

18F USFS Special Uses Midpoint Check-in

June 24, 2024

You should do this.
You've done it before.
There are risks.

Imagine

An online “front door”
that enables quality
connections between the
public and their local
permit administrator



Today's agenda

- Why we're here
- What we've done
- What we've learned
- Next steps
- Discussion

The team



Neil Martinsen-Burrell
(he/him)
Project lead / engineer



Peggy Wu (she/her)
Account manager



Chris Mather (he/him)
Product manager



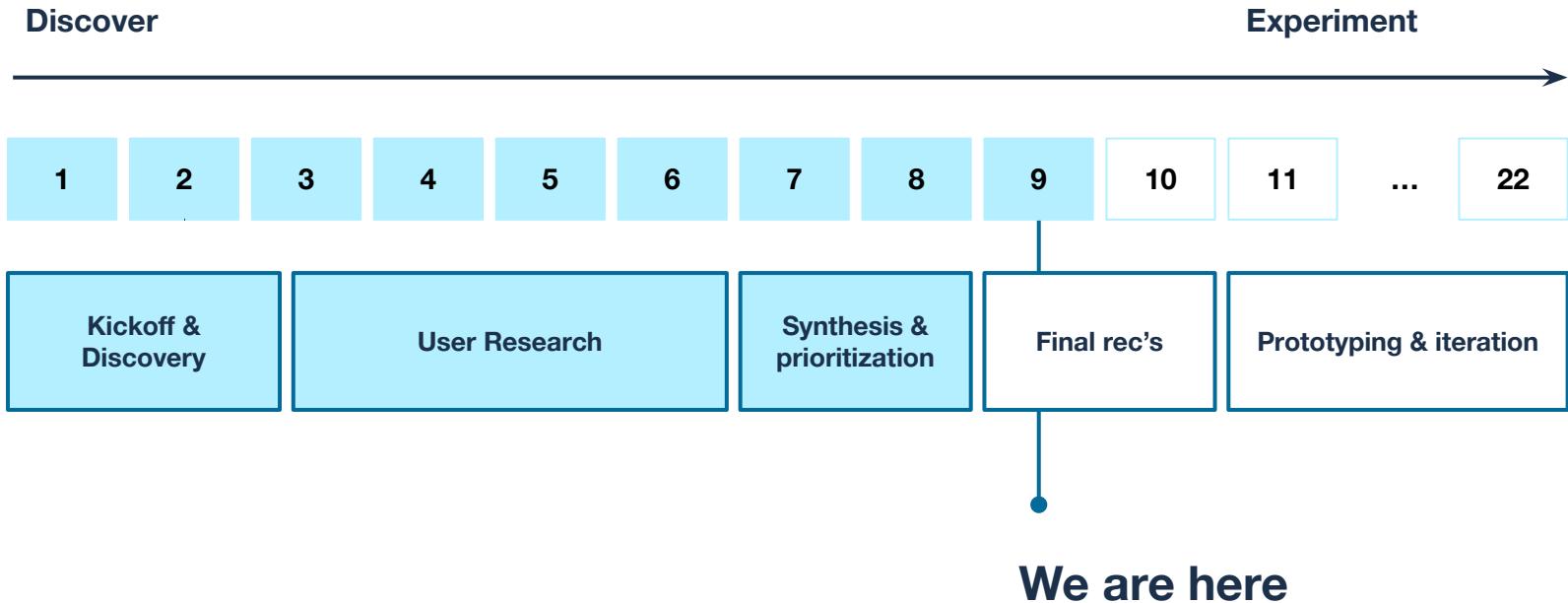
Dave Luetger (he/him)
Designer / researcher

Why we're here

Love the SOW you're with

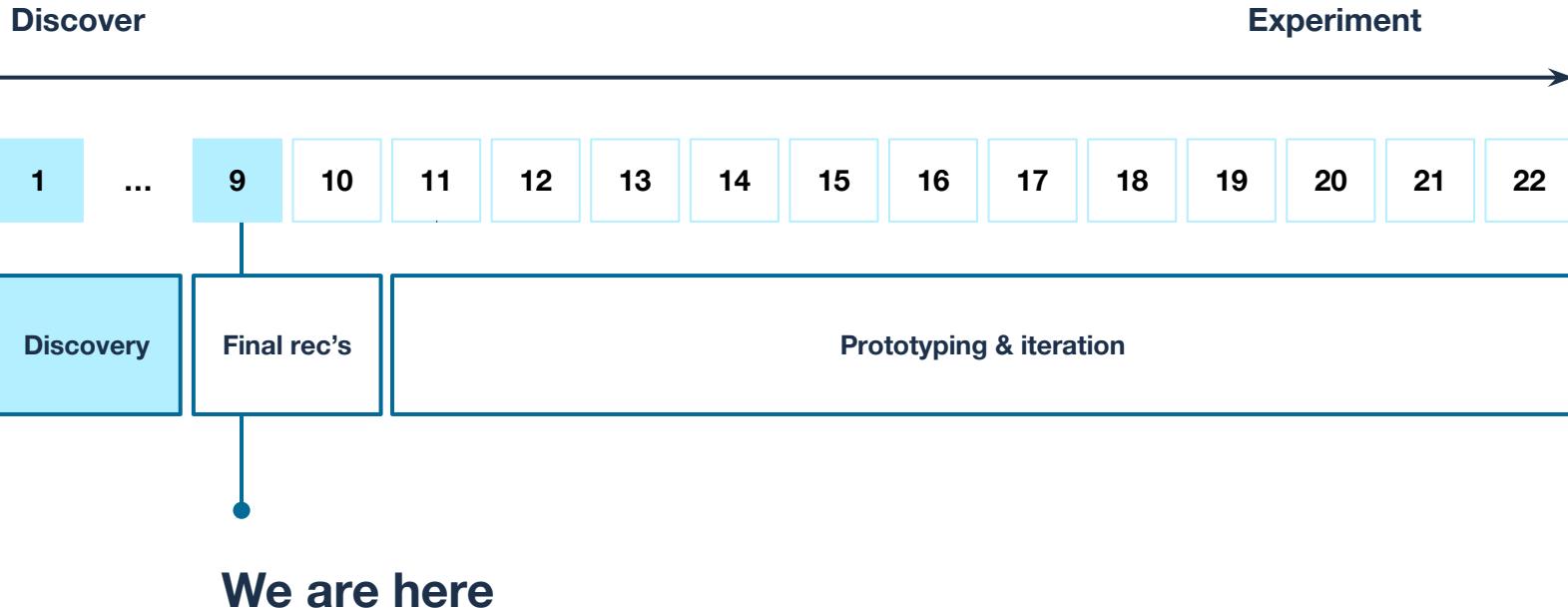
*18F will **assess** the technology, permitting, and [customer experience] landscape of the Special Uses Permitting application process for the public and conduct desk and field **research** and stakeholder **interviews** to help US Forest Service determine the **best path forward.***

