

# USA.gov and Permitting

## Mid-Flight Report

Nick Brethauer and Michael Cata || 05 / 10 / 2017

The big ideas:

---

**There's a bright red line between: people paying to enter public lands and people getting paid to use that same space.** Why? Land managers only have a certain number of footsteps to give away. They make sure the general public has full access to that recreational use before sharing it with commercial outfitters.

**Land management agency operations and policy favor the general public over outfitters and guides.** Recreation.gov covers the former with relative ease, but the latter requires a contract through each respective jurisdiction. Interactions with federal agents are friendly, but operators feel constrained by outdated and irrelevant "guidelines."

**The actual application to start the permit process is not difficult.** Post-submission communications, nuanced rules, continual reporting, and a general "lack of trust" are larger tensions with federal agents. Decentralized decision making, has led to variance in procedures and introduced more complexity into that already tenuous relationship.

**Outdoors companies are aware of who, what, and where they need to apply.** Maps won't solve the problems that incumbent operators face every year. However, general awareness campaigns could help upcoming firms and new market entrants. The size of that population may be very small, but the industry is growing.

**USA.gov doesn't have a clean, shoe-in opportunity to fix systemic problems.** The product could address underlying issues of awareness, expectations, and verification for operators. These efforts could help new entrants to the outdoors industry and prevent redundant conversations with federal agencies. To be clear, however, USA.gov will not be able to solve broader policy consequences like accessibility or codified permitting processes.

## Research topics

---

### **Relationships within and between federal agencies and the public**

Research topic tags: *relationship, relationship + permit process, inclusion + input, communication + relationships*

#### Themes:

Agencies view commercial operators as posing a greater liability on the lands than general members of the public. Guides feel they share the same mission as their federal counterparts but interpret the commercial use application process, subsequent monitoring, inaccessible management, and additional paperwork to change plans as a “lack of trust.”

- **[Between agencies]** USA.gov cannot address intra- and inter-agency policy and organization differences. Collaboration between parts of a single agency are difficult for local differences in ecology and policy. Establishing standards across land management agencies would be even more complex and time intensive.
- **[Between public and agencies]** One outfitter recommended a “Pre-Check” style system that would help build trust between operators and federal employees. A platform could host, share, and verify data like: historical permits, insurance policies, and outdoor activity safety certifications. USA.gov could also help set expectations for business owners before they engage land-management agencies. See those recommendations under the awareness topic.

### **General awareness of permitting and required steps**

Research topic tags: *technology, search/awareness, prototype, permit awareness*

#### Themes:

Permitting awareness is split between known-knowns and unknown-unknowns. Efforts to increase awareness may not help incumbent operators, but could assist new entrants to the outfitter and guide industry. Land management officials acknowledge that many first-time applicants are unaware of jurisdictional lines and the general application process.

- **[Content]** USA.gov could work with the various agencies to provide simple outlines for the respective processes: apply, review, authorize and some general steps under each.
- **[Application]** USA.gov could integrate that data with a mapping tool to help newcomers understand where they need to start that process with each location or jurisdiction.
- **[Partnership]** At this point in time, Recreation.gov isn’t interested in serving commercial use audiences.
- **[Partnership]** One potential avenue for further exploration is syndication of content with the regional public affairs offices of the Forest Service to increase public awareness of events, news, and statuses for each of the major Forest Service regions.

## Permit Process

Research topic tags: *permit process, resource constraints, policy enforcement, enforcement, reporting*

### Themes:

Applying for a permit has a few general steps: apply, review, authorize. The questions, quotas, and exemptions under each of those steps vary by agency, and even geography. If you need to apply for more than one permit, the burden of paperwork and dialogue becomes exponential. That doesn't stop many outfitters. The real barrier is the negotiation of visitor volume, specific location, and use of land.

- **[No go]** USA.gov should not insert itself into those detailed, local negotiations. The heads of various federal land management agencies by intentional organization design don't have the power to unilaterally change park or forest policy.
- **[See above]** USA.gov could help operators make a stronger case for proposed uses and assist the decision making of federal professionals. The example shared above in the "Relationship" section covers this concept. That investment would be large and require intense collaboration with the entire outdoors and land management community to validate user adoption and federal recreation ownership.