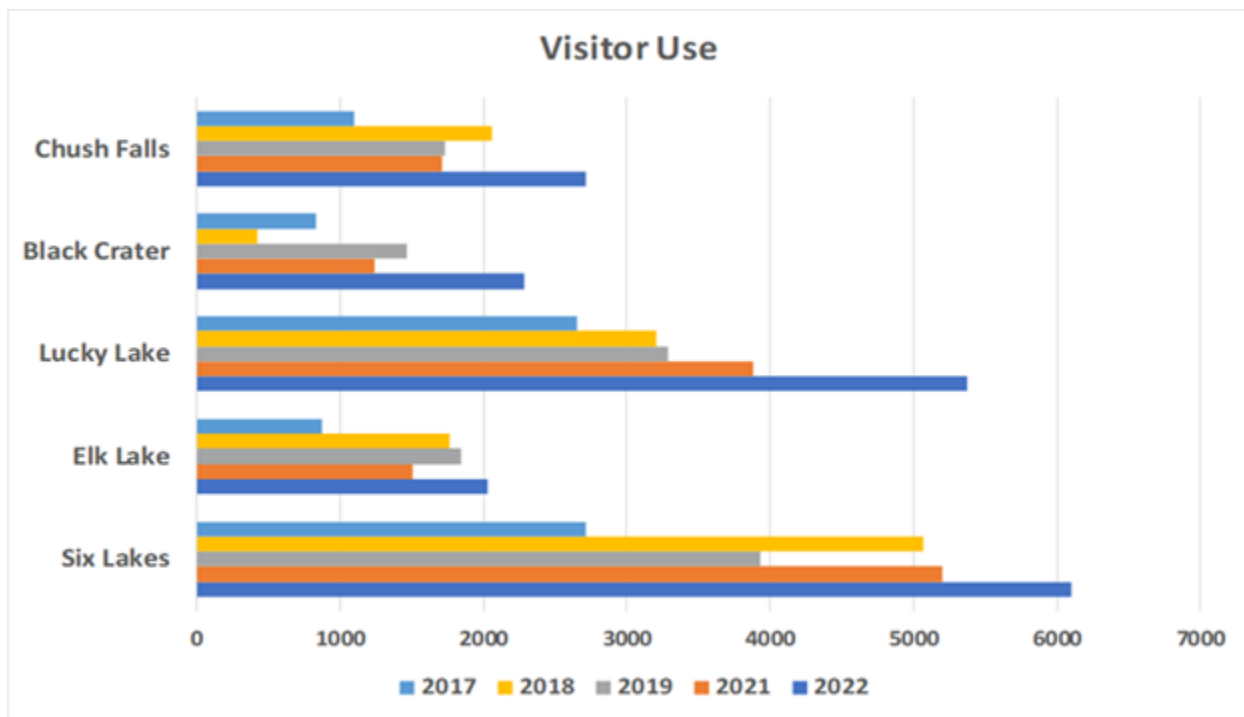
Many users had questions about the rate of compliance with the new permit system. The Forest Service and our many partners have made significant efforts to raise awareness of the permit system and how to plan a wilderness trip during the permit season. However, there are still users who do not realize the new permit system is in place, do not fully understand how the system works, or simply do not comply with permit requirements.

The overall compliance rate for the permit system increased steadily throughout the first season as people continued to learn about the permit system. The forests focused on an educational approach with an emphasis on positive interactions with wilderness users – gaining compliance through stewardship messaging for shared long-term benefit will be complemented with enforcement moving forward as needed.

In the second and third seasons of the CCWP system, we continued to see new users unfamiliar with the system, and our volunteer trailhead hosts provided information, helped people secure permits, and offered suggestions for different, available opportunities. A small number of users resistant to the permit system remain and as we continue our education efforts, warnings and citations are part of the toolkit available to rangers in the field.

### Potential Impacts from Displacement

A number of trailheads that do not have limits on day use have seen increased use, particularly as they are recommended by rangers and volunteers to people without a permit. These trailheads require self-issued permits and are being monitored for impacts. Approximately 20% of visitors do not complete a self-issue permit and these numbers reflect only the permit data collected.



## Access and Equity

Any permitting system has unintended effects that make accessing the permit system more challenging for some potential users, decreasing opportunities for some segments of the population. These barriers can include financial (cost of the permit reservation fee), technological (overnight permits require a recreation.gov account with an email address; permits are mostly reserved online), and systematic (understanding how to navigate a permit system's rules, regulations, and processes).

We share the ongoing concerns about equity of access and availability of opportunity to all potential wilderness users. While we continue to work with local and regional partners to explore ways to facilitate access for visitors more greatly affected by the permit system, to date, we have established partnerships with local libraries. In both 2022 and 2023, most libraries in Jefferson, Deschutes, Marion, Linn and Lane Counties had wilderness passes available for checkout by any library cardholder, providing access to the Central Cascades Wilderness Permitting area.

## Looking Ahead to 2024

There are no major changes under consideration for 2024.

We are considering minor changes to the timing of when high-elevation trailhead permits are released, in order to avoid the cancellation of permits when a late snowpack prevents vehicle access into late June or even July. Any finalized changes will be shared on the [Central Cascades Wilderness Permits webpage](#) and on [Recreation.gov](#).

We look forward to hearing more from you. The suggestions and comments received have helped shape the system and protect both the wilderness experience and wilderness character for future generations. Please share your feedback at [sm.fs.ccwp@usda.gov](mailto:sm.fs.ccwp@usda.gov).

All reservations for Central Cascades Wilderness Permits need to be made through *Recreation.gov* either online, via the [Recreation.gov](#) app on Google Android & Apple iOS devices, or by calling their call center

at 1-877-444-6777 or TDD 877-833-6777. Search for “Central Cascades Wilderness.” Overnight permits are not available at local Forest Service offices or outside of the reservation system.

## For More Information about the Central Cascades Wilderness Permit System

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- **Shared Forest Information and *Frequently Asked Questions* webpage:** [Willamette National Forest - Recreation Passes & Permits \(usda.gov\)](https://www.usda.gov/land-management/land-use/central-cascades-wilderness/central-cascades-wilderness-overnight-permits)
- [Central Cascades Wilderness Overnight Permits, Deschutes National Forest - Recreation.gov](https://www.usda.gov/land-management/land-use/central-cascades-wilderness/central-cascades-wilderness-overnight-permits)
- [Central Cascades Wilderness Day Use Permits, Deschutes National Forest - Recreation.gov](https://www.usda.gov/land-management/land-use/central-cascades-wilderness/central-cascades-wilderness-day-use-permits)
- **Email:** [sm.fs.ccwp@usda.gov](mailto:sm.fs.ccwp@usda.gov)