Where we are





Where we're heading



What we've done

Our research goals

What we did

Created a journey map



So that we could...

Understand how permit administration works

Partnered with special uses staff



Leverage their expertise

Reviewed existing documents



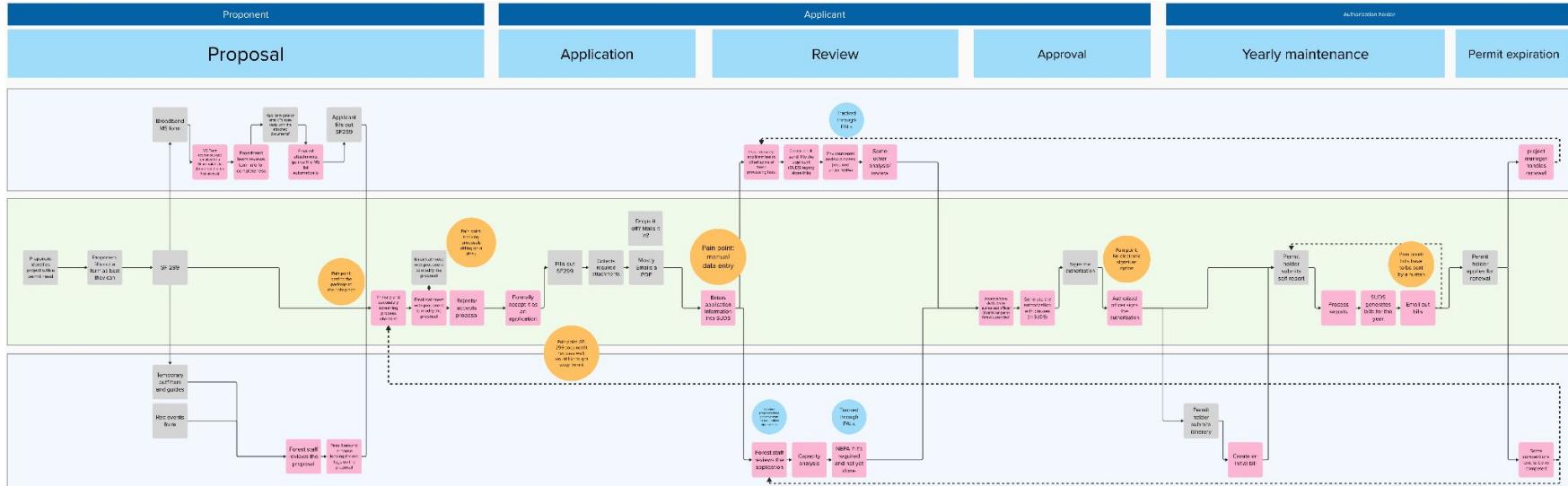
Learn about the history of digital permitting at USFS

Spoke with field office staff



Discover what can be improved

Journey map

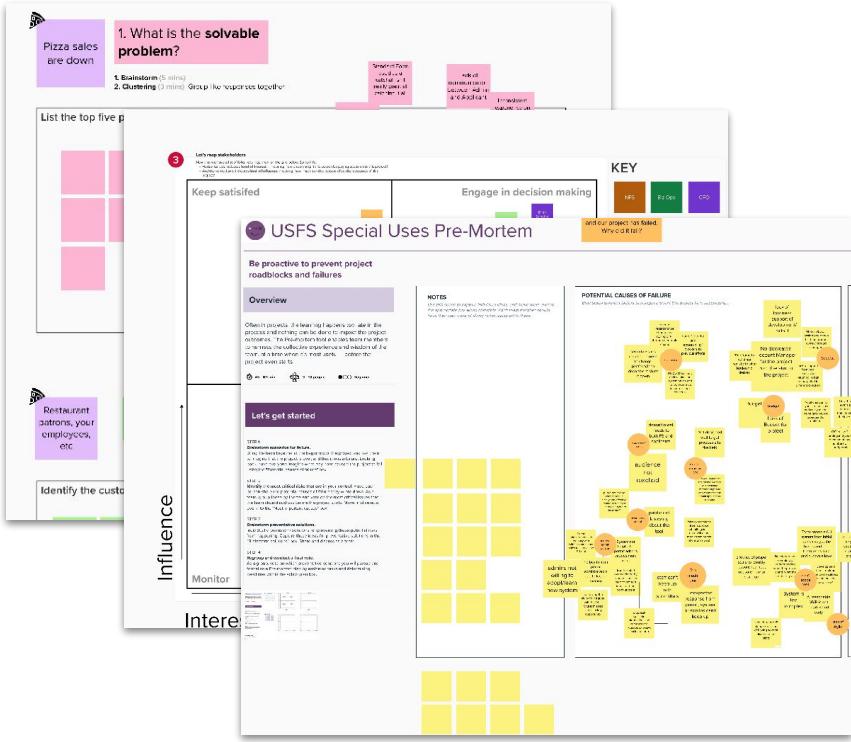


Based on an exercise from [18F Design Methods](#)

