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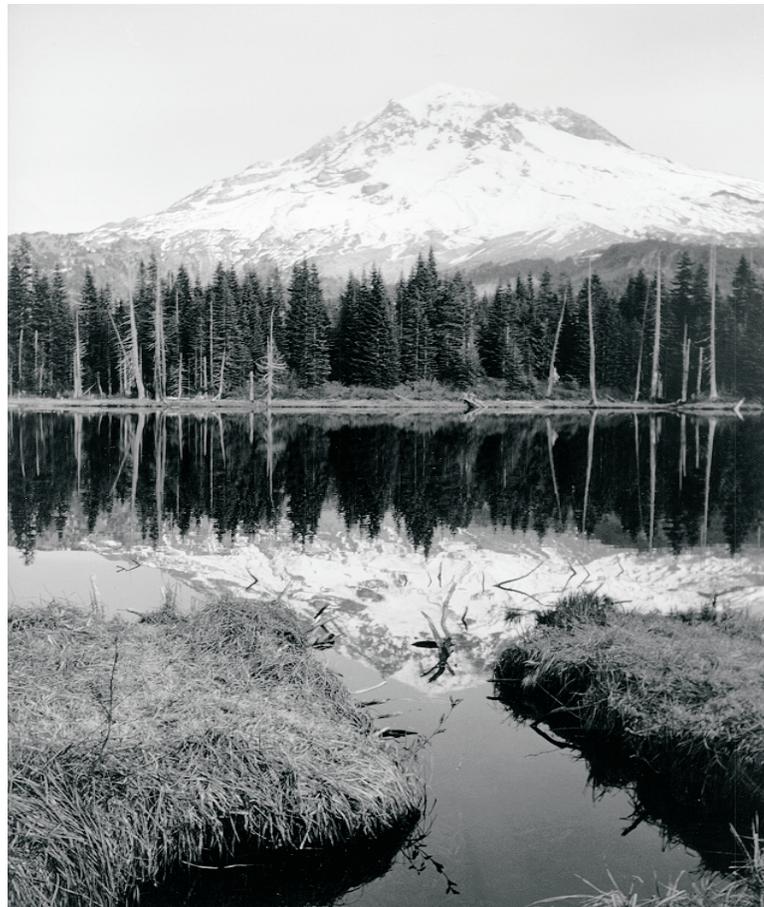


Forest Service

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# Overview on the New Alternative for the Wilderness Protection Plan



## Mt. Hood National Forest

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# Overview on the New Alternative for the Wilderness Protection Plan

The Mt. Hood National Forest has completed a second Environmental Assessment for a Wilderness Protection Plan. The Plan considers alternative ways to manage increasing recreation use and protect wilderness values within the Mt. Hood, Salmon-Huckleberry and Hatfield Wildernesses.

All three of the wildernesses are within 1.5 hours of the Portland-metro area, making them ideal day use destinations. While overnight use was higher in the 1970's and early 80's, nearly 85% of visitors are day users. There are few non-wilderness hiking alternatives on National Forest lands, within a day hike radius of the urban area.

## Management Objectives

The three major wilderness management objectives are to:

- ◆ Provide opportunities for solitude given existing and future recreation use trends.
- ◆ Provide recreational and climbing opportunities, especially day hiking.
- ◆ Protect and restore wilderness conditions in impacted sites.

Visitors generally prefer to see few other groups while recreating in wilderness. Crowding along a trail or at a destination can affect the user's wilderness experience. There is little public support for a limited use permit system, especially day use limits, that restricts users' wilderness access and trip spontaneity. The challenge managers face is maintaining a suitable wilderness experience for an increasing number of visitors and preventing resource damage, with minimal user restrictions that can be publicly supported.

## **Previously Developed Alternatives and Public Comments**

The wilderness planning process began in 1994 with data collection and public wilderness workshops to identify issues and management actions. Wilderness Rangers and Workshop volunteers measured campsite impacts and gathered data on the number of people and groups using the wilderness. They also determined the number of other groups people encountered on the various trails.

