U.S. Forest Service

ePermitting discovery workshop 1/ Special uses

Session held on August 17–18, 2016 in Everett, WA

18F

What we did

On August 17 and 18, 18F led a workshop with [stakeholders](#) from the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest and the national Natural Resource Management Office. The purpose of this workshop was to build a vision for the ePermitting pilot at Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie and determine and determine what needs to be built. We also gave an introduction to agile and modular software development methods.

How to use this report

This report is a guide to understanding the opportunities and challenges, hopes and fears presented by the special uses ePermitting pilot. This is not an all-inclusive report for *every* possible outcome, but will help frame a joint understanding of the goals of the pilot, and begin the process of figuring out how to get there through an acquisition strategy using the Agile BPA. Methods described herein can also be used by anyone; continued discovery and conversations are encouraged as we continue to document findings through conversations with Forest Service employees and others.

Project vision

We began with a series of activities designed to help us build a vision for the pilot and the broader ePermitting project. We brainstormed answers to each of these questions and then voted on priorities together (using the [KJ method](#)). The answers to each of these questions were shared by a majority of the group.

What is the problem this project is trying to solve?

- Building an agency culture that:
    - welcomes the public consistently (across units, despite being decentralized)
    - focuses on customer service that connects people to the land (over trying to protect the land from them)
    - is open to change
- Implementing a permitting process that is:
    - Is understandable, flexible, transparent, and fair,
    - Holds participants accountable for fulfilling their responsibilities, on time.

Who are the project's primary users?

- Inside the Forest Service:

    - Special use administrators (the people who manage the process of distributing permits at the forest level)

    - Decision makers at various levels, including staff officers, line officers, and others involved in approving permits

- Outside the Forest Service:

    - Outfitters and guides who apply for permits (vocal and powerful "agents of access")

    - Schools and higher education institutions

    - Non-profit clubs and organizations (such as the Boy Scouts, YMCA, mountaineering groups)

    - App developers and people who might build on a permitting API

What are the pain points those users face?

- From permittees:

    - Uncertainty about permit requirements

    - Hard-to-understand, complex permitting process

    - Waiting a long time for a response from the forest (and not knowing how long it might take)

    - Inconsistent decisions from forest to forest ("I can do this there, so why not here?")

    - There is not helpful feedback from the Forest, just a repeated rejection (Permittee: "How about this place?", FS: "Nope.", Permittee: "How about this place?", FS: "Nope.")

    - Insurance requirements for groups are not always clear or relevant

    - Getting denied a permit, without really understanding why

    - National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) compliance processes taking a long time and being non-transparent for participants

- From inside the Forest Service:

    - Varying understandings of the permitting process and rules, particularly evident when permit decisions are appealed

    - Difficult for Forest Service leadership to get the data they need to answer key questions about special use permits

    - Forest staff not familiar with mechanisms they can use to recover the cost of the permitting process from permittees

    - Pressure from public, advocates and Congress for better public service, combined with slow governance process

    - General low organizational priority of special use permitting relative to other kinds of forest uses, like commodity harvesting (perhaps because most of the money recovered does not go back to the Forest Service, but to the Department of the Treasury)

    - When companies who conduct business in multiple forests try to pay with one check, confusion ensues

    - Staff without the appropriate expertise of the environment and operations of the forest reviewing permit documents

What are the key features of a solution?

- Online application for permits (could include forms, fees, checklist of documents, online payment, insurance requirements, document attachments, indication of whether NEPA is required)

- A tool for discovering what is possible (could include a map of places types of permitting are allowed, links to other possible permits from nearby forests, clear descriptions of constraints impacting certain areas)

- A way to check the status on a permit (could include what stage a given application is in, what timeline they can expect future things to happen on)

- Opportunities for both permittees and *their customers* to provide feedback on the services they receive (could include post-permit emails surveys)

- Flexible reporting tools that allow leadership and other data consumers to answer questions about the numbers of permits issued without burdening special use administrators

- Dashboard for "super users" (perhaps permit administrators) to know what permits are in process for a forest

- A place where guides and outfitters can enter their own end-of-permit reporting data (instead of submitting it on a paper form)

Existing user journey

We [journey mapped](#) the current experience of outfitters and guides applying for Forest Service permits. To avoid duplicating previous work of the Special Use Data System (SUDS) redesign process, we focused on the experience from the guide's perspective, not the back end processes associated with each step.

This journey map is *not* an exhaustive, sequential list of permittee tasks. It is meant to provide examples of what outfitters and guides encounter during each stage of the process, according to our workshop participants.

[View the entire journey map in our Google Drive folder.](#)

Initial scope

We decided to focus 18F's initial efforts on building an application form for non-commercial group use, which could evolve to cover additional permit types and features.

We began the scoping portion of our workshop with an introduction to agile software development and modular contracting. We focused our discussion around a "minimum viable product" 18F might help construct. Everyone agreed that building an application form for non-commercial group use was the best place to start. After a round of design studio style sketching, participants distilled their thoughts into agile "epics" or answers to the following questions. The answers below consolidate both stories.

What are overarching user stories for this first phase?

- As a person interested in using a national forest (for example, to get married), I can submit an online application to use my location in the forest.

- As a special use administrator, I can issue permits quickly and efficiently.

What are the benefits of making this user story possible?

- For members of the public: avoiding double booking locations, 24-hour access to permits, consistent forms and questions between forests

- For the Forest Service: reduce administrative tasks, free up resources to do more in the field, reduce errors and stress, improve information sharing within the agency and with the public

What systems integrations does this require?

- Special Use Data Systems

- Recreation.gov

- ePass

- Existing geospatial information

What new data might this require?

Information about location and parking constraints, as well as other rules that may not be codified in a machine-readable format

What more granular user stories might drive development?

- As an applicant, I can:

  - Share my desired date, time, location, number of people, and a variety of other information about my "temporary effects" on the forest

  - Get guidance about the constraints that might affect their plans

  - Get offered useful tips about the permitting process

  - Submit an application for approval and receive a permit or an explanation about what happens next

- As a special use administrator, I:

  - Am notified when a permit is issued

  - Can route an issued permit to rangers, frontliners, law enforcement officers, and public affairs

  - Am notified when a permit expires and is uploaded into SUDs

Assumptions:
- Permittees have internet access

- Permittees know they need a permit

- Permittees need some kind guidance about how to choose an acceptable site

- Policies that clearly explain what sites may be used for what already exist

Next steps

We will conduct a similar workshop for Christmas tree permitting with a different group of stakeholders in late August. The results of these workshops will be used to develop the acquisition, product and design strategy and outcomes that will result in the development of ePermitting solutions.