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**RE: Additional Comments on the Frontcountry and Visitor Use Plan for Ross Lake National Recreation Area and State Route 20 Corridor**

To North Cascades National Park Planning Team,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit additional comments on the Frontcountry and Visitor Use Plan for Ross Lake National Recreation Area and State Route 20 (SR 20) Corridor. Our community is deeply invested in the management of the North Cascades National Park (NCNP) Complex and entire SR 20 corridor, from Marblemount to Mazama.

The Mountaineers previously submitted a comment letter on the Frontcountry and Visitor Use Plan with suggestions focused on recreation planning within Ross Lake NRA. This letter will expand upon those comments to provide suggestions for visitor use management in the neighboring Forest Service-managed lands along the Cascade River Road area and the SR 20 corridor.

The Mountaineers, based in Seattle, Washington and founded in 1906, is a nonprofit outdoor education, conservation, and recreation organization whose mission is “to enrich the community by helping people explore, conserve, learn about and enjoy the lands and waters of the Pacific Northwest and beyond.” The Mountaineers Books publishing division expands the mission internationally through award-winning publications including instructional guides, adventure narratives, and conservation photography. 1,200 skilled volunteers lead 3,200 outdoor education trips and courses annually for 16,000+ members. Our youth programs provide over 15,000 opportunities each year for children to get outside. We are a passionate, engaged, and knowledgeable community that cares about the outdoors, and protects the outdoor experience for current and future generations

**Geographic Scope: A Corridor-Wide, Multi-Agency Framework**

The Mountaineers recommends that the Planning Team broaden the geographic scope of the plan to include adjacent U.S. Forest Service frontcountry areas such as the Cascade River Road area and the SR 20 corridor from the Ross Lake National Recreation Area boundary to the Early Winters area near Mazama. Due to their high concentration of exemplary hiking, scrambling,



and alpine climbing opportunities, these areas are critical to The Mountaineers programs and popular among many Washington residents. Visitors experience this area as a single, continuous corridor – viewing the landscape by its peaks and trails (many of which span jurisdictions) rather than its agency boundaries. Managing the region in isolation fragments the agencies' abilities to coordinate on important tasks like visitor use management, permitting, and search and rescue.

A comprehensive, multi-agency management framework would allow the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service to work together seamlessly in addressing shared challenges and opportunities along SR 20. Such an approach would unify visitor management through consistent signage, interpretation, and trailhead design, helping the public navigate the landscape safely and understand resource protections across jurisdictional boundaries. This approach would create a consistent set of policies for facilitated access groups like The Mountaineers, eliminating duplicative permit processes that currently burden both permit-seekers and agency staff. Finally, by improving communication protocols and aligning incident response systems, a corridor-wide plan would strengthen emergency coordination and public safety – critical needs in a high-use alpine environment where rescues can involve both Park and Forest Service personnel. Together, these measures would produce a more efficient, transparent, and collaborative management system that reflects how people actually experience the SR 20 corridor – as one continuous and interconnected mountain landscape.

### **Importance of the SR 20 Corridor to Mountaineers Programs**

For over 100 years, Mountaineers members have cherished the natural beauty and challenges offered by the North Cascades landscape. The Mountaineers considers the North Cascades region one of the most significant gems of the Pacific Northwest and greatly values its world-class opportunities for frontcountry and backcountry recreation. Our members visit the SR 20 corridor often, through courses, activities, youth programs and personal trips, engaging in activities such as day hiking, backpacking, scrambling, snowshoeing, climbing, mountaineering, backcountry skiing, and kayaking. Our programs teach safe and responsible recreation skills, Leave No Trace practices, and encourage a stewardship ethic.

While North Cascades National Park is revered for its world-class climbing and stunning scenery, many of our members' most beloved peaks lie just outside the park boundary, on Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest lands accessed from SR 20. In the last 2 years, 122 Mountaineers trips have visited this area, providing over 600 opportunities for our members to experience the rugged wilderness of the North Cascades. The Rainy Pass, Blue Lake, and Cutthroat trailheads are starting points for many cherished day hiking and backpacking trips. Peaks in the Washington Pass area, including the Liberty Bell Group, Kangaroo Temple, Wallaby Peak, and Silver Star Mountain provide key teaching opportunities for our climbing and scrambling trips. These peaks and trails are also visited by our noncommercial youth program



trips: last year, youth learned to climb on Liberty Bell and South Early Winters Spires and did trail work on the popular Heather-Maple Pass Loop trail. To access this landscape, our members and youth programs camp at campgrounds located along the SR 20 corridor, including Early Winters campground, Klipchuck campground, and Lone Fir campground (currently closed due to hazard trees).

The SR 20 corridor provides The Mountaineers important access for our programs and we are therefore deeply invested in its thoughtful management. How this landscape is managed directly shapes our ability to provide safe, meaningful, and sustainable experiences for our members and partners. We are committed to working with Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest and North Cascades National Park staff to ensure that this treasured landscape remains accessible and resilient for generations to come.

