Topic: Communication plan for the 2019-2020 Open Forest special uses pilot launch on the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest

Introduction

This communication plan provides key messages and information to Forest Service employees supporting the Open Forest special use permit application intake pilot. Specifically, this plan is targeted for use by Public Affairs Officers (PAOs), special use permit administrators, and frontline staff at the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, the first forest to participate in this online special use application intake system.

This plan will help guide employees through the launch of this pilot and increase their understanding of the Open Forest system in order to facilitate better communication with employees, stakeholders, and the public. In addition, interested Agency staff (e.g., Agency leadership) can read this communication plan to learn more how Open Forest improves the customer experience for the special use permit application process.

About the Special Uses Application Pilot

The Open Forest special use permit application intake system provides an opportunity for applicants to submit applications in a timely and efficient manner from the comfort of their own home or anywhere with internet connectivity. Applicants who submit applications, and Forest Service administrators who receive the applications, will be able to utilize Open Forest to share status updates, review and organize applications that have been submitted, and communicate easily with each other through automated email systems. The following needs were identified from both our special use permit applicants and Forest Service administrators:

- the ability to electronically submit and receive applications,
- communication between applicant and administrator for tracking application status, and
- a way of ensuring application completeness prior to submitting it to the Forest.

The Open Forest special uses application intake system meets all three of those needs. Customers can log into Open Forest, create their profile through login.gov, and track the status of their applications, until the application is accepted by the Forest Service administrator and sent to the Special Uses Data System (SUDS) for processing. The system reduces the likelihood of Forest staff receiving incomplete applications, saving time and creating more efficiency for Forest Service administrators and for our customers.

Key Messages

These messages and associated talking points are intended to increase awareness of the Open Forest system for Forest Service employees at the participating pilot Forest. Information provided in this communication plan is intended to be a guide.
NOTE: **key messages have been identified as "Internal and External Audiences" or "Internal Audiences Only" depending on the appropriate target audience.**
Please see the Questions and Answers section for additional background information on the Open Forest special uses pilot, which have also been labeled "Internal and External Audiences" or "Internal Audiences Only".

For Internal and External Audiences

Key Message #1: Open Forest will allow visitors to submit applications for special use permits online for the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, starting in December 2019. It will also allow Forest Service administrators to review applications, communicate with applicants and send information to SUDS all through the automated system.

- The Open Forest pilot seeks to improve the Agency's customer service to forest visitors, customers, and special use permit applicants by allowing non-commercial group use and temporary outfitting and guiding permit applications to be filled out and submitted from a computer or mobile device. Rather than downloading a word document from an FS website, and having to mail or email potentially incomplete information to a Forest office.
- Open Forest offers the opportunity to also learn more about the type of special use permit that an applicant may be interested in.
- Open Forest is planned to be available for public use in alignment with national direction for special uses program.
- Special use permit applicants will continue to have the opportunity to submit applications outside of Open Forest using traditional mechanisms offered by the Forest.
- The Open Forest system offers an automated one-way intake into the Special Uses Database System (SUDS)
- The Open Forest system offers a two-way communication system between the applicant and the FS administrator.
- There are no financial transactions that occur through the Open Forest special uses permit application intake system.
- Financial transactions would be handled in the traditional manner determined by the Forest.
- For general questions about special use permits, the forest visitor should call their local Forest Service office, visit the local Forest website, or they can learn more about special use permits on the Open Forest site.
- Technical questions from the public related to the use and function of the Open Forest website can be sent to this Open Forest team email address: SM.FS.OpnFrstCsSup@usda.gov

Key Message #2: Lessons learned from this pilot launch will be used to inform future development of the Open Forest system.

- Through Open Forest the Forest Service hopes to learn about customer usage of the system, performance of the system, and the overall customer experience which includes the forest visitor and Forest Service staff.
- This input would inform improvements for the Open Forest system for potential future use and applicability.
- A feedback tool is provided in Open Forest where visitors can provide anonymous feedback if they choose to. The feedback gathered during the pilot will help inform potential improvements to the system for future use.

For Internal Audiences Only

Key Message #3: The Open Forest team will provide training and support to key employees (PAOs, frontline staff, special uses program staff, and others) at the pilot Forest and Region to ensure they are prepared for the launch and implementation of the special uses pilot.