Exercises with USFS SMEs

We met with a core group of 5 USFS subject matter experts on a weekly basis. We worked together on a few items, including:

- Problem statements
- A pre-mortem
- Stakeholder mapping
- Stakeholder communication
- Journey mapping



Desk research

We reviewed dozens of documents and artifacts from past USFS/18F projects, including:

- Open Forest
- 2016 Special Uses discovery and path analysis
- Christmas tree permitting pilot
- Timber contracting/permitting path analysis

The image shows a collage of various US Forest Service (USFS) and 18F-related documents and artifacts, illustrating the scope of desk research conducted. Key components include:

- ePermitting discovery work 1/ Special uses**: A document from the U.S. Forest Service dated August 17-18, 2016, featuring the USDA and USFS logos.
- Open Forest Investment Close**: A document dated March 2, 2021, also featuring the USDA and USFS logos.
- Timber Contracting and Permitting Path Analysis**: A document dated September 13, 2019, with a team list including Melissa Braxton, Mark Trammell, Kelsey Foley, Olesya Minina, and Mark Hopson.
- Christmas Tree Permitting Pilot**: A document dated January 2020, detailing the transition from the Open Forest platform to the Recreation.gov app.
- Open Forest Platform Progress**: A timeline from January 2018 to November 2019, showing milestones such as the launch of the platform, integration with the US Web Design System, and the start of the timber contracting path analysis.
- Recreation.gov Online Christmas Tree Permit Service**: A document dated November 2019, explaining the shift to the Recreation.gov app and the need for a pilot of the new Open Forest platform.
- Recruitment Materials**: A document titled "RECRUITMENT" with sections for "Team" and "RECRUITMENT", listing roles like Regional Manager and REPLY Director.