### **Expanding Opportunities for Facilitated Access**

Mountaineers trips are facilitated by skilled, knowledgeable, and passionate volunteer leaders. These leaders deliver a range of public benefits that extend well beyond their immediate service to trip participants. Volunteer leaders are highly trained safety professionals who act as reliable first responders in emergency situations, providing immediate assistance and coordination in remote mountain environments where agency personnel may not be present. Leaders also serve as educators and role models for responsible recreation, consistently practicing and teaching Leave No Trace principles that reinforce the land managers' own public education and stewardship efforts. In addition, Mountaineers leaders function as de facto stewards of the land, maintaining a year-round presence in the field and monitoring changing resource conditions, access issues, and visitor impacts across the SR 20 corridor. Facilitated access improves equity in the outdoors, allowing more people to gain the skills they need to safely and sustainably experience our region's incredible mountains.

To sustain and grow these benefits, future management of the SR 20 corridor should expand permitting opportunities to increase facilitated access in this region. The Visitor Use Plan should treat facilitated access as an essential component of the visitor experience – improving safety, equity, and sustainability – and recognize outdoor leaders as partners in public safety, education, and resource protection.

### **Infrastructure and Visitor Use Management Needs**

To ensure visitor safety, protect resources, and sustain the quality of recreation experiences, the final Frontcountry Recreation and Visitor Use Plan should prioritize targeted infrastructure and management improvements at key sites along the SR 20 corridor. The Mountaineers would like to provide the following suggestions for potential improvements:



- **Infrastructure improvements at Blue Lake and Rainy Pass Trailheads:** Traffic congestion and overflow road parking due to heavy peak season use have created dangerous conditions for vehicles and pedestrians at these sites. Expanded parking and improved pedestrian circulation at these trailheads would alleviate roadside congestion and enhance visitor safety. These locations would also benefit from upgraded waste facilities and improvements to signage and interpretive materials to enhance public understanding of seasonal conditions, avalanche risks, and wilderness boundaries.
- **Washington Pass Observation Site:** A scenic vista overlooking Washington Pass and the Liberty Bell Group and a short paved trail make this site a fantastic accessible location for visitors with disabilities or those with limited time to experience the North Cascades landscape. The Mountaineers believes that this site has high potential to positively impact a large number of visitors and encourages the Forest Service to prioritize maximizing use of this site, including through regular ranger presence and reopening the visitor center building.
- **Creating Reservable Campsites along the SR 20 Corridor:** The Early Winters, Klipchuck, and Lone Fir Campgrounds serve as key camping and staging locations for Mountaineers trips visiting the nearby Washington Pass area for climbing trips. Due to the difficulty in securing camping reservations in the National Park, these campgrounds are critical to The Mountaineers access to this region. Our programs, and particularly our youth trips, would greatly benefit from the option to reserve a site ahead of time. We support maintaining first-come first-serve availability at these campgrounds to allow for flexibility and equitable access, but we also encourage the Forest Service to consider adding some limited reservable options, such as a reservable group site.
- **Reopening Lone Fir Campground:** The Lone Fir Campground was indefinitely closed in the spring of 2025 due to heavy tree disease and hazard tree potential. Given its proximity to many popular climbing and hiking destinations and the high use of the area, The Mountaineers recommends that the Forest Service prioritize assessing and removing hazard trees so that this campground can be safely reopened to the public.
- **Canyon Creek Bridge replacement:** A washout taking out a bridge five miles into the Jackita Ridge Trail has interrupted access to the Devils Dome Loop. Replacing the bridge here would alleviate hazardous creek fording conditions in the spring and early summer and restore reliable access to this popular loop.

## Interagency and Community Collaboration

Effective management of the SR 20 corridor will also depend on structured, ongoing collaboration among agencies, tribes, local interests, and commercial and nonprofit partners. The planning process should establish a formal mechanism for annual coordination meetings involving the Park Service, the Forest Service, Tribal governments, partner organizations, and nearby gateway communities. These meetings would provide an opportunity to share data,



review seasonal conditions, and coordinate management priorities across jurisdictional boundaries.

The plan should also institutionalize shared stewardship initiatives, such as volunteer cleanup days, resource monitoring, and educational programs modeled on the successful, but now defunded, Methow Valley Ranger District Climbing Ranger Program, which built strong public trust and improved environmental outcomes through direct engagement with the climbing community. These collaborative structures exemplify The Mountaineers' broader advocacy for participatory, field-informed governance, where local expertise and technical knowledge shape federal recreation policy. By grounding the plan in genuine partnership and transparent communication, the agencies can ensure that the SR 20 corridor remains both a model of interagency cooperation and a sustainable, world-class alpine destination.

### **Conclusion**

The SR 20 corridor represents one of America's most iconic alpine landscapes and a vital classroom for outdoor education. A unified, interagency approach – one that expands scope to include Forest Service lands to improve infrastructure and visitor use management across jurisdictional boundaries – will protect this special landscape while providing the best possible visitor experience.

The Mountaineers appreciates the leadership of both the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service in developing this plan. Thank you for the opportunity to comment and for considering our input. We look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure that future generations can continue to experience the spectacular beauty of the North Cascades.

Sincerely,

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