

# 2020 Recreation Season After Action Review

## Summary of Findings



Photo by: Christian Wiediger

## OVERVIEW

This past year, public lands and rural communities saw enormous spikes in visitation as people sought safe options for vacation and recreation during the COVID-19 pandemic. This surge overwhelmed the capacity of public lands staff and infrastructure, and strained the resources of adjacent rural communities. While the circumstances were unprecedented, we know many of these recreation-related pressures are simply an acceleration of existing trends.

Knowing that solutions to these challenges should reflect the input of communities and partners most impacted, the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition and the Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative organized a workshop of rural stakeholders and Forest Service staff to review recreation during the year 2020. Participants in the January event brought up a range of impacts caused by record visitation. Those living near public lands said they faced increases in trash, human waste, and wildfire risk as heavy visitor traffic collided with closed recreation sites, scaled back enforcement resources, and limited visitor services. Participants also noted that many visitors were new to the outdoors and often seemed confused by the various rules, signage, and closures associated with public and private lands. Many were also unfamiliar with the principles of ‘leave no trace’ and wildfire safety. Meanwhile, communities reliant on public lands tourism faced an increased COVID-19 risk from outside visitors without being able to capture the associated economic benefit because many people were “coming, hiking, and leaving.”

Using these experiences as a starting point, we focused our workshop on capturing participants’ lessons learned and their suggested solutions for communities, land managers, and agency partners to adapt to and better prepare for recreation impacts in the years ahead. We hope the following recommendations will inform agency management strategies that reflect the needs of those living and working in our rural communities and public lands.

# SHORT-TERM COVID-19 MITIGATION STRATEGIES:

1

**The Forest Service should invest in increased staff or volunteer capacity at recreation sites.** Having dedicated hosts at recreational sites, whether through agency staffing or partnerships with local NGOs (e.g. Wallowa Resources' Community Solutions, Inc. manages USFS campgrounds in Eastern Oregon) has been critical to ensuring that visitors are educated on responsible recreation practices and that COVID-19 protocols and policies are enforced.

2

**The Forest Service should continue to prioritize and develop close coordination and communication with local counties, communities, and tribal governments to address and alleviate visitation pressures on those entities.** Near John Day, OR, the Forest Service coordinated with tribal and county staff to open federal recreation sites and services in areas where those entities were struggling to accommodate additional visitors and to close areas of the national forest where local entities could not provide search and rescue.

3

**The Forest Service should meet as early in the recreation season as possible with its permittees to address and adjust COVID-19 operating plans and protocols.** Early and frequent dialogue between the agency and local outfitters, guides, and special use permittees last year enabled them to continue operations using agreed-upon COVID-19 precautions.

4

**To augment its own capacity, the Forest Service should utilize knowledgeable, longtime partners to develop COVID-19-adapted agency protocols and serve as liaisons between the agency and other community and volunteer groups.** Agency staff on the Willamette National Forest relied on an established partner organization to survey the capacity of other volunteer organizations to safely engage in field work during the pandemic. The partner organization then developed COVID-19 protocols for willing volunteers and ensured compliance with those precautions. This enabled the agency to continue relying on partners to conduct maintenance and keep recreation sites and trails open throughout the pandemic.

5

**To help protect rural communities, the Forest Service should support promotion and communication campaigns for safe visitation and recreation.** One avenue would be to engage with state-level coalitions and organizations, such as those in California and Montana that are convening cross-jurisdictional conversations and leading campaigns about responsible recreation and COVID-19-safe tourism.

# LONG-TERM MANAGEMENT PRIORITIES:

1

**The Forest Service must manage recreational access based on the natural limitations of our public lands ecosystems, and consider visitation control mechanisms when necessary.** The need to protect natural resources and important heritage sites from unfettered human access is more urgent than ever. Workshop participants saw the need for difficult decisions and additional measures such as permitting and lottery systems, limits to dispersed camping access, and studies of recreation-driven displacement that can inform long-term management planning.

2

**The Forest Service should work closely with adjacent community and recreation partners to plan for long-term, ecologically and operationally sustainable recreation access on federal lands.** In 2020, USFS Region 6 looked to states, communities, and partner organizations for recommendations on keeping developed recreation sites open and compliant with the Region's COVID-19 protocols. This effective example of partner engagement should be carried forward to long-term planning. Key partners should be included in the development of sustainable recreation management strategies that effectively address ongoing visitation pressure.

3

**The Forest Service should align its management strategies and communications with local and state leadership, recreation industry partners, and user groups.** To manage cross-boundary recreation impacts and unify public messaging around responsible recreation, the agency should align with entities such as destination development organizations (e.g. Travel Oregon) and state-level offices of outdoor recreation.



# ORGANIZATIONS REPRESENTED

## OREGON

Deschutes National Forest, USFS  
Eastern Oregon Visitor Association  
Greater Hells Canyon Council  
Malheur National Forest, USFS  
Siuslaw Institute  
Siuslaw National Forest, USFS  
Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative  
Teddy Roosevelt Conservation Partnership  
USDA Rural Development, Oregon state office  
Willamette National Forest, USFS

## CALIFORNIA

Sierra Business Council

## COLORADO

Smokey Wire

## IDAHO

Idaho Wildlife Federation  
Private landowner and BLM permittee

## WASHINGTON

Glacier Peak Institute  
The Wilderness Society, Washington office

## MONTANA

Heart of the Rockies  
The Wilderness Society, Montana office

## WYOMING

Bridger-Teton National Forest, USFS



## ABOUT RVCC

RVCC envisions healthy landscapes and vibrant rural communities throughout the American West. We are committed to finding and promoting solutions through collaborative, place-based work that recognizes the inextricable link between the long-term health of the land and the well-being of rural communities.

## CONTACTS

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## ABOUT SOUTHERN WILLAMETTE FOREST COLLABORATIVE

The SWFC is a grassroots, community-based organization that brings together community members, special interest and industry groups, conservation organizations, and land managers. We work together to find common ground on balanced restoration approaches. Our goal is to increase the pace and scale of restoration, while also bolstering the local economy.

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