

Permits to Replace Freedom of the Hills

Are you a hiker, backpacker or climber—or a person who just loves getting outside? Well, if you haven't heard, your ability to access five of Oregon's premier wilderness areas is about to change. The Willamette and Deschutes National Forests, concerned about impacts associated with overuse, have proposed a quota-based, permit system for the Three Sisters, Mount Jefferson, Mount Washington, Diamond Peak, and Waldo Lake Wilderness areas. No doubt about it; this is a historic change. Soon it will take much more than just a free weekend or great weather forecast for you to be able to load up and go hiking or backpacking in these areas.

The Forest Service has determined that overuse is causing resource damage and that restricting access is the only way to address the problem. At just over 200 pages the Environmental Assessment for the Cascades Wilderness Strategies Project is a massive document full of data and copious references to impressive research studies. Five alternative actions are proposed but, except for the no-action alternative, they all end up in the same place—a quota-based permit system.

As far as I have been able to determine, if any of the proposed alternatives (other than no-action) are adopted, it will create the biggest, most restrictive and comprehensive limited-entry wilderness permit program in the country. Make no mistake, if you visit any of the five wilderness areas addressed in this plan you will be impacted. Alternative 2, the preferred alternative, requires permits for all overnight camping in all five wilderness areas and permits for day hikes at most trailheads.

Implementing a limited-entry permit system over five wilderness areas is a very big deal and the need for such a program should be indisputably documented. It is not. Though the underlying premise is that use levels must be reduced because overuse is causing damage to the resource there is insufficient documentation of extensive resource damage to justify implementation of such an extensive and restrictive permit system.

The Agency's push for a limited-entry permit system, one impacting such a vast area with so little background data on user impacts, might make one ask if generating revenue was a major focus of this plan—a concern not without merit. The permit system on Idaho's Middle Fork of the Salmon generates tens of thousands of dollars in application fees every year. Yes, that's right, application fees. Would-be boaters must pay to apply even when most never get to float the river.

Could this happen in Oregon? Absolutely! Unfortunately, we just don't know; the current Forest Service NEPA document does not address fees or budgets. As it was explained to me, consideration of issues related to the permit system—things like fees, budgets, personnel and such—are outside the scope of the NEPA review; the public will have the opportunity to comment on those issues at a later date.

Being asked to comment on this proposal without knowing how much it will cost and how it will work is rather like being asked to buy a house without going inside. I was told that the agency expects permit fees to not only support the permit system but trail crews, wilderness rangers and desk time for office staff. Based on traditional norms, permit fees will also support a percentage of payroll costs for everyone that touches wilderness; from the District Ranger to the Forest Supervisor. How much will all this cost? Right now, we just won't know. My guess, it won't be cheap.

In some instances, there is no alternative to a permit system. However, the question Forest Service leadership has failed to address is—are we truly at a point where there is no alternative to a quota-based permit system? It is not clear to me that we are.

You have until May 21st to comment on the Central Cascades Wilderness Strategies Project.

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