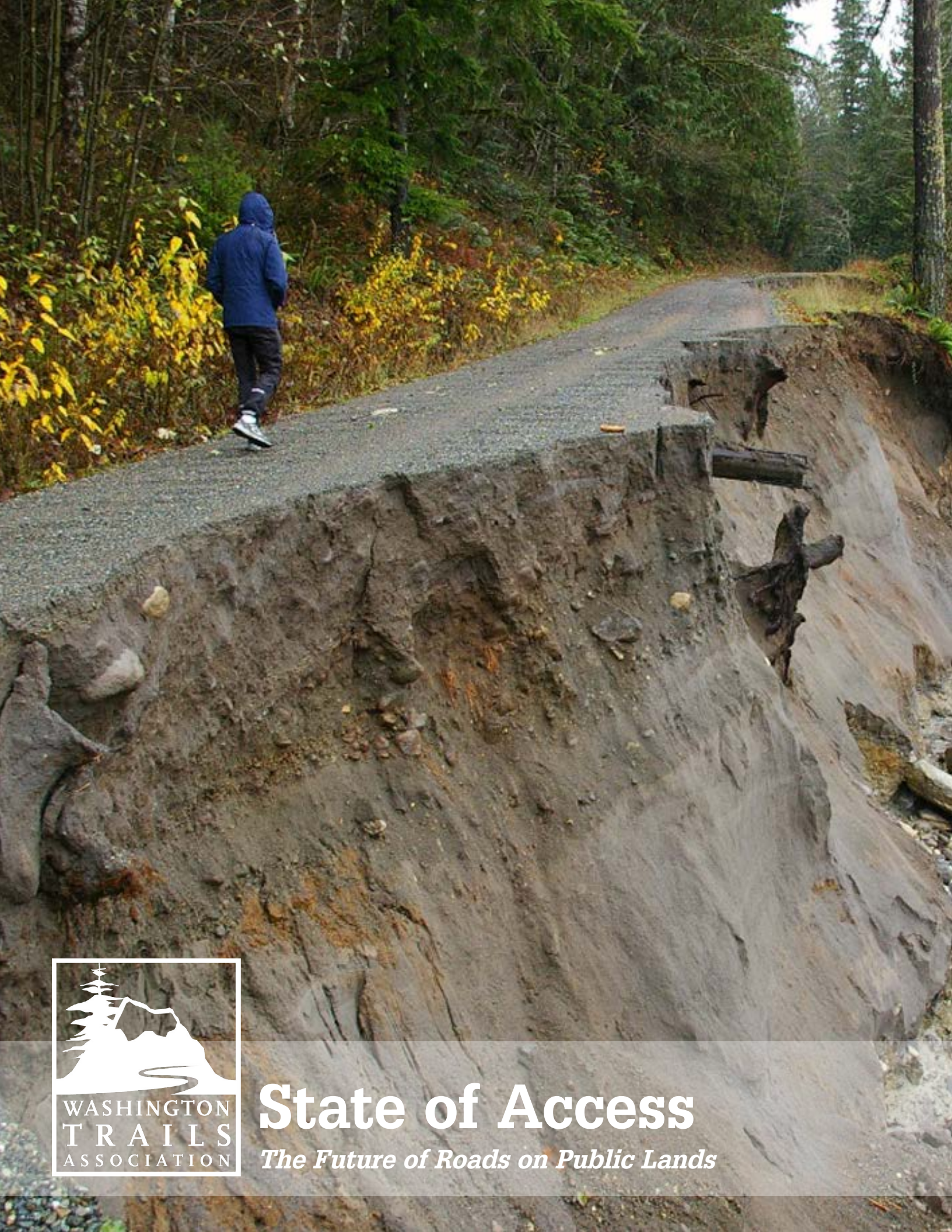


WASHINGTON TRAILS ASSOCIATION

State of Access

The Future of Roads on Public Lands

Washington Trails Association preserves, enhances and promotes hiking opportunities in Washington State. We engage and mobilize a community of hikers as advocates and stewards for our trails statewide. We draw strength from the dedication and generosity of our members, volunteers and partners and are committed to leaving a rich legacy of trails and wild lands for future generations to enjoy.

As the state's leading hiking resource, WTA serves more than 1.7 million hikers each year through our website, wta.org, our bimonthly magazine Washington Trails, and community events. Through collaborative partnerships and grassroots advocacy, WTA focuses on state and federal issues like trail funding, hiker safety and wilderness protection. WTA has built the nation's largest state-based volunteer trail maintenance program in the nation. You'll find WTA volunteers–adults and youth alike–on the trail in every season, contributing more than 100,000 hours annually to keep trails open and well-maintained.

Get involved protecting and maintaining Washington's Trails.