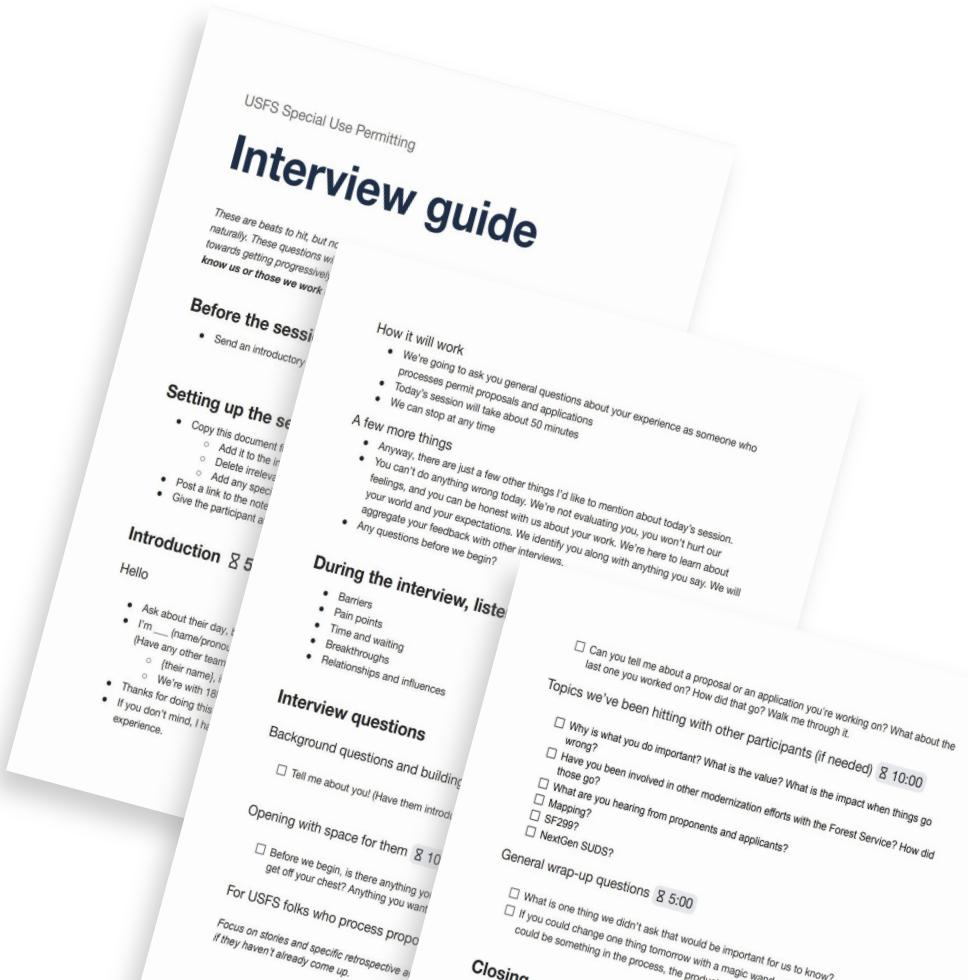
Stakeholder research

Semi-structured interviews

Shared baseline of questions
But each conversation was unique

Topics

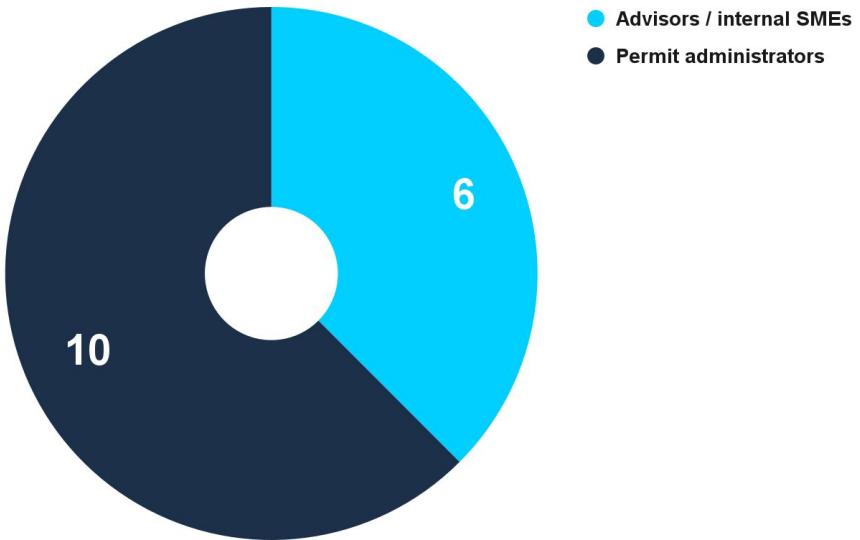
- Walk us through a permit you are working on
- Speed bumps in the process
- Staffing, resources, tech



We've spoken to...

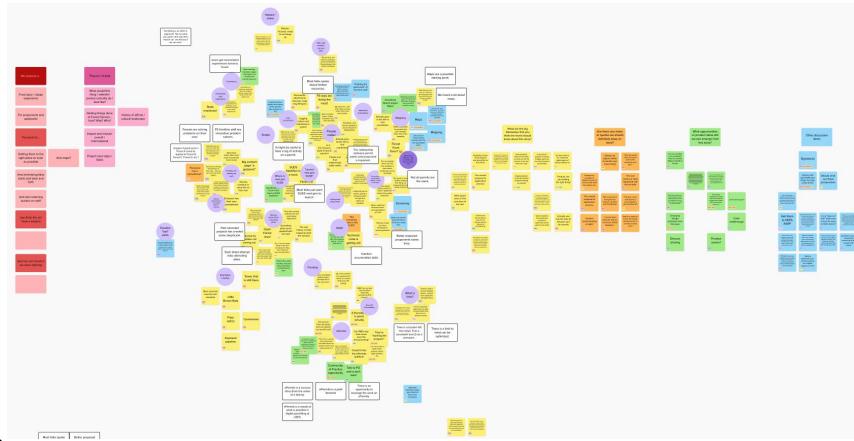
16 total participants

With 22 more Forest Service folks and permit seekers to come



Next, we made sense of these conversations

1. Conversations and debriefs led to **observations**
2. We **affinity mapped** those observations
3. We cross-referenced those with the results of our other activities and developed **insights**



What we've learned

Insight

1/ The relationship between the permit administrator and the proponent is the heart of the permitting process. Making this relationship stronger makes the process better.

...a big puzzle and I'm working with everyone on my side and on their side...

[It's about] hearing it directly from the proponent's mouth.

[We] start with a meeting – a big screen TV in the conference room. [We] put up a lot of maps.

Insight

2/ Proponents often need help assembling their package. Providing assistance can be time consuming.

I really need to know, do you have a turnkey project right now, or is it just an idea?

After numerous emails [I] still haven't gotten anything.

[If they had] their ducks in a row before it got to my desk, that would save a ton of time.

Insight

3/ Special Uses permit administrators have limited time and resources. Keeping up with demand can be difficult.

We were down to 2 staff at one point and 5 of our 7 staff are brand new.

We get a lot of flack for operating at the speed of government.

I am one person for over four million acres. [I have] 300 permits to myself...

Insight

4/ When demand outstrips resources, permit backlogs swell. Permit administrators burn out; proponents get frustrated or abandon the process.

We were down to 2 staff at one point and 5 of our 7 staff are brand new.

We get a lot of flack for operating at the speed of government.

I am one person for over four million acres. [I have] 300 permits to myself...

Insight

5/ Permit administrators want better tools. Mapping, in particular, came up often in conversation.

...they used to give us paper maps or scribble on a map with a highlighter...

She has a huge list, 30 places. It spanned three different forests and maybe 6-8 districts...

Location specification is missing throughout the process. A lot of people don't have GIS capabilities.

Insight

6/ Forests are solving these problems on their own. There are some innovative solutions.

