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Organization:

Title:

Comments: Proposed Central Cascades Permit Fee

To whom it may concern,

Wilderness is something that shouldn't be taken for granted. It is something special that needs to be protected. Wilderness is also for adventure and exploring the wonders of nature. I have had the opportunity to hike, backpack, and trail run for thousands of miles on and off-trail through state, federal and even private lands. From summits of 14ers to the canyons of Big Bend and Zion National Park to the shores of the Great Lakes and rocks of Newfoundland. I have hiked in areas where no permits are required, where they can simply be filled out at the trailhead, or are strictly regulated such as the Wonderland Trail and John Muir Trail. Recently I have been blessed to experience some of the wonders of Oregon in the Central Cascades. Not knowing how long I will be in the area and with the uncertainty of the permit situation in the near future, I was motivated to hike in these wilderness areas while I still had the chance. I have had the opportunity to visit these areas on four separate weekends. I will describe my experiences below.

In late September of 2018, I backpacked the Three Sisters Loop. I drove to the trailhead and camped at the Devil's Lake Campground Thursday night. There were some people around but I was still able to find a campsite. I parked at the Green Lakes Trailhead early the next morning. I was the only car in the parking lot. I hiked the loop clockwise and it was very beautiful. It was my first time backpacking on the PCT since I had completed the John Muir Trail in 2011. The first day I hiked all the way to the edge of the Obsidian Limited entry area and set up camp just outside the boundary. I encountered several other backpackers throughout the day but it didn't seem overly crowded and I had a perfect campsite all to myself. The next day was rainy but also didn't seem crowded and I ended up camping at Camp Lake which had several other groups of people nearby, but I was still able to find a nice campsite. The final day, Sunday, I encountered numerous hikers around the Green Lakes area and was stunned when I returned to the parking lot to discover the cars had to park well out into the road.

My second adventure was an out and back on the PCT from Santiam Pass to South Matthieu Lake and I completed it in early August 2019. The northern part of the Mount Washington Wilderness felt uncrowded and it seemed like almost all the backpackers were PCT thru hikers. Once on the lava near Belknap Crater and Little Belknap there were day-hikers but it still didn't seem crowded. Crossing into the Three Sisters Wilderness there were groups camped at designated campsites at the Matthieu Lakes, but even some of the campsites were empty Saturday afternoon. I did an out and back so my campsites were close to each with the first at Washington Ponds and the final one off-trail at George Lake. I camped alone both nights.

The third trip was a combination adventure with the main goal of climbing the South Sister with a couple of friends. I had a drive of several hours and with a half day at work on Friday hoped to be able to find a first come first serve campsite at a campground near the trailhead. I drove up the Cascade Lakes Byway and searched many of the campgrounds near the trailhead but they were already full. I had to drive back south all the way East Davis Lake Campground before I could find a campsite. After setting up camp I decided to go explore while waiting for my friends to arrive. I went for a trail run on the Six Lakes Trail to Doris Lake and back. There were a couple groups camped near the lakes but otherwise I didn't see anyone else. The trailhead had lots of empty parking spaces. Next I decided to go paddle boarding at Hosmer Lake and it was outstanding, such amazing

views! There was a guided tour heading out for the moonrise as I finished. Otherwise, just a couple others on the lake. The next day, we got a slightly late start with our climb up South Sister. By the time we reached the trailhead, the parking lot was nearly completely full with cars down the road. There were so many people on the trail that I lost count, but everyone was pleasant. We had a great time and the views were incredible. After finishing the hike, my friends had to return home, but I decided to hike in a few miles from the Todd Lake Trailhead with the plan to run up near Broken Top in the morning. As I hiked in, I didn't see anyone, and I found a nice place to camp with a small pond nearby and a good view of Mount Bachelor. In the morning, I had probably one of my favorite trail runs of all time. The lake at the base of Broken Top was spectacular and the view from the ridge was inspiring. There were several tents camped near the lake and I saw many day hikers as I ran down, but it was still an outstanding wilderness experience. After packing up and backpacking out, the trailhead was full of cars and someone was already waiting to take my parking place. Next I went for a quick paddle on Sparks Lake before driving home.

