

USA.gov, FFD Permitting

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Project Brief

Hypothesis

The USA.gov team has explored building a service to centralize requests that manage land-use permits across various federal land management agencies and bureaus. Such a platform would provide a consolidated system where the public can submit requests and agencies can grant permits. The goal of such a platform would be to simplify the often difficult process of obtaining land-use permits and reduce duplicative efforts across land-management agencies.

Research Mandate

OPP is engaging 18F to assess the viability of building a service to improve the user experience of land-use permit requests and provide strategic direction on follow up steps. 18F will synthesize findings and preliminary recommendations based on field interviews, research, and conversations that will provide more clarity and certainty for decision-making.

Research roadmap:

1. Explore/understand/map the challenges that agencies have with the permitting process.
2. Explore/understand/map the challenges that end users (guides/outfitters) have with the permitting process.
3. Understand if there is a role for USA.gov to play in improving some piece of the permitting experience, and make recommendations to USA.gov on possible approaches to do that.

The three objectives above will help organize the data we collect and set a framework for recruiting users and collecting information.

The detail listed below is intended to guide our interview process and is not a comprehensive list of questions we will actually ask participants. We hope those interviews will sound more like conversations than rigid surveys.

Learning goals:

Identify common threads:

What is the the overall landscape of permitting processes?

- How are the permitting processes different inside agencies? Between agencies?
- How are they similar? Is there a most common permit use case that we could improve could be applied to the majority of outfitters and guides?
- What are the challenges for outfitters and guides around the planning and permitting process?

Explore/understand/map the challenges that agencies have with the permitting process:

- Map permitting process/timeline from the agency program level perspective
- Understand major challenges & pain points from the agency perspective
 - Around permitting processes specifically
 - Previous complaints from outfitters/guides
 - Others?
- Understand primary systems and their constraints
- Understand future plans for improving in this area
- Validate assumptions:
 - Agencies maintain multiple permit processes and systems
 - Multiple processes and systems are redundant, create inefficiencies
 - Some agencies (BLM) use closed source systems that may make it difficult to share data
 - Technical and content teams are often disconnected within an agency
- Map the permitting process/timeline from the field/region/district perspective
- Understand major challenges & pain points from the field perspective
 - Any challenges associated with permitting processes (discovering how, learning about, applying
 - Around challenges in becoming an outfitter/guide
 - Previous complaints from outfitters/guides
 - Other challenges and problems?
- Understand primary systems that people in the field interact with
- Understand how employees in the field interact with guides/outfitters
 - When do they interact?
 - What is it like when it goes well?
 - What is it like when it doesn't go well?

Explore/understand/map the challenges that end users (guides/outfitters) have with the permitting process:

- What frustrations do guides/outfitters experience around the permitting process?
- How do you become a guide? What factored into your decision to start a business?
- Understand location selection, trip routes, and any associated paperwork.
- Understand how guides/outfitters work with federal officers in the field.
- Understand their hopes and constraints for expansion.
- Do outfitters have to file redundant permit applications (with multiple agencies) for a single trip route? How common is that?
- How do outfitters figure out who to file a permit with?
- What challenges do experienced, new, and potential outfitters have? What are the differences? Similarities?
- How much of a burden is permit filing? What consequences have outfitters had as a result of permits being held up or denied?
- What other ways do outfitters interact with the government?
- What tools do outfitters use to run their business? Is permit filing and follow-up easily managed within their existing tools and workflow?

Understand if there is a role for USA.gov to play in improving some piece of the permitting experience, and make recommendations to USA.gov on possible approaches to do that:

- What are the opportunities around permitting for OPP/USA.gov to help agencies?
 - Are agencies ready for OPP/USA.gov to help them?
- Assuming agencies are ready:
 - Is it feasible for us to connect their systems?
 - How much of a lift would it be?
 - Buying? Building?
 - What is the state of their technical infrastructure?

Methodology

Interviews

Research will primarily be carried out through interviews. In weeks 1-3 of the project, interviews will be done primarily by phone/videoconference, and when possible through in-person meetings (particularly with land management agency headquarters staff based in the DC area).

In parallel, we will develop a plan to conduct in-person research with guides/outfitters and land management agency field personnel, which we will carry out over the course of a week sometime in week 4-6 of the project.

Prototype

Our team has developed an initial prototype to test the usefulness of a tool that helps users determine their permitting needs by identifying their land use area need on a map. If appropriate, we may show this to users to get their initial reactions and attitudes.

Conversation guide

Based on the above learning goals (and any new or modified goals we uncover through our research), we will develop a conversation guide for each user group. We will use the guide to ensure that we are covering all significant learning objectives, and that our interview questions are appropriately tailored.

Recruiting

- How are you going to recruit users?
 - Email and potentially through cold-calling numbers found on public sources. [\[Templates\]](#)
 - Professional and personal networks of team members and/or 18F colleagues.
- Are there particular types of users you need to recruit? If so, who are they?
 - We would like to recruit permitting system owners, outfitter/guide business owners, outfitter/guide business operations persons, land-use agency field agents including rangers and special use administrators.
- Who will do the scheduling?
 - 18F team members in coordination and conjunction with our contact sheet, found [\[here\]](#).
- PRA considerations
 - PRA limitations do not apply, as we will be solely using unstructured interview-based techniques.
- Consent
 - Federal employees: We will be speaking to federal employees within the bounds of their normal job duties. We will verbally explain how we will protect their information, and ask for verbal consent.
 - Members of the public: We will obtain signed consent for each interviewee by verbally explaining how we will protect their information, and will ask for signed consent using 18F's standard [research consent form](#).