- Demonstrations of the website have been provided to key special uses staff at the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest as the site has been built over the past few years.
- More recently, during 2019, demonstrations have been provided to the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie special uses staff, as well as select Region 6 special uses staff.
- Technical questions related to the use and function of the Open Forest system can be sent to the Open Forest Customer Support Team email address: SM.FS.OpnFrstCsSup@usda.gov

Link to USDA Strategic Goals

The Open Forest pilot and the key messages are aligned with the following USDA Strategic Goals:

STRATEGIC GOAL 1: Ensure USDA programs are Delivered Efficiently, Effectively, and with Integrity and a Focus on Customer Service.
- Open Forest was built with a focus on functionality and efficiency for both the forest visitor and the Forest Service employee.
- The Open Forest system was built based on iterative internal and external stakeholder feedback and usability testing.
- The Open Forest system offers the opportunity for the forest visitor to learn about their area of interest for their participating National Forest much like the visitor would if they were in a forest or district office.
- Open Forest offers an opportunity for a forest visitor to easily acquire information and submit a special use application for Forest Service review at their convenience.

STRATEGIC GOAL 4: Facilitate rural prosperity and economic development.
- The convenience of the Open Forest facilitates easy access to information and processes allowing for responsible recreation and visitor use, which supports outdoor recreation industry and businesses that may be local to participating National Forests.

STRATEGIC GOAL 6: Foster productive and sustainable use of our National Forest System lands.
- Open Forest offers a consistent approach for forest visitors to engage with and ultimately access their National Forest.
- Open Forest provides a learning opportunity for the forest visitor before they submit applications or acquire permits without driving to an office.
- The option of using Open Forest eliminates forest visitor dependency on visiting a forest office during business hours to obtain or submit information.

Stakeholder Messaging Template

Subject:

Special use permit applications can be submitted online for the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.

Content:

The Forest Service has launched the "Open Forest" pilot for submitting special use permit applications online in effort to improve customer service and modernize the special uses application review process.

Open Forest allows applicants to complete and submit non-commercial group use and temporary outfitting and guiding permit applications from the comfort of their own home or anywhere with internet connectivity. The pilot also offers applicants and Forest Service administrators the opportunity to receive automated application status updates. The traditional application process will continue to be available during the online pilot program.

Based on its robust special uses program and customer needs, the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest was selected as the first forest in this pilot. The Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest is the only national forest currently participating in this special uses application online pilot. Based on feedback and lessons learned during the pilot, the Forest Service hopes to expand the program to other national forests in the future.

To submit a non-commercial group use, or temporary outfitting and guiding permit for the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, please visit https://openforest.fs.usda.gov/mbs.

 For more information about the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest's special uses program, [insert web link and/or employee's name/contact info].

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

Forest Website Template

Link Open Forest from your Forest's home page, and/or special uses program page.
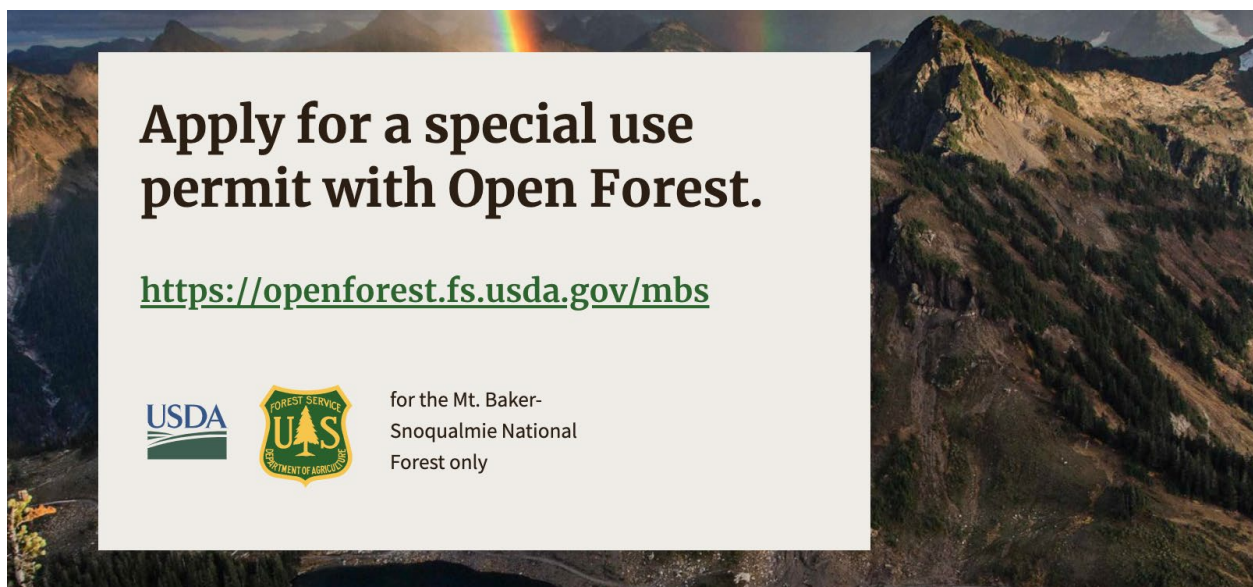https://openforest.fs.usda.gov/mbs

Example website language:
The Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest is offering the opportunity for you to fill out and submit an application for a non-commercial group use or a temporary outfitting and guiding permit through Open Forest. Click here to visit the Open Forest special use permit application page [Insert link and image].