Examples of Forest solutions

Splash pages

Common Questions About Special Use Permits

What are special-use authorizations?	+
When do I need an authorization?	+
Is my proposal commercial? Special Uses	+
How much does it cost?	The Forest Service manages over 192 million acres of national forests and grasslands that comprise the National Forest System (NFS). Today, our growing population and mobile society have created a demand for a variety of uses of these federal lands. Some of these uses require specific approval. The Forest Service provides services that support our economic activity and benefit local users. The agency's special-uses program authorizes uses on NFS land that provide a benefit to the general public and protect public and natural resources values. Currently there are over 74,000 authorizations on the NFS lands for the general public or over 180 types of uses.
Download the Frequently Asked Questions	Each year, the Forest Service receives thousands of individual and business applications for authorization for use of NFS land for such activities as water transmission, agriculture, outfitting and guiding, recreation, telecommunication, research, photography and videography, and other applications to determine if they are compatible with the use of the land.
Recreation Special Uses/Events Permits	RECREATION SPECIAL USE PERMITS
As a participant in the Special Use activities to be held on the lands, Special Use permits are required for any activity that will occur on National Forest lands when:	1. The proposer/applicant intends to charge an entry or participation fee, or
Actual use request	2. The primary purpose is the sale of a good or service and, in either case, regardless of whether the use or activity is intended to produce a profit.
Estimated date of permit application	Recreation special-use permits are required for any activity that will occur on National Forest lands when:
The National Forest (outfitter/guide) permit application	1. The proposer/applicant intends to charge an entry or participation fee, or
Itineraries (check out)	2. The primary purpose is the sale of a good or service and, in either case, regardless of whether the use or activity is intended to produce a profit.
Add a guide or outfitter	Recreation special-use permits are required for any activity that will occur on National Forest lands when:
Film request for filming	1. The proposer/applicant intends to charge an entry or participation fee, or
Noncommercial	2. The primary purpose is the sale of a good or service and, in either case, regardless of whether the use or activity is intended to produce a profit.
Operating plan	Recreation special-use permits are required for any activity that will occur on National Forest lands when:
Final fee workups	1. The proposer/applicant intends to charge an entry or participation fee, or
Outfitter and guide permit application	2. The primary purpose is the sale of a good or service and, in either case, regardless of whether the use or activity is intended to produce a profit.
Research permit application	Recreation special-use permits are required for any activity that will occur on National Forest lands when:
Recreation events	1. The proposer/applicant intends to charge an entry or participation fee, or
You've printed	2. The primary purpose is the sale of a good or service and, in either case, regardless of whether the use or activity is intended to produce a profit.
Can't find you	Recreation special-use permits are required for any activity that will occur on National Forest lands when:
Priority outfitter and guide permits	These permits are issued for those groups that intend to use the National Forest on a regular or recurring basis, or are requesting a large number of service days. These proposals may have competitive interests for the activity and the proposal may be selected through a competitive process. The availability for new priority outfitter and guide special-use permits are very limited on the NFS. Contact the individual ranger offices to see if priority permits are available.
Commercial Filming and Photography	The USDA Forest Service permits commercial filming and still photography on Forest Service lands. Like other short-term commercial uses of National Forest system lands, commercial filming requires a special use permit issued by the District Ranger.

"Everyone has a spreadsheet"

Category	Sub-Categories	Details
Hunting	Small Game, Big Game, Waterfowl, Migratory Birds, Non-Migratory Birds, Elk, Moose, Bear, Deer, Furbearers, Turkey, Game Fish, Non-game Fish, Other	Permit Type: Hunting, Season: Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter, Year: 2021, Status: Approved, Review Date: 2021-06-01, Approver: [Redacted]
Fishing	Small Game, Big Game, Waterfowl, Migratory Birds, Non-Migratory Birds, Elk, Moose, Bear, Deer, Furbearers, Turkey, Game Fish, Non-game Fish, Other	Permit Type: Fishing, Season: Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter, Year: 2021, Status: Approved, Review Date: 2021-06-01, Approver: [Redacted]
Hiking	Small Game, Big Game, Waterfowl, Migratory Birds, Non-Migratory Birds, Elk, Moose, Bear, Deer, Furbearers, Turkey, Game Fish, Non-game Fish, Other	Permit Type: Hiking, Season: Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter, Year: 2021, Status: Approved, Review Date: 2021-06-01, Approver: [Redacted]
Biking	Small Game, Big Game, Waterfowl, Migratory Birds, Non-Migratory Birds, Elk, Moose, Bear, Deer, Furbearers, Turkey, Game Fish, Non-game Fish, Other	Permit Type: Biking, Season: Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter, Year: 2021, Status: Approved, Review Date: 2021-06-01, Approver: [Redacted]
Camping	Small Game, Big Game, Waterfowl, Migratory Birds, Non-Migratory Birds, Elk, Moose, Bear, Deer, Furbearers, Turkey, Game Fish, Non-game Fish, Other	Permit Type: Camping, Season: Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter, Year: 2021, Status: Approved, Review Date: 2021-06-01, Approver: [Redacted]
Boating	Small Game, Big Game, Waterfowl, Migratory Birds, Non-Migratory Birds, Elk, Moose, Bear, Deer, Furbearers, Turkey, Game Fish, Non-game Fish, Other	Permit Type: Boating, Season: Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter, Year: 2021, Status: Approved, Review Date: 2021-06-01, Approver: [Redacted]
Other Recreational Activities	Small Game, Big Game, Waterfowl, Migratory Birds, Non-Migratory Birds, Elk, Moose, Bear, Deer, Furbearers, Turkey, Game Fish, Non-game Fish, Other	Permit Type: Other Recreational Activities, Season: Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter, Year: 2021, Status: Approved, Review Date: 2021-06-01, Approver: [Redacted]

Custom forms

STILL PH COMMERCIAL FILMING & STILL PHOTOGRAPHY Data Proposal Submittal

Per agency policy, you must submit your prop...

Project Name: **Production Date:** **Type of Product:** Still Photo Video Proprietary

Company Name: **Business Name:** **Business Address:**

Time Frame: **Scouting Dates:** **Address:** **City:** **State:** **Zip:**

Office phone: **Second contact person:** **Office phone:** **Geographical Location:** **Location Details (other than Location Desired):**

Phone: **At Point of Contact:** **Phone:** **Description of boundaries of NFS lands to be used:**

Proposed date for Commercial Filming: **Reviewed by:** **Approved by:** **Reviewed Date:**

Proposed date for Still Photography: **Reviewed by:** **Approved by:** **Reviewed Date:**

Comments:

5. National Forest Name * **Select your answer:**

6. Type of Use (Fiber Optics, Wireless-Tower/Shelter, or Other)(define) * **Select your answer:**

ANGELAS NATIONAL FOREST SPECIAL USE - AIRCRAFT NOTIFICATION FORM

Ang-Special Use Authorization holder that requests the use of aircraft (fixed, rotor-wing), or UAV within the Angeles National Forest boundaries will be required to fill out this form and submit to the Forest Service Office (FSO) <http://www.fs.usda.gov/angeles> and Forest Lands Program Manager karrie.zech@fs.usda.gov at least 72 hours prior to...

