

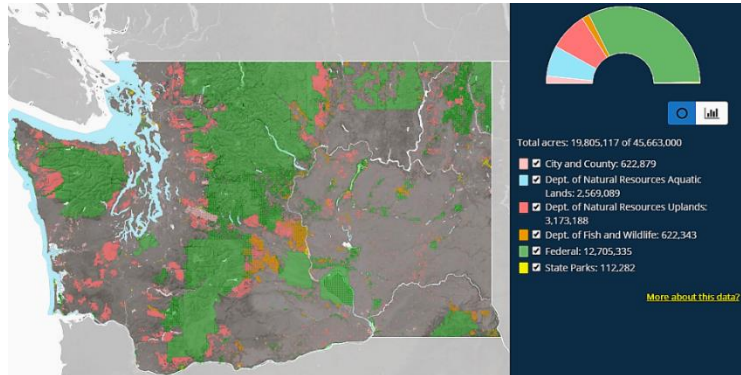
THE WILLIAM D. RUCKELSHAUS CENTER

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Simplicity, Consistency, and Equity in Recreation Fee Systems in Washington Mid-Project Update

Purpose

From the Columbia River to the 49th Parallel, and the Pacific Ocean to the Palouse, land ownership and management in Washington state is a patchwork of federal, tribal, state, local (including city, county, and public utilities), and private entities. Nearly 40% of the state (~20 million acres) is primarily managed by nine agencies (six federal and three state)¹. In recent decades, these agencies have instituted various user-based fees to help offset decreases in state and federal allocations while striving to manage trails and other facilities under pressure from increasing participation in outdoor recreation.



Map of public lands in Washington – Courtesy of the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office

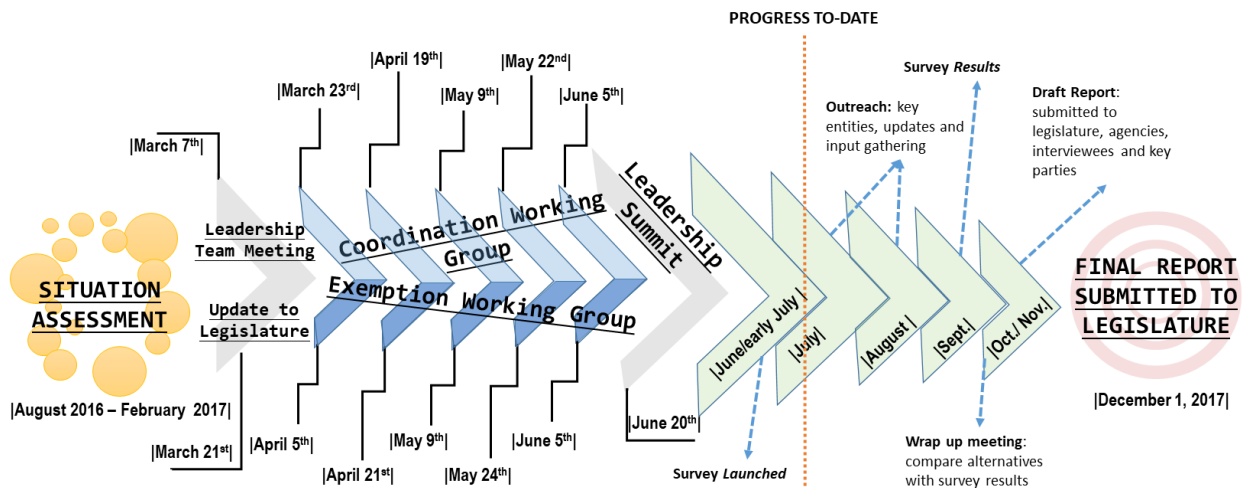
Currently, more than 20 unique recreation passes and permits² are available in Washington (including state and federal, daily and annual). The pass(es) that may be required depend on the agency, trailhead, season, activity, mode of access, and whether or not an individual qualifies for a free/reduced fee program. These passes, depending on the agency, come in the form of a review mirror “hang tag,” window cling, sticker, or plastic card that may be linked to a specific individual, household, or up to two license plates. Specific activities and/or areas may require additional fees or permits (e.g. backcountry hiking permits, hunting/fishing licenses, ORV tabs, etc.). The myriad of pass permutations results in public land users who are uncertain about what pass is needed where (and when, and why).

¹ State Agencies: WA State Parks, WA Department of Natural Resources (DNR), WA Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW); Federal Agencies: U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Land Management

² Although sometimes perceived as such, these passes and permits are not necessarily parking permits. Some passes grant “motor vehicle access” while others must only be displayed at authorized fee sites or in association with specific activities. Some agencies can charge access or entrance fees, others may not. This process uses the terms “passes” or “recreation fees” to refer to the many passes and permits that have very specific meanings to the agency with which the pass or permit is affiliated.

To begin addressing these challenges, in 2016, the Washington State Legislature directed the WA State Parks and Recreation Commission, in partnership with the WA Department of Natural Resources and the WA Department of Fish and Wildlife, to work with the Ruckelshaus Center³ to “coordinate a process to develop options and recommendations to **improve consistency, equity, and simplicity in recreational access fee systems while accounting for the fiscal health and stability of public land management.**” The legislation also requested exploration of the potential for “federal and state permit fee coordination,” including a “single pass to provide access to state and federal lands” and a “comprehensive and consistent approach to recreational fee discounts and exemptions.”