In 1998, the Forest issued an Environmental Assessment for public comment. The document presented a No Action alternative that would make no management changes, and two action alternatives. Alternative #2, the (original) Proposed Action, proposed to implement a limited use permit system that would reduce the amount of overall wilderness use by nearly half, in order to meet group encounter standards in the Forest Plan. Alternative #3 proposed similar reductions on most of the trails, but allowed for near current use levels on the south side climb route. Over 500 people attended public meetings on the plan and over 600 wrote letters or gave input on it. Following are the major issues people expressed about the (original) proposed action.

### **Issues With The (Original) Proposed Action**

#### **Issue #1: Use restrictions are not necessary to provide solitude.**

Hikers and climbers said they do not expect solitude in popular areas, but can, and do find solitude, when that is what they seek. Some objected to the interpretation of solitude within the Wilderness Act, or the fact that solitude is a subjective concept. They also pointed out that use in many of these areas, especially the south side climbing route was historically high before wilderness designation.

#### **Issue #2: Wilderness use restrictions would result in undesirable effects.**

It would impact the day hiker's spontaneity and the flexibility of changing plans based on weather and rain. Search and rescues would increase as folks climbed or hiked in marginal or adverse weather, or on routes beyond their ability because of the limited permit system. Use restrictions would displace use from the popular areas to the low use areas and impact both social and biophysical resources in those areas. Limiting wilderness access could reduce the public's support for wilderness. Limits on the easier, more accessible trails would impact families and those unable to hike longer, and more challenging wilderness trails and permit cost could impact those on a limited budget.

### **Issue #3: There should be more emphasis on wilderness education and resource protection.**

Many folks felt that wilderness managers should focus more time, energy and funding towards wilderness education, preventing and correcting biophysical impacts, increasing trail maintenance, and controlling camping rather than day hiking.

## **Advisory Committee Recommendations**

The Willamette Provincial Advisory Committee (PAC), a Congressionally sanctioned Forest advisory group, reviewed and commented on the original proposed action. They felt that use limits for day use and climbing were not warranted at this time and that solitude should not be the primary criterion for regulating use in popular areas. They encouraged managers to consider historic use levels and focus on restoration of impacted areas and wilderness education to prevent future impacts. They recommended partnerships with outdoor groups and other interested individuals to help educate and protect wilderness resources. They also felt that areas outside of wilderness should be developed and marketed to disperse use outside of wilderness and that the agency consider additional areas for wilderness designation.

## **Shaping a New Alternative**

Several other Northwest Forests were considering use restrictions with similar public sentiments. Some groups and individuals asked their Congressional representative to comment on wilderness management proposals including the Mt. Hood's. During this time, wilderness researchers were evaluating years of wilderness data and reaching conclusions regarding the effectiveness of use limits in popular areas. They concluded that large reductions in high use areas, could displace use and associated impacts to areas of wilderness that currently have pristine character, without an associated improvement in the popular areas. As a result of public comment, wilderness research and Congressional interest, a team of national managers and researchers compiled a wilderness recreation strategy analysis. In the summer of 1999, the analysis was shared with several key user groups in the Northwest. Wilderness managers on the Mt. Hood used this analysis as well as the large amount of public comments received on the original Wilderness Plan, to develop a new preferred alternative, Alternative #4 in the second Wilderness Plan.

## **Alternative #4 – The New Alternative (Preferred)**

Alternative #4 seeks to meet the three major wilderness objectives listed on page one, using the following approach.