BROADBAND COMMUNICATIONS USES SUBMISSION

1. Date of Proposal/Application Submission * **Please input date (MM/dd/yyyy):**

2. Proponent/Applicant Name * **Enter your answer:**

3. Proponent/Applicant Telephone Number * **Enter your answer:**

4. Proponent/Applicant Email * **Enter your answer:**

5. National Forest Name * **Select your answer:**

6. Type of Use (Fiber Optics, Wireless-Tower/Shelter, or Other)(define) * **Select your answer:**

Insight

7/ As forests solve on their own, the permitting process diverges. Proponents can have inconsistent experiences from forest to forest.

I would identify that as an issue - the forms that one forest use might differ from another. I see that all the time. Unless it's an SF form, it's not going to be the same, you see that all the time in Special Uses.

8/ Past digital permitting efforts have struggled to establish permanent product ownership. They have failed as a result.

“

There is **no product manager or product owner** [...] and subsequently there is **[no] plan to scale-up the Open Forest services** and the cost to maintain a system for one forest is not considered a sound IT investment.

– *Open Forest Investment Closeout*

March 2, 2021

”

“

We had to **pause the project** because changes to the budget model delayed our being able to **onboard a product owner** for ~more than six months.

– *USFS Firewood Permitting Pause*
November 3, 2020

”

Insight

9/ Most folks expressed frustration or confusion with the pause of SUDS next gen. “Just launch it” was a refrain we heard often.

There are some billing quirks, but compared to the billing quirks that I already have, I don't see any difference.

[NextGen] has the automated features that I want and [I'm] able to add documents to it. I'll take the billing things; I'll handwrite bills if I have to.

Insight

10/ The failure to deliver in these past projects has created some skepticism about digital modernization efforts. Another failure here risks alienating allies.

I don't like it when the Washington office or the regional offices subvert the work we're doing on the ground... My reaction to the online permitting [effort is] tempered with the fact that SUDS Next Gen seems to be a fail. [I don't want] SUDS Next Gen 2.0 with E-Permitting.

11/ But the spirit of Open Forest lives on! There is a real opportunity to build off the success of Special Forest Product E-permits.

Special Forest Product E-permits

Special Forest Products E-permits picked up where Open Forest left off.

- Their pilot launched on June 5th
- They've overcome hurdles that we are likely to encounter
- They've developed and utilized elements that we may be able to build off of (Forest Service Digital Playbook, approved headers and footers, Figma files)

The screenshot shows the homepage of the USDA Forest Service Special Forest Product E-Permit Application. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for Home, About, FAQ, and Give Feedback. The main content area features a large image of stacked logs. A central callout box says "Welcome to Forest Service Special Forest Product E-Permit Application". To the left, there's a form titled "Choose Your Permit" with dropdown menus for "Select your forest" and "Select a product", and a "Get Your Permit" button. Below this, a section titled "How E-Permits Works" is divided into four steps: Step 1 (Find & Select Your Forest), Step 2 (Review Permit Details), Step 3 (Get Your Permit), and Step 4 (Print Your Permit). Each step has a corresponding icon and a brief description.

An official website of the United States government. Here's how you know.

USDA Forest Service U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Special Forest Product E-Permits

Home About FAQ Give Feedback

Choose Your Permit

The USDA Forest Service invites you to obtain permits for select forest products now available online, with more to come in the future.

Get started by selecting your desired forest and product.

Select your forest

Select a product

Get Your Permit

Welcome to Forest Service Special Forest Product E-Permit Application

How E-Permits Works

Step 1

Find & Select Your Forest

From this homepage, select your forest and desired product to get started.

Step 2

Review Permit Details

Read important information about your permit before you obtain it.

Step 3

Get Your Permit

Complete your permit form, then pay with Pay.gov using a debit card, credit card, or check to purchase your permit.

Step 4

Print Your Permit

You will immediately be able to view and print your permit, and will receive a confirmation email to access your permit later.

Break

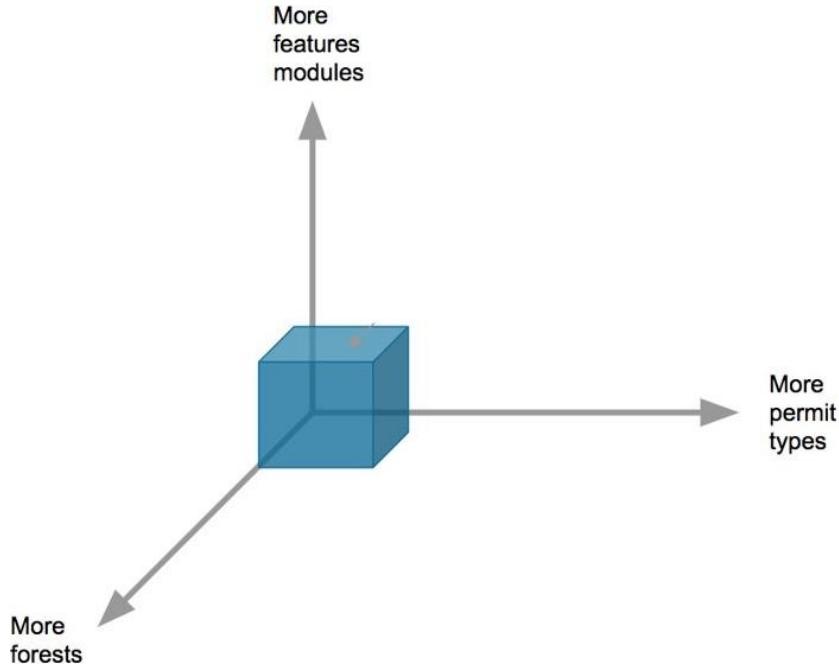
There are risks to be aware of

- Forest-level innovation exacerbates inconsistency
- Executive-level deprioritization jeopardizes resources
- FS fails to support people in product ownership
- Failure to scale blunts the cost benefits
- Another failed attempt continues alienating allies