Process



This figure depicts work coordinated by the Ruckelshaus Center, including key dates and targets. For the *Situation Assessment of Recreation Access Fee Systems in Washington State*, the Center interviewed more than 60 individuals, representing state and federal agencies, tribes, outdoor recreation users, pass vendors, and other interested parties. Their input guided the roles and tasks of a Leadership Team and two working groups. Over the past several months, participants have shared their perspectives, identified information needs, and developed work products.

³ The William D. Ruckelshaus Center is a joint effort of Washington State University and the University of Washington whose mission is to act as a neutral resource for collaborative problem solving in the state of Washington and the Pacific Northwest.

Scenarios for Further Analysis and Consideration

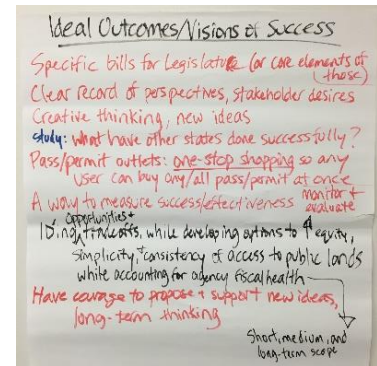
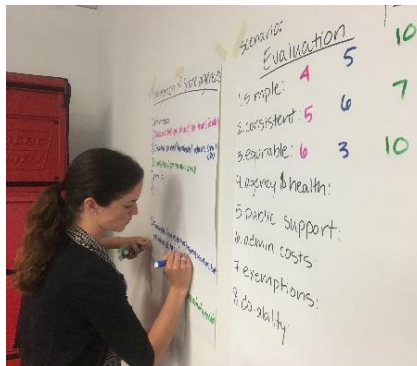
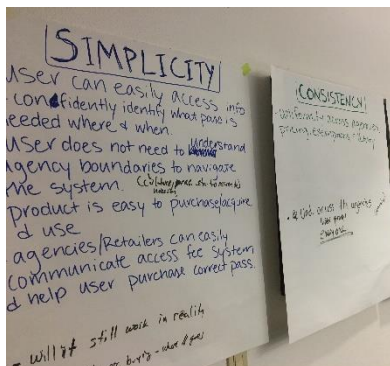
The work groups developed, and Leadership Team refined, the four scenarios below. All scenarios assume retention of special use fees (e.g. for campgrounds, hunting/fishing licenses, or for backcountry permits). The scenario number does not reflect rank or preference.

Scenario 1 - Opt-In Tweak: Administrative or programmatic improvements to the current system, where people who opt to recreate on public lands support land management through user-based recreation fees/passes. Components suggested to date include consistent free days and eligibility for free/reduced fee programs, joint marketing/land management efforts, and common information on passes available at all points of sale.

Scenario 2 - Opt-In Plus: Similar to Scenario 1, but pass products and prices change. Components suggested to date include Discover Pass as base pass with ability to add endorsements (such as Sno-Park, Northwest Forest Pass, etc.); fee coordination board to set pass prices, distribute revenue, and recommend reduced fee programs; and consistent pass transferability.

Scenario 3 - Opt-Out: Buying a discounted Discover Pass at the time of vehicle registration becomes the default option; however, vehicle owners may opt out of paying this fee. If a vehicle owner opts out, they would have a different color/style license tab and still retain the ability to purchase a full-price Discover Pass later. Components suggested to date include revenue sharing agreements with local/federal agencies, current passes/permits retained for out-of-state visitors and individuals who chose to opt out at time of registration, and donation opportunities to support free/reduced fee programs.

Scenario 4 - All-In: This scenario embodies the idea that the “public supports public lands.” At the time of registration, vehicle owners are required to pay a fee supporting recreation on public lands. Components suggested to date: eliminate Discover Pass and recalibrate funding allocations to state agencies, create granting program to support equity and public land access, and develop revenue-sharing agreements with local/federal agencies.



Photos of Coordination Work Group meeting – Courtesy of Molly Stenovec

During the Work Group/Leadership Team “Recreation Fee System Summit” on June 20, participants identified the following components that could be incorporated into any of the scenarios:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create single information portal (mobile friendly) for trip planning, with pass requirements and ability to purchase required pass(es) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discover Pass sticker/window cling (especially for open top vehicles and motorcycles)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fee Coordination Board 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent price for Discover Pass
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase coordination/partnerships between state, federal, and local passes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recalibration of Discover Pass revenue sharing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased/improved marketing and coordination among state, federal, and local agencies 	

Next Steps

The Leadership Team and work group(s) will meet periodically throughout the fall to incorporate additional research, survey data, and public input to refine the scenarios, and ultimately develop final options and recommendations for the Legislature and agencies. If you or your organization has questions or suggestions that might merit consideration, or if you would like to learn more, contact Molly Stenovec, Project Manager, at molly.stenovec@wsu.edu or (206) 219-2411.



Coordination Work Group meeting – Courtesy of Molly Stenovec