MBS Open Forest Media Image.png

Questions and Answers for Internal Audience

Open Forest Overview

What is the leader's intent for Open Forest?
- To provide a convenient customer experience and encourage people to use their National Forests.

Why is it necessary to offer Open Forest as a pilot?
- When developing new systems, pilot efforts are often used to ensure a system will work effectively and efficiently. The pilot approach reduces risks, costs, and helps ensure a timelier implementation with an initial investment.

Why is Open Forest starting with only one Forest for special uses application system?
- The special use program is largely consistent between forests.
- Starting with one National Forest for this system minimizes risk to both the customer and the agency, and allows for easier communication and learning opportunities.
- The system is also being tested for its automated one-way intake into the Special Uses Database System (SUDS).

How do Forest visitors access the Open Forest website?
- Forest visitors can access the Open Forest website one of two ways:
    1. Find a link to Open Forest from the participating Forest's special uses webpage.
    2. Visit Open Forest directly at https://openforest.fs.usda.gov/mbs

What Forests are participating in the pilot?
- The Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie is the only forest currently participating in the special use application pilot within Open Forest.

How was the pilot Forest selected and why?
- The Forest were selected by National Forest System executive leadership based on stakeholder interest, quantity of special use applications average each year, and capabilities of the Forest to participate.

There are more than two types of special use permits, why don't I see the other option(s) available through Open Forest?
- The Open Forest pilot does not offer the opportunity to submit an application for anything other than a non-commercial group use or a temporary outfitting and guiding permit application. These were the two types of special use permit applications that were identified as a starting point to test the system with for the pilot.
- People who are seeking recreation event, filming permits, or other types of permits will need to contact the forest, or follow the forest's traditional methods for special use applications.

How long is the pilot expected to last?
- We're not sure how long the pilot will last. The pilot will help to inform decisions about next steps.

Will this online system be available on a mobile device?
- Yes. Open Forest has been developed for use by desktop computers and mobile devices.

Questions and Answers for Internal Audience (Continued)

Open Forest Outcomes and Next Steps

What information will be used from the pilot to determine its success?
- During the Pilot Project, the Agency hopes to learn about usage and usability of the system, performance of the system, and the overall customer experience of the public and Forest Service staff. A feedback tool is also provided on the site that offers the public the opportunity to anonymously submit their feedback to Open Forest.

What happens after the pilot is over?
- Information related to the topics above will be utilized by executive decision makers as well system managers to improve the system for the future.

Will there be improvements made based on the pilot?
- Yes, based on information gathered during the pilot.

What is the cost to operate Open Forest?
- There is no "upcharge" or "convenience fee" for forest visitors to use Open Forest.
- There is no "upcharge" or "convenience fee" for a Forest to participate in the pilot.
- Future costs associated with Open Forest and how they will be managed are still under consideration by executive leadership.

Training, Expectations, and Other Logistics for the Pilot Forest

Why are we communicating about this now?
- The timing of communication is directly correlated to the availability of the system. The system launch is dependent on cyber security reviews that were recently completed and the system is now in final testing. Earlier communication may have resulted in setting a false expectation in relation to system availability.

Will there be a training for the pilot forest on how to use this program?
- Yes, plans/communications are in progress to offer demonstrations of the website. Forest staff are encouraged to reach out to Amber Sprinkle amber.sprinkle@usda.gov to schedule a demonstration of the Open Forest site if they have not received one yet.

How are frontline staff expected to assist the public when they are confronted with questions?
- Questions about the Forest's special uses program should be addressed by the pilot Forest as they normally would.
- For technical support related to Open Forest email: SM.FS.OpnFrstCsSup@usda.gov.

Can an applicant choose to submit an application in the traditional way?
- Yes.

Does the special use permit application on Open Forest have more requirements?
- No. There are no new or additional required fields for submitting an application for a special use permit, other than acknowledgement of entering personally identifiable information into the system. Required fields are indicated on the application page. If a required field is not filled out, the application cannot be submitted.

