



Washington Trails Association

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July 30, 2024

Brian McNeil, Acting District Ranger
Snoqualmie Ranger District
902 SE North Bend Way Bldg. 1
North Bend, WA 98045

RE: Carbon River Landscape Analysis Project

comments submitted electronically through the comment portal -
<https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public//CommentInput?Project=65083>

Acting District Ranger McNeil,

Washington Trails Association (WTA) appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on the landscape analysis within the Carbon River watershed. WTA has a clear understanding of the purpose and need for future planning in this area. We appreciate the Forest Service offering recommendations that invest in recreation infrastructure to better meet demand in the area. Our comments are focused on aspects of this analysis that impact hiking trails.

Washington Trails Association (WTA) has a more than 50-year legacy of engaging the hiking community. WTA enhances hiking experiences across the state by empowering a diverse and growing community of hikers to explore, steward and protect trails and public lands. WTA is the nation's largest state-based trail maintenance and hiking advocacy nonprofit organization, with more than 26,000 member households. In 2023, WTA crews largely composed of volunteers performed approximately 157,000 hours of trail maintenance. In addition to volunteer stewardship, WTA is a trusted source for hiking information that is accessed by hundreds of thousands of outdoor enthusiasts each year. It is WTA's privilege to work closely with the staff of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest on projects large and small. Since 2022, WTA has worked closely with landowners and community members within the Carbon River Corridor to advance the visitor and resident experience on recreational lands.

Tribal Engagement

WTA is supportive of the holistic approach to the landscape analysis that allows us to consider multi-outcome changes to the land from forest planning to recreation and road decommissioning. We appreciate how the Forest Service has included the interests of the Tulalip Tribes, Muckleshoot Tribe and Puyallup Tribe in the analysis. We encourage continued engagement with Tribes throughout this landscape analysis process, during implementation and in future stewardship of this project area.

We understand that the Carbon River area has great cultural significance. WTA is committed to creating and advocating for sustainable trail systems that minimize the impacts of visitors while ensuring that the benefits of hiking, such as mental, physical, spiritual health and well-being are also supported. We appreciate how the landscape analysis includes recommendations that consider trail infrastructure investments as a key user management tool. On popular trails like Summit and Coplay lakes, we believe that impacts to sensitive areas can be minimized through investments that better guide visitors away from fragile and important places (i.e. lake boardwalks, closures around culturally sensitive areas, improved designations for day-use areas and reevaluation of overnight camping at Summit Lake). Additionally, we see the potential for recreation investments, including mindful infrastructure development and interpretive signage, to be an opportunity to share stories with visitors about Native Americans' connection to this landscape. We encourage continued discussions with Tribes about areas of importance and access in the Clearwater Wilderness.

FS 7810 Road and Future Access

Right now, the Carbon River Road offers the only viable access to recreation in Clearwater Wilderness. Destinations like Summit and Coplay lakes are popular for their lakes and beautiful angles on Mount Rainier. These trails are essential in the Carbon River Corridor, as they are a key piece of the limited recreation infrastructure that allow people to explore public lands in the area. The two lake trails are also the only places to see Mount Rainier outside of the national park in the Carbon River area. For this reason, **WTA supports Option 1 for the future of the FSR 78 road and bridge** because it is the only option offered that continues recreation access. We believe the beloved recreation that the FSR 78 provides access to is essential to maintain. Without this access, the Clearwater Wilderness becomes largely inaccessible. We look forward to seeing a more detailed analysis of options for the bridge relocation. As we understand this solution better, we urge the Forest Service to prioritize maintaining recreational access.

In addition to our support for Option 1, we would like to see improvements to the FSR 7810 road that reduce negative impacts, such as sediment run-off, to the Carbon River, improves safety and provides better access for visitors. As we cover above and below, we appreciate the Forest Service's ideas around improving responsible visits to Summit and Coplay Lakes through infrastructure investments, such as the development of a family-friendly and ADA accessible trail. In order for visitors to benefit from these investments, the FSR 7810 road must be accessible to visitors beyond those with high-clearance vehicles.

Recreation Investments

We are excited to see the opportunities for recreation investments listed in Option 1. We see the value in all of these recommendations – from new and better constructed trails to educational signage and toilets – to make for a better and more sustainable visitor experience. Recommendations we support include:

- The expansion of parking opportunities, including the development of a second overflow parking lot, trailhead, and lot connector trail near Coplay Lake. These investments can alleviate safety concerns related to parking and better support the current and future needs of visitors.
- Infrastructure development on the Summit and Coplay lakes trails that will create better boundaries between sensitive areas and day-use and trail areas. We believe that consolidating use around the lakes through boardwalks can concentrate people, preventing off-trail excursions and keeping people away from fragile vegetation and cultural sites.

- New toilets at Celery Meadows and Summit Lake that will help reduce the impacts of visitors at trailheads.
- Improvements to recreation access at Coplay Lake, including camping opportunities, signage, and lakeside access. We are especially interested in construction to make Coplay Lake an ADA-accessible lake shore destination, serving to facilitate more connections to nature in the Carbon River area. In addition to improved trail accessibility, the development of 3-4 campsites with parking and 4-6 semi-primitive walk-in campsites helps improve the area's reputation for and ability to be a family-friendly camping spot.
- The development of a new trail that will provide access to various points along Tolmie Creek, including its waterfalls. The creek-to-waterfalls walk is a documented place of recreation. Creating a better maintained and designated trail reduces impacts, like social trails, that may exist in the absence of a formal trail. With a portion of the proposed trail happening on decommissioned roads, the recommendation makes for good road-to-trail conversion. We also support intentions in this recommendation to both improve the dispersed camping in this area – and remove sites that are impacting the creek – while maintaining access to this well-liked site through parking and trailhead development.

Carbon River Dispersed Camping

Through our participation with the Carbon River Coordinating Council and understanding of community and Tribal concerns in the area, we recognize that the dispersed camping near the Carbon River floodplain must close due to significant ecological impacts. We recommend that the Forest Service identify new opportunities for dispersed camping in the greater region to replace this loss, as there are few camping options on the Northwest side of Mount Rainier National Park and Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. With the primary use of Evans Creek Campground being for motorized vehicles, limitations on Summit Lake camping areas and the competitiveness of Mount Rainier National Park camping permits, recreationists will have slim options for overnight stays in the Carbon River Corridor. We are concerned that without additional camping options in the greater Carbon region, people will find other places that are unsuitable for camping to stay overnight and misuse in the Carbon River floodplain may transfer to another location. We hope that the Forest Service can collaborate with Mount Rainier National Park to evaluate opportunities for new camp areas in the greater Carbon River region.

Overall, WTA envisions a future for the Carbon River area where popular recreation sites are preserved, investments improve visitor experiences and negative impacts on natural and cultural resources are minimized. We know that recreation plays a critical role in the economy of Carbon River towns and in the lives of people who reside in them.

Thank you for considering our feedback on the Carbon River Landscape Analysis. We look forward to continuing to work with you and the community in this region.

Sincerely,



Cassidy Giampetro
Advocacy Manager