

# Mount Rainier National Park Nisqually to Paradise Draft Corridor Management Plan and Environmental Assessment

## *Frequently Asked Questions*

### **Why is a Corridor Plan needed?**

The popularity of Mount Rainier National Park is growing, as revealed in the regular increase in visitation from year to year. Many of the park's existing management documents do not reflect current visitor magnitude or needs. Visitation increased 85% from 2008 to 2021. The park experiences extremely concentrated use, with 70% of the more than one million visits occurring between July and September. Much of this use is concentrated in a relatively small number of popular destinations in Paradise.

- This plan is about managing for our future so that we can sustainably accommodate expected increases in visitation and still provide a high-quality experience. Based on a range of studies and predictive factors we expect visitation to continue to grow for national parks, including Mount Rainier.
- Visitors currently experience wait times of more than an hour to enter the park through the Nisqually and White River Entrance Stations on busy days, causing congestion both inside and outside of the park. Roadway congestion also occurs within the park at popular trailheads, which leads to parking in undesignated areas and pedestrian safety concerns due to limited roadway visibility. Reducing congestion will enhance visitor experience of this historic roadway and improve visitor access to recreation opportunities.
- Proactive planning for visitor use helps management agencies provide access, improve experiences, and protect resource conditions and values for this and future generations. Unmanaged visitor use can inadvertently damage the very natural and cultural resources and qualities that attract people to these areas in the first place. Proactive planning can also create opportunities for personal and partner engagement and participation in subsequent implementation and stewardship activities.
- The National Park Service (NPS) is exploring proactive strategies with flexible and scalable tools that improve access to public lands while ensuring we protect the resources that make high-quality visitor experiences possible.

### **How did you come up with this plan?**

The draft Nisqually to Paradise Corridor Management Plan/Environmental Assessment (EA) is the product of many years of studies, public comments, stakeholder input, and analysis. The plan has been informed by a number of scientific studies. We also gave a lot of weight to what people said they valued about the park and what management strategies we should consider, which we heard during the last two public comment periods. The planning team, which consists of NPS managers, scientists, and staff relied on this information to develop the draft plan and EA.

**Why are you considering these specific actions?**

The plan presents alternative actions and strategies that could be taken to protect park resources and provide high-quality visitor experiences. They reflect ideas and suggestions from the public to provide better visitor experiences and respond to existing issues associated with crowding and traffic congestion during peak visitation times. This is a draft plan; your feedback will help inform the final plan.

**What kind of comments are you looking for?**

We are particularly interested in any new information, questions, or ideas that will improve, augment, or challenge that information and ultimately strengthen the plan to support informed decision-making by NPS.

**If enough people make the same comment or suggestion, will that idea be automatically implemented?**

The public comment period is not a vote. What we are looking at is the substance of the comments, not necessarily the volume.

**When are you making a final decision? When would that decision be implemented?**

A final decision is anticipated this year after NPS reviews public comment on the draft plan. Implementation of any changes approved by the final decision would begin in summer 2024. Additional information about the specifics of the final decision will be provided before implementation begins.

**How does this plan address winter use and winter access?**

This plan proposes to expand winter day use access by opening the road beyond Longmire during some days in the winter when it is not feasible to open the road all the way to Paradise. Opening the road between Longmire and Cougar Rock on days when the road to Paradise is closed would expand winter access within the corridor.

**How would the preferred alternative impact access to the park for bicyclists, volunteers, park pass holders, climbers with permits, those with reservation at the Inns or campgrounds and others who have business or permits to be in the park?**

Visitors with wilderness use permits and/or overnight reservations within the corridor (e.g., Paradise Inn, Cougar Rock Campground, Backcountry Permit Reservations) would not be required to obtain a separate reservation to access the corridor. Those users who need to access the park for non-recreational purposes (e.g., volunteers, Tribal members, staff) would not be required to have a permit.

At this time, the proposed reservation systems are to manage private vehicles. If you have thoughts or considerations on this topic to share with the planning team, please provide those in your comments.

**What would the system look like to make a reservation?**

Reservations would be made through an online vendor with an option to call into a reservation line via phone.

**Would locals get preference for entry into the park?**

With regard to fees and seasonal reservations, the NPS Recreation Fee Reference Manual (RM22A: Recreation Fee Collection) states fees will be collected “fairly and equitably.” For these reasons, NPS believes that the best way to provide fair and equitable access to Mount Rainier National Park is to provide all potential visitors with the same opportunities for access.

**Would there be a fee associated with shuttles, timed entry reservation, and/or parking reservations?**

This is an operational consideration of the plan that will be considered in system implementation with the reservation sales vendor. There would likely be a minimal fee (between \$2-\$6) to obtain a reservation. The fee or service charge would be tied to the cost of operating the reservation system and associated visitor services.

**How would the new system account for no-shows?**

Leftover advance reservations would be added to the short-term reservation pool. The park would study the rate of “no-shows” in the system and account for those in the number of permits that are available each day.

**How far in advance would reservations be available, and would any reservations be saved for spontaneous trips?**

A percentage of reservations would be held aside for near-term availability in addition to long-term, or advance reservations. The specific time frame for reservation windows would be identified during the design of the reservation system.

**How large of a window would I have to arrive at the park under a timed entry system? Once inside the park, is my time limited?**

The window for entries has yet to be defined. Other similar systems in NPS use 1-2 hour windows to help pace vehicles into the park or areas of the park. Reservations would not limit how much time visitors can spend in the park. The intent of the system is to better pace visitor entry into the park. None of the alternatives propose a reservation system that would have a required exit time.

**Why even pick a preferred at this point, doesn't that stifle public comment?**

The purpose of identifying a preferred alternative is to let the public know which alternative we are leaning toward selecting at the time a draft plan and EA is released. We have identified a preferred alternative, so the public knows which direction we are headed and has many opportunities to comment on that direction. This is the final public comment period and the public's last chance to formally weigh in to help inform decision-making.

**What is visitor use management and visitor capacity? Why is this needed?**

Visitor use management is the proactive and adaptive process for managing visitor use, using a variety of strategies and tools to achieve and maintain desired resource conditions and visitor experiences. Planning for and managing visitor use in concert with resource preservation is at the heart of NPS’s mission. Proactively planning for visitor use supports responsive management that increases the ability of NPS to encourage access and maximize visitor opportunities while protecting park resources for this and future generations. Visitor capacity, a component of visitor use management, is the maximum amounts and types of visitor use that an area can accommodate while achieving and maintaining desired resource conditions and visitor experiences, consistent with the purposes for which the park was established.

**How was visitor capacity identified?**

Visitor capacities are based on the best available data and information. This includes but is not limited to a thorough analysis of current use levels and desired conditions for resources and values in key areas within the corridor study area. NPS identifies visitor capacities based on the following guidelines: 1) determining the analysis area, 2) reviewing existing direction and knowledge, 3) identifying the limiting attributes, and 4) identifying visitor capacity, using management strategies necessary to maintain quality of visitor experiences, protect and conserve park resources, and “right-sizing” facilities and transportation assets to meet capacity requirements. NPS can increase or decrease visitor capacity over time. Adjustments would be done after careful monitoring of conditions in the park. Monitoring acts as a feedback loop that helps managers know how effective an action is and if different actions.