> Protect It: Preserve the wildlands you love for future generations to enjoy by joining Washington Trails Association today. Your membership donation helps WTA continue to maintain and advocate for the beloved trails of Washington.
wta.org/support

> Build It: Give back to the trails you love to hike by helping rebuild them! Regardless of experience or age, WTA has opportunities for everyone to learn the basics of trail maintenance. We're certain you'll enjoy it so much you'll come back and join us again.
wta.org/volunteer

> Write It: Have you been out hiking recently? Write a trip report to help other hikers have the most up-to-date information about the condition of Washington's trails. With your conditions update, you can also share photos and helpful tips for other hikers.
wta.org/trip-reports

Join the conversation, share hikes, and get trail news.

facebook.com/washingtonhikers

twitter.com/WTA_hikers

pinterest.com/wtahikers

Cover photo of Suiattle River Road Washout by Kim Brown

Introduction

Hiking is a critical driver of Washington's economy and quality of life. Without appropriate and ecologically sound road access to trailheads, the social and economic benefits provided by our public lands will decline. Fewer people will be inspired to take action to preserve roadless wild places if they cannot access the trails that lead to them. And the values of solitude, introspection and connection with nature fostered by our wildlands will be lost.

Washington Trails Association is the state's strongest voice for hikers. Since 1968, our advocacy program has focused on preserving trail opportunities and funding. In the past ten years, dozens of trails have become inaccessible because roads that led to them washed out or were otherwise damaged. The Westside Road at Mount Rainier and the White Chuck River Road on the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest are two examples of roads that will likely never be reopened. Given trends in global warming and declining agency budgets, more roads will be damaged and not all can be repaired. The purpose of this report is to provide guidance for WTA staff, land managers and lawmakers to address this critically important issue.

The National Forest road system evolved from timber and mining roads on National Forests, first-nations trading paths, and historic wagon routes. Many of the roads that hikers drive were funded by timber receipts and were not intended to stay on the landscape for decades. In the past, hikers drove by active timber sales with piles of smoking slash. Now, they are as likely to pass a forest of second growth Douglas fir or alder interspersed with old snags. The roads that pass through these changing landscapes may seem constant and solid. But they are part of the landscape, subject to the same forces as every other part of the forest.

The people who built these roads did not do so with the forethought that land managers would apply now. They were looking ahead to the next timber sale or mine shaft. Their knowledge of forest and river ecosystems was limited by the times in which they lived. And their values were delineated by the idea that the forests and mountains of the Pacific Northwest were inexhaustible reservoirs of timber, minerals and wildlife. We know better now, as we usually do in hindsight.

Action Needed Now

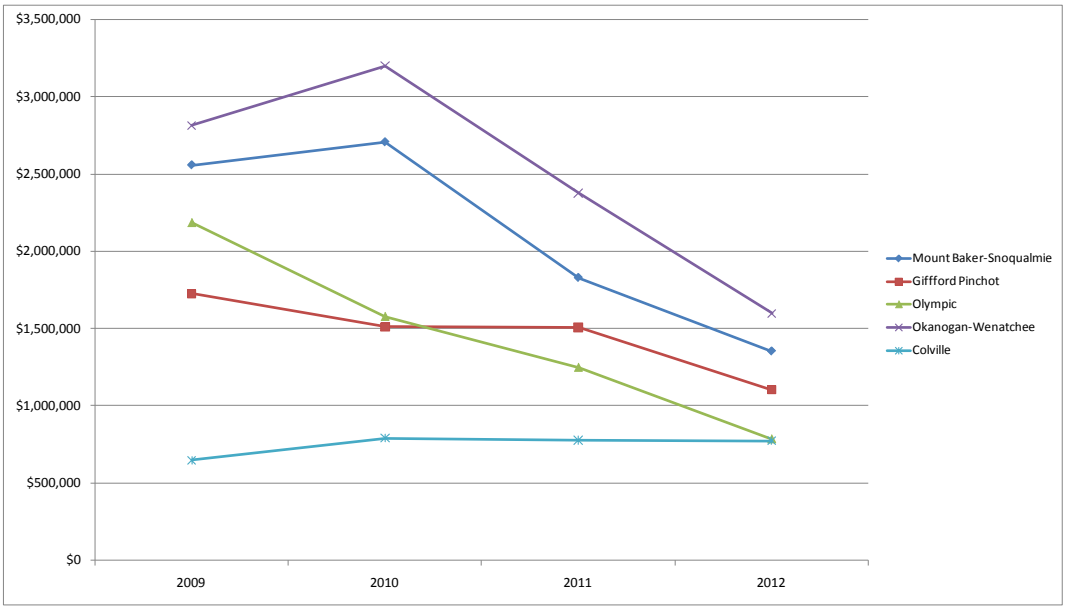
We now need to apply a different lens. We need to take actions that our predecessors could not take.