Does this mean that we are going strictly to online options as an agency?
- No. Open Forest provides more flexibility for forest visitors to engage in business with their local forests.

Questions and Answers for Internal Audience (Continued)

Are special use permits actually issued through Open Forest?

- No. Special use permits are created within SUDS, just as they have been traditionally. Open Forest is an application intake system only. It does not send a special use permit to an applicant.

How do we know if people are submitting applications through Open Forest?

- Forest Service administrators who have been assigned administrator roles for the Open Forest special uses pilot will receive an automated email each time an application is submitted.

Help Is Available

How do Forest Service employees get help if the Open Forest site is not working?

- For help, email SM.FS.OpnFrstCsSup@usda.gov.

Can Forest Service staff at the participating pilot Forest make any changes directly to the Open Forest website?

- Not directly to the website. However, they can request changes by contacting the Open Forest team, or Amber Sprinkle at amber.sprinkle@usda.gov.
- Forest Service administrators will be able to "Accept", "Hold", or "Reject" applications within the Open Forest system submitted applications.

Questions and Answers for External Audience

Open Forest Overview

Why is the pilot necessary?
- When developing new systems, pilot efforts are often used to ensure a system will work effectively and efficiently. The pilot approach reduces long-term risks, associated costs, and helps to ensure a successful implementation with an initial investment in a pilot.

What is the life-cycle of an application when it is submitted through Open Forest?
- When an applicant submits an application, they receive a confirmation page and an automated email that tells them what they can expect next.
- When an applicant submits an application, a Forest Service administrator receives an automated email telling them that someone has submitted an application, and that it is ready for Forest Service review.
- A Forest Service administrator will then log in to Open Forest to review the details of the application.
- Once a Forest Service administrator has reviewed the application in Open Forest, they are given the option to "Accept" the application to SUDS, "Hold" the application asking for more information from the applicant (thereby allowing the applicant to edit their application), or "Reject" the application all together. In any case, the applicant will receive an automated email to the email address they provided, informing them of the status update of their application.
- If a Forest Service administrator "Accepts" the application to SUDS, the applicant is informed. Further processing of their application occurs through SUDS, and automated status updates through Open Forest would no longer occur. An applicant to log into their Open Forest account at any time to view the status of their application (whether or not it has been reviewed, accepted (to SUDS), put on hold, or rejected).
- If a Forest Service administrator "Accepts" the application to the Special Uses Data System (SUDS), they would continue to use SUDS to create the special use permit for the applicant. The Forest Service administrator would then need to manually contact the applicant to inform them of the status of their permit, and ultimately issue the permit to them.

Why are non-commercial group use or temporary outfitting and guiding my only options?
- These were the two types of special use permit applications that were identified as a starting point to test the system with for the pilot.
- People who are seeking recreation event, filming permits, or other types of permits will need to contact the forest, or follow the forest's traditional methods for special use applications.

If I am issued a special use permit after submitting my application, where can I use my permit?
- The Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest is the only forest participating in the Open Forest special use permit application pilot. Therefore, your permit would only be valid for use on the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.

Where can I go to fill out a special use permit application online?
- You can access the Open Forest website one of two ways:
    1. Find a link to Open Forest from the participating Forest's special uses webpage.
    2. Visit Open Forest directly at https://openforest.fs.usda.gov
- During the pilot, you can still choose to submit an application in the traditional method offered by the forest.

Questions and Answers for External Audience (Continued)

Open Forest Outcomes and Next Steps

How long is the pilot expected to last?
- We're not sure how long the pilot will last. The pilot will help to inform decisions about next steps and the potential for future opportunities.

Will this online system be available on a mobile device?
- Yes. Open Forest has been developed for use by desktop computers and mobile devices.

Is the online pilot system secure? Will personal information be protected?
- Yes, the Forest Service has followed all agency, USDA, and federal cybersecurity protocols while building and implementing Open Forest. Applicant information will be protected through a two-factor authentication system through Login.gov https://login.gov/security/

What information will be used from the pilot to determine its success?
- During the pilot, the Agency hopes to learn about usage and usability of the system, performance of the system, and the overall customer experience of the public and Forest Service staff. A feedback tool is also provided on the site that offers the public the opportunity to anonymously submit their feedback to Open Forest.

Help Is Available

Who do I contact if I have a question about the Open Forest site?
- For help, email SM.FS.OpnFrstCsSup@usda.gov

Who do I contact if I have a question about the special uses program?
- Contact your local National Forest office.