This is a **product** not a **project**

Recommendations

- Launch SUDS NextGen
- Assign a **full-time** Product Owner
- Start building an online front door for broadband permits **to serve specific user needs**
- Develop a plan to scale in forests, features, and permits
- Build on what works: E-Permits, Broadband national intake, permit administrator staff





**What's next?
Continued conversations**

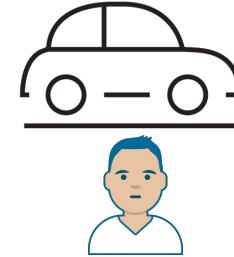
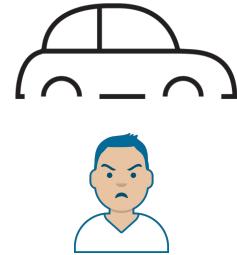
Ongoing research

- Inviting observers to a small sample of sessions
- A shift toward sharing ideas, co-design, and usability testing prototypes
- Proponent and applicant viewpoints

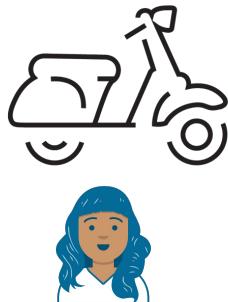
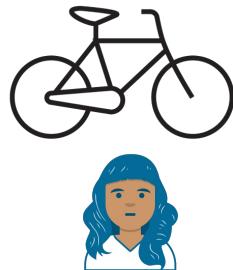
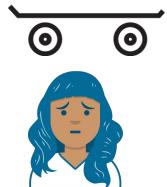
**What's next?
Building**

What will we be able to deliver

FROM



TO



Three ways to understand the way forward



“How might we” statements



Design principles



User stories

Three ways to understand the way forward



“How might we” statements



Design principles



User stories

A way to frame insights and problem statements and to help generate targeted ideas.

For example:

Insight

Users are often unsure about which form to complete when they file their taxes.

HMW

How might we make users feel confident they are filing their taxes correctly?

Three ways to understand the way forward



“How might we” statements



Design principles



User stories

How might we...

...reduce churn without removing the human element?

...reduce the burden on already overworked frontline staff?

...help proponents and applicants submit more complete information?

...do that in a way that doesn't overburden or confuse them?

...incorporate more consistent geospatial information into proposals?

Three ways to understand the way forward



“How might we”
statements

Design principles



User stories



Written statements, generally in the form of imperatives like “Earn people’s trust,” that serve as **guiding lights** during decision-making.

Give us a shared point of reference when negotiating next steps. Good design principles are specific to the project, not general truths, and **should help teams say “no”** to otherwise interesting proposals or generate ideas when they’re stuck.

Three ways to understand the way forward



“How might we”
statements



Design principles



User stories

Emerging principles

Get permit seekers to a “quality connection” as soon as possible.

Give permit seekers the tools to self-select out, but make the next steps easy to get if they want to proceed.

Try to emulate the experience a permit seeker might have in the office.

Give permit seekers as much information up front as possible.

Keep an eye on the prize: Facilitating safe and responsible use of public lands.

Three ways to understand the way forward



“How might we” statements



Design principles



User stories

A way to describe what will actually happen with the product or service. They are told from the perspective of the user and are used to inspire and direct design decisions. A way to describe “features.”

As a **user/role/who**

I want to **task/action/what**

So that **objective/purpose/why**

Three ways to understand the way forward



“How might we” statements



Design principles



User stories

Example

As a **person who processes proposals and applications...**

I want to **see on a map where a proponent wants to do their business...**

So that **I can easily evaluate if their request overlaps with any heritage sites, species ranges, or existing permits.**

Three ways to understand the way forward



“How might we” statements



Design principles



User stories

Example

As a person who wants to apply for a special use permit...

I want to see an easy to understand summary of what I'll need to provide...

So that I can plan and submit a proposal that is complete enough to get through the next stage in the process.

Three ways to understand the way forward



“How might we”
statements



Design principles



User stories

Processors and front line staff are asking for things like:

- A consistent way to see the geospatial component of a request (maps)
- An easier way to trade approvals electronically (signatures)
- Fewer proposals that are unlikely to go very far (screening)
- A way to see the state of a permit
- Complete and correct forms

Proponents and applicants seem to want:

- An expectation of what happens next (timing, steps, etc.)
- A way to see the state of a permit
- Guidance on how to complete the proposal

We envision...



A “front door” for permit seekers

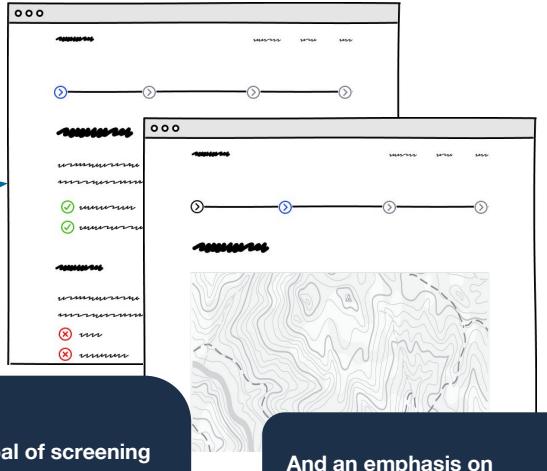
- Focused on broadband
- Initially operating for 1-3 forests

We envision...