- **We Must Plan for the Future**
  A wealth of environmental legislation has passed since the 1970s. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) gives land management agencies a toolbox to plan for changes, trends and needs on public landscapes. Land Managers must engage in robust analysis. In the case of roads, each National Forest should conduct forest-wide Access and Travel Management (ATM) Plans, examining their road system and making hard choices based on the best available science and public input. While ATMs are not NEPA processes, their can inform land management decisions.

  National Forests can come out of an ATM with a system of roads that should stay on the landscape and a list of those that should be decommissioned. Further, ATMs can be used to justify Congressional funding increases.

- **We Must Pay for our Road System**

  Our public lands have sustained funding cuts for the past 20 years. National Forests make do with less money each year. These are cuts in real dollars, not failures to increase funding or keep up with inflation. Funding for the repair and maintenance of Forest Roads in Forest Service Region 6, composed of Washington and Oregon, has declined from $90 million in 1990 to $17 million in 2012. One of the reasons for this steep decline is the retreat of the timber industry, which previously funded our road system. We do not want to return to the heavy clear-cutting that characterized timber harvest on National Forests for decades, but we must not penalize Forests for developing a more sensible and sustainable timber strategy. Rather, it is imperative that conservation and recreation groups do all they can to ensure that land managers are rewarded for their efforts.



  Very little of the Federal Budget is discretionary in nature. 86% of federal spending is taken up by defense and entitlements, both of which are essentially untouchable. The remaining 14% is everything else that the Federal Government does, including manage all public lands. When cuts are made, they're made in the discretionary category first, and that means that the Forest and National Parks Services are first in line. We must remain vigilant in advocating for federal road maintenance funding.

- **We Must Engage the Public**

  Our road system has a huge constituency of forest users who appreciate public lands for the scenic beauty and recreational opportunities they offer. Agencies do their best work when people who love their lands are engaged, and the public can change the character of an area by getting involved in an organized way. An excellent example is the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Road, which evolved from a mecca for target shooting and garbage dumping to a place for hikers, mountain bikers, equestrians and family campers close to Seattle. That happened because a committed, organized group of people came together and engaged with willing agency partners to make change. It is change of this kind that is most durable.

WTA's Vision of Access

We envision a rational and sustainable system of backcountry roads designed and maintained to provide wildland access while minimizing environmental impacts. The State of Access Report is our articulation of that vision, and a tool that WTA will use to advocate for appropriate road access to our public lands.

The argument is often advanced that closing roads and pulling trailheads closer to the edges of public lands will ease pressure on wild areas and increase frontcountry hiking opportunities. While this may make a certain intuitive sense, it ignores some important realities.

This approach will lead to a dramatic decline in hiking opportunities. There will not be enough frontcountry trailheads to satisfy public need, particularly in a state with as many hikers as Washington. It will also funnel a huge number of hikers into a relatively small space, increasing localized impact to unacceptable levels.

Along with a decline in opportunity would come decreasing variety. Not all hikers seek a frontcountry experience. Many hikers enjoy remote, high country experiences that this approach would effectively close off. Many Northwesterners have made the decision to live in dense urban areas. The experience of remote wild areas is essential to many urban residents' quality of life.

Modern urban living is the most sustainable option and should be encouraged rather than discouraged. Increasing access and diversity of hiking opportunities benefits our state's economy and the well-being of the urban public. Today, strong, developed economies have healthier public lands and cleaner environments.

This report features eight roads that WTA will use as models when deciding which routes should remain open on public lands and will provide a template for future land management decision making.

Not only are these roads important individually, they highlight the range of issues that roads across the landscape face:

1. The Suiattle River Road: Critical access to a unique wilderness
2. Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Road: A successful collaborative effort
3. Carbon River Road: A dynamic landscape renders road realignment unfeasible
4. Dosewallips River Road: An important access road should be reopened
5. Stehekin Road: A little-used mountain road that cannot be repaired
6. Illabot River Road: A well-built road that should remain open
7. Mountain Loop Highway: A critical recreation access road with a challenging section
8. Mitchell Peak Road: Lack of public easement blocks recreational access

How Does WTA Analyze Roads?