### **Primitive Areas**

The primary goal of Alternative #4 would be to maintain and protect the primitive social and physical resource character currently found in the less used parts of these wildernesses. In response to Issue #1 above, wilderness visitors in future generations should be able to find opportunities for solitude when they seek it. While there are not many existing resource problems in the primitive areas, fixing these impacts and restoring their wilderness setting would be a high priority in Alternative #4. Primitive areas would be managed to achieve social standards for solitude similar to Alternative #2. Use in these areas is relatively low and not expected to increase significantly in the near future. Therefore, use limits to achieve these standards are not necessary at this time.

### **Use Management Areas**

The second goal of Alternative #4 would be to manage recreation use in the popular areas at a level that does not cause unacceptable biophysical resource impacts. Wilderness education, restoration, and impact prevention would be the focus in high use areas. Popular trails and destinations would be allocated to “Use Management Areas” (UMA’s).

### **UMA Destinations**

Most of the biophysical resource impacts (trampled vegetation, bare ground, human waste, etc.) are located at UMA destinations, where many users camp or spend several hours on a day trip. Wilderness managers would develop site-specific prescriptions for UMA destinations. The prescriptions would look at all impacted sites and determine which sites would be closed and restored, which would be left as is, and which would be fixed and remain open. All sites not scheduled for closure at a UMA destination, would be designated. Users visiting this destination would be required to camp or picnic at the designated sites to prevent additional sites from becoming established. The number of designated sites would determine the “carrying capacity” for the UMA destination. If future use at the destination began to exceed the carrying capacity, then access could become limited with a permit system for that area in order to protect biophysical resources.

## **Wilderness Stewards**

Current wilderness budgets are not sufficient to provide wilderness rangers in all UMA destinations. However, in order to continue to have relatively unrestricted use at UMA destinations and prevent resource impacts, it is important to have some on-site presence in these areas. Alternative #4 would develop partnerships with key outdoor groups and interested individuals to serve as “Wilderness Stewards”. Wilderness stewards would patrol trails and camp at destinations making visitors contacts. They would educate users about wilderness management and leave no trace concepts, and encourage voluntary compliance with area regulations. Wilderness stewards would also conduct off-site wilderness education sessions with schools, church and youth groups, etc. They would assist the Forest in site restoration and collect use and resource impact data in UMA’s. Wilderness stewards would help increase the public’s knowledge and appreciation of wilderness and hopefully encourage support for protective measures when they are needed.

## **UMA Trail Corridors**

UMA trail corridors would be managed differently than UMA destinations. Trail corridors, where hikers disperse along the trail without a single destination, have few impacts associated with the amount of use. Impacts are generally dispersed and are usually a result of inappropriate behavior (short cutting switchbacks) or poor trail location or design. Use along UMA trail corridors would not be limited, with two exceptions. First, could be limited if the trail corridor had unacceptable resource damage attributable to the amount of use it received, and other efforts to correct and prevent the damage were unsuccessful. Second, along a UMA trail corridor could also be limited if the trail led to a UMA destination where a limited use permit system was in place for reasons of carrying capacity and resource protection.

## **Marketing of Non-Wilderness Destinations**

Use in some popular areas has increased nearly 100% in the last 15 years. The Portland-metro area is nearing 2 million people and continues to grow. These wildernesses cannot continue to meet growing recreational demand. Under Alternative #4, Forest staff would work with other recreation managers at State Forests, State and County Parks, Bureau of Land Management, and other recreation sites near the urban areas to develop and market non-wilderness destinations, especially day hiking alternatives.

## **Potential Limited Use Destinations in the Near Future**

Only two UMA destinations would likely have use limited in the near future: Burnt Lake in the Mt. Hood Wilderness; and Wahtum Lake in the Hatfield Wilderness. These two areas currently have unacceptable resource impacts and average use levels that exceed probable carrying capacities. Lake basins are usually popular destinations, have sensitive vegetation around them, and are important habitat for fish and wildlife. Because use is concentrated in a relatively small area, it is important to manage the use and limit the extent of biophysical impacts. Limiting use is the only way to ensure that new sites and additional resource impacts do not become established.