A “front door” for permit seekers

- Focused on broadband
- Initially operating for 1-3 forests

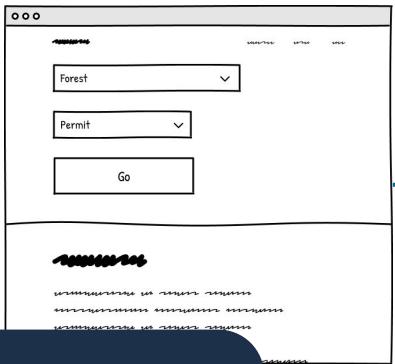


With a goal of screening and setting expectations

- So that forests can collect the right amount of information

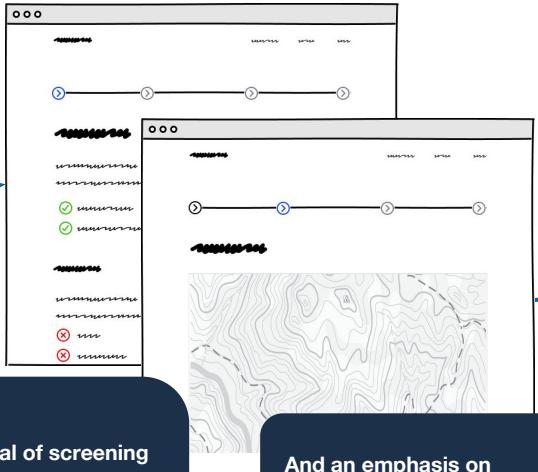
And an emphasis on mapping

We envision...



A “front door” for permit seekers

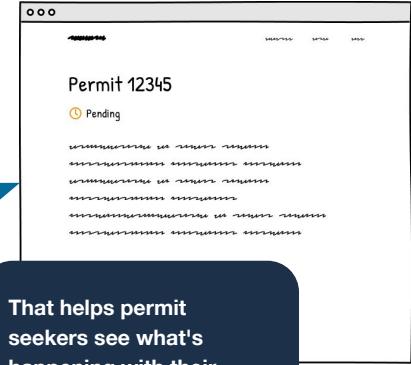
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With a goal of screening and setting expectations

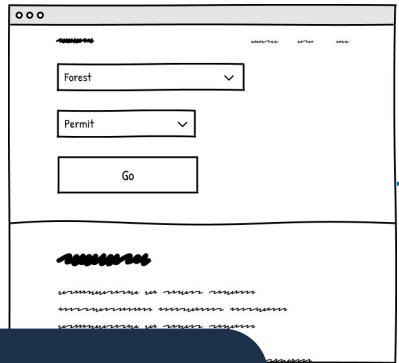
- So that forests can collect the right amount of information

And an emphasis on mapping



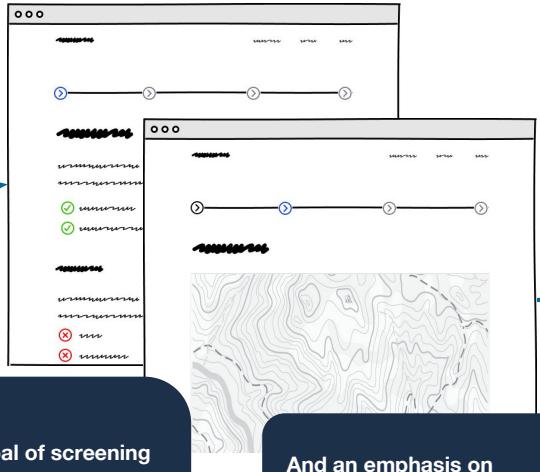
That helps permit seekers see what's happening with their request

We envision...



A “front door” for permit seekers

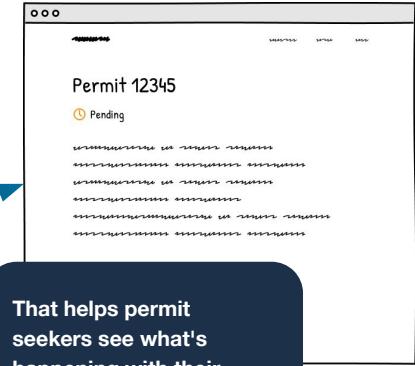
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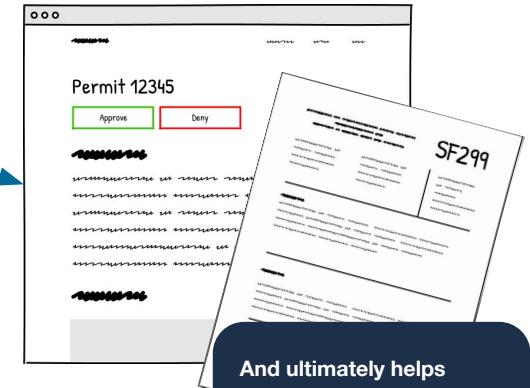
With a goal of screening and setting expectations

- So that forests can collect the right amount of information

And an emphasis on mapping



That helps permit seekers see what's happening with their request



And ultimately helps processors get more complete info (and stay in line with policy)

Discussion

Risks are mainly about resourcing

Each piece of the org might not have the resources to make this happen, but keeping your eyes on the prize, there are enough resources available to do this work.

How can you break away from the NFS and CIO silos so that the IT team and the program team can be successful together?

What will you do to mitigate against these org-level risks?