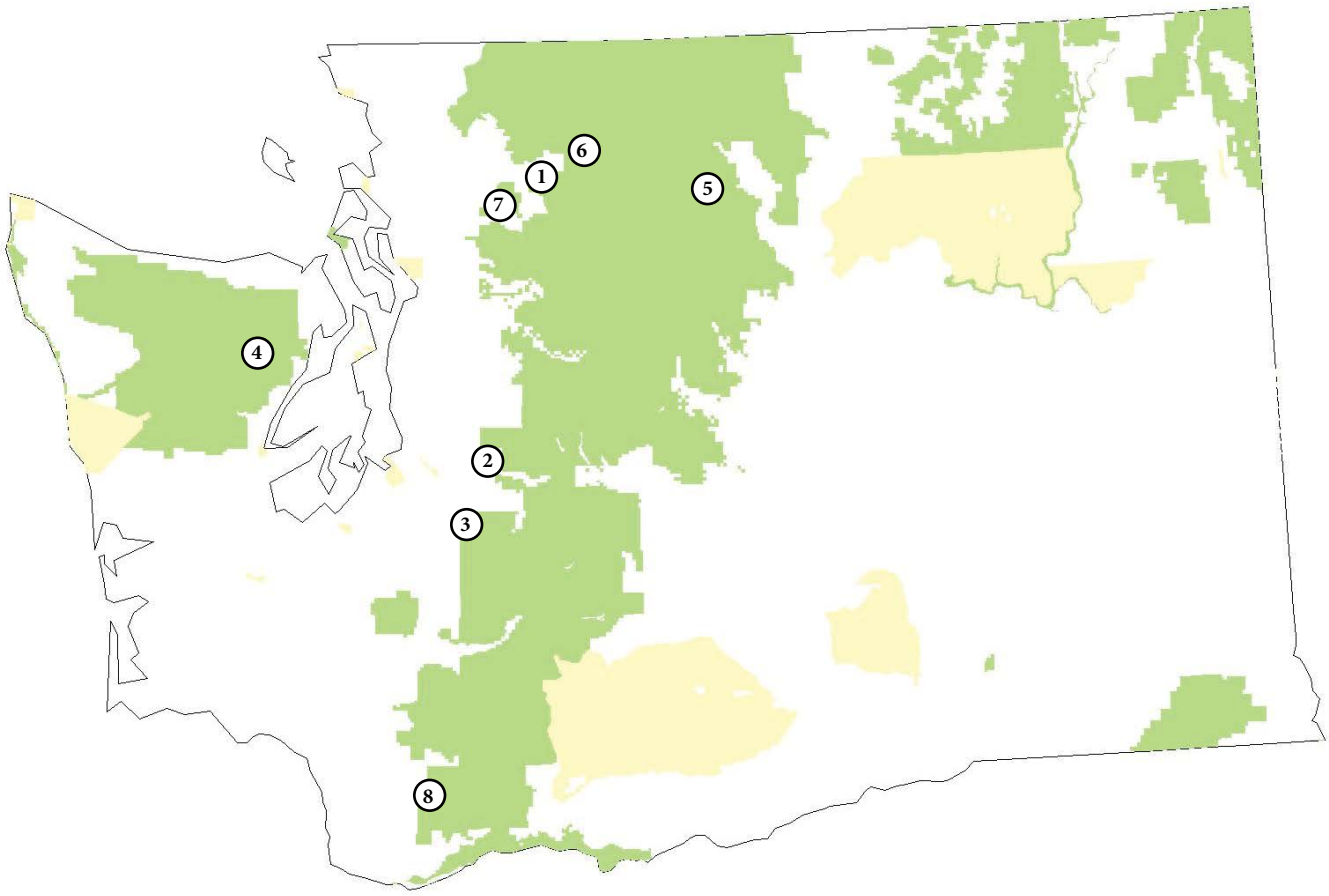
WTA's mission requires us to balance recreational access to public lands with the need to conserve those places for future generations. Just under the surface of nearly any wilderness advocate is an ardent hiker who came to love wild places by visiting them and becoming galvanized around the need to protect them. Recreational access is vital to preserving our wildlands.

When WTA evaluates roads, we start with a set of principles:

- **Road Access is Critical to Hikers:** Hikers need roads to access trailheads. In the absence of long-lasting, unacceptable and unavoidable impacts to aquatic resources or threatened and endangered species, roads leading to trailheads should remain open.
- **Planning is Fundamental:** WTA believes that agency analysis of road systems is essential. Agencies must engage in contingency planning in order to respond to weather or hydrological damage to vulnerable roads.
- **Funding Makes Everything Else Possible:** Funding does not always exist to pursue all options for road repair, but agencies must still complete thorough analysis, since planning drives funding. Organizations like WTA must advocate for adequate road funding.
- **Cost/Benefit Analysis Should Inform all Decisions:** While some roads are so prone to damage and environmental problems that the cost of keeping them open outweighs their public benefit, most access roads provide such unique and popular recreational opportunities that extra efforts should be made to keep them open.

The criteria we used to evaluate the roads in this report were:

- **Importance to Hikers:** Is this road heavily used by hikers? Does it lead to