## **Potential Triggers for Limiting Use in the Future**

Education of users, marketing of non-wilderness destinations, on-site wilderness stewards, natural barriers to direct foot traffic, and site restoration would all be alternative management actions considered, before use limits were implemented. If problems were a function of too many groups using an area and causing unacceptable social or resource impacts, then actions would be taken to reduce use. The intent of Alternative #4 is to take action before the limit of acceptable change (standard) is reached, not after it is reached. Actions could include moving the trailhead to extend travel time to the problem area, or implementing a limited use permit system for the problem area. A limited use permit system is the more likely remedy. There are three situations that could result in management actions to limit use in this alternative.

- ◆ All designated sites at a UMA destination are full or nearly full during the peak season (carrying capacity exceeded);
- ◆ Biophysical standards (limits) are being approached in either Primitive Areas or Use Management Areas because there are too many groups using the area; or
- ◆ Use levels increase in Primitive Areas and approach social encounter standards.

## **Climbing Areas**

The south side climb route would be a UMA trail corridor with no limits planned at this time. Stewards would encourage use of the blue bag system for human waste, discuss wilderness management, and collect use data. Less used and more challenging routes would be managed as Primitive Areas described above. Use limits on these routes are not necessary at this time.

## **Alternative Effects**

### **Social Conditions and Displacement**

The (Original) Proposed Action, Alternative #2, would provide solitude to even the most popular destinations during peak season, with a limited use permit system. Use in the wildernesses under this alternative would be reduced by nearly half with the south-side climb route and Ramona Falls being affected the most. Those not able to get a permit to a popular destination, would likely be displaced to more primitive areas. The New Alternative (#4) would provide opportunities for solitude in the primitive areas at all times, and to a lesser extent in the UMA's during mid-week, poor weather, and off-season. Hikers may encounter a number of other groups along UMA trail corridors, but UMA destinations should not experience unacceptable crowding beyond the assigned capacity of the area.

### **Restoration Efforts**

All action alternatives would designate camping and day use sites. While restoration is proposed under all alternatives, implementation of the permit system in Alternative #2 would use the bulk of the wilderness budget at least for the first few years, leaving little funding for restoration and education outreach. Alternative #4 would focus restoration efforts, first in the primitive areas and then in the UMA destinations. Wilderness stewards would assist in restoration and possibly help secure matching grants for site improvement work. Recovery of impacted sites could take decades or longer in higher elevation sites.

### **Biophysical Resource Impacts from Recreation**

Resource impacts in Alternative #2 would improve to the extent that restoration efforts are funded. With much fewer people visiting some destinations, sites could begin naturally recovering if they do not get repeated use. Improvements in the more popular areas would probably be offset by increased resource impacts from displaced use to primitive areas. Higher UMA use levels in Alternative #4 could cause increased impacts over time. These impacts could be mitigated by a more aggressive restoration campaign and more on-site education and impact prevention by wilderness stewards and rangers. Primitive areas in Alternative #4, would likely not see resource impacts increase to an unacceptable limit (exceed Forest Plan standards).

## Conclusion

The alternatives in the Wilderness Plan present different approaches to wilderness management. For the (Original) Proposed Action to be successful, it requires relatively large amounts of time and funds to administer and enforce the permit system, and still have funds for restoration and education outreach. There is little public support for widespread use limits to meet social standards at this time. Perhaps if people were to get used to it in the future, and enjoy less crowding on trails, they might support this approach over time. The New Alternative #4 enlists the public in wilderness management with collaborative partnerships. For Alternative #4 to be successful, it requires a long-term volunteer commitment of groups and individuals to assist the Forest in managing recreation use and educating the public. From the comments received on the first plan, it appears that there is public support for this approach. Alternative #4 also requires development and marketing of non-wilderness hiking alternatives. These wildernesses cannot continue to accommodate the growing populations that want to hike in a primitive setting.

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