The fourth adventure was backpacking a double loop in the Mount Jefferson Wilderness in late September 2018 from Santiam Pass. First I followed the PCT past Three Fingered Jack and then took the Minto Pass Trail to Marion Lake, then to Lake of the Woods and connecting back to the PCT (just avoiding the Pamela Lake Limited Entry Area), taking the PCT back to Minto Pass and then Old Summit Trail back to Santiam Pass. This was an outstanding hike through some incredible country. I had a windy but awesome campsite up on the ridge by Three Fingered Jack, the chance to see mountain goats, and Mount Jefferson. I only saw a couple hikers the first day. The second day there were a couple people on the PCT, a few groups around Marion Lake, and a couple more along a stretch of trail that wasn't as well maintained north of Lake of the Woods. I had thought of camping at Rockpile Lake but there were several groups of people there, so I opted to pack water and camp up near the top of Rockpile Mountain. I had the place all to myself and enjoyed awesome morning views of Three Fingered Jack, Mount Washington, the Sisters and Broken Top. I hiked out through the rain and passed a few other groups of hikers, but it didn't feel crowded. Upon returning to the parking lot in the early afternoon, it was almost empty and a sheriff was parked in his truck nearby.

With these experiences in mind, I will comment on the proposed fees for permits in these wilderness areas.

First, while I understand that the comment period regarding the quotas has expired, my personal experience was that the only overly crowded areas that I have hiked were summiting the South Sister and surrounding Green Lakes. I haven't hiked in the northern part of the Mount Jefferson Wilderness but from what I have heard Jefferson Park is also quite crowded. These high use areas seem appropriate to limit entry, but the remainder of areas that I have hiked through haven't been any more crowded than other areas around the country. I believe that the currently approved quotas are too extreme and aren't needed in many areas of these wildernesses.

Some of the most famous day-hikes in the country that I have completed including Angel's Landing and the Narrows in Zion National Park, Old Rag in Shenandoah National Park, Devil's Garden in Arches National Park, Franconia Ridge in New Hampshire, and the Paintbrush Divide/Cascade Canyon Loop in Teton National Park all do not require a permit and are covered by a park entry fee. But I could understand that the South Sister might be similar to the the popularity of Half Dome, Mount Whitney, or the Enchantments. Permits for the South Sister seem reasonable to me, but quotas and fees for day hiking other less popular areas seems unnecessary.

Some of the trails that I hiked in the Mount Jefferson Wilderness were covered in blowdowns and being maintained by volunteers. Am I expected to pay extra per day to access wilderness that I have already paid for with my taxes, that I have already paid for by purchasing an annual pass, for trails that don't appear to be

receiving significant upkeep from the National Forest Service? Is there an added benefit that I will receive with the new daily access fee? If the money will go to support trail maintenance, building new trail to help disperse the crowds, even to build new campgrounds, I support it completely, but if this new revenue will go to support increased staff to enforce the new permit rules I am opposed. If increased money is necessary, the burden shouldn't be passed on to those who abide by the rules and reserve the permits, but the funds should come from increased fines to those who break the rules and hike without a permit.

The new quotas would not allow me to complete the same variations of my hikes above without significant effort and advanced planning. I am usually good at predicting how far I will hike in a day, but others aren't. I appreciate that the quotas aren't for specific campsites or zones in the wilderness areas, but I would have incurred additional fees and had difficulty reserving permits by backpacking in two different wilderness areas during the same weekend. Having to pay fees for both shouldn't be necessary. I would also lose the spontaneity of deciding to go for a quick overnight backpacking and trail running adventure after summiting the South Sister as a day-hike. Having to get multiple permits for the same weekend or even same day seems tedious, not to mention expensive.

Ideally, I think serious thought should be taken to revise the extreme measures of the quota system or delaying its implementation. I think it would be best to start gradually with permits for summiting the South Sister, hiking to Jefferson Park and other significantly crowded areas that I am not aware of.

If quotas are deemed necessary, there should be a way to refund the fee collected by recreation.gov. If money is needed, it should first come from increased fines from rule breakers. If additional money is needed after that, it may be reasonable to charge a fee at the trailheads that exceeded the quota in the previous few years on the days that they exceeded the quota (for example: holiday weekends). Finally, only if absolutely necessary fees should not be per day or per person, but per outing and per group regardless of how many wilderness areas are accessed. Keeping fees as low as possible will give equal access to all regardless of their current financial situations. A family shouldn't have to miss out on the wonders of Oregon because they have to pay daily fees per person.

I am attaching some of my favorite photos from these spectacular wilderness areas.

Thank you for your caring for our beautiful wilderness and for considering my thoughts.

Sincerely,  
Eric Moll

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