

Mount Hood Wilderness Plan

The initial Mount Hood Wilderness Environmental Assessment issued in November 1998 served as a model for what a solitude-focused wilderness could be like. Current use levels on many hiking trails and climbing routes would have been dropped dramatically so that hikers and climbers would only encounter a maximum of 10 other parties during a day, regardless of whether this occurred on mid-week during a shoulder-season or on a busy holiday weekend. Climbing use on the popular South Side route would have been cut by 90 percent based on historic norms.

Public comments overwhelmingly rejected this initial plan, with most visitors to this urban-proximate wilderness feeling that use is largely self-limiting, and that seeing other people was not necessarily an impediment to enjoying the wilderness. Aside from concerns that people would not have the flexibility to recreate when and where they wanted, the scientific research showed that such a move would damage the plant life in the wilderness by dispersing use from currently high-use areas to low-use areas. Most damage to vegetation occurs during the initial trampling, so spreading the footprint of impacts by sending more people to presently undisturbed areas would increase the damage to plants throughout the wilderness, and would vastly outpace any restoration efforts in high-use areas that would see fewer visitors.

After the initial defeat, the Forest Service regrouped, worked with a wide variety of recreation and conservation groups in developing a revised plan that focused efforts on protecting the physical health of the wilderness, rather than limiting social contact with other wilderness visitors. The revised plan, which was released in April 2000, received widespread public support, especially among outdoor groups including climbers, hikers and equestrians, and was adopted by the Mount Hood Forest Supervisor.

However, the adopted wilderness plan was appealed by Wilderness Watch and other "purist" environmental groups on January 23, 2001, because they felt it did not sufficiently protect wilderness solitude. The AAC mobilized several other climbing and outdoor organizations to aid the Forest Service by filing comments in support of adopted plan. In the end, Forest Supervisor Gary Larsen withdrew the plan on July 30, 2001 for further work. As yet there has been no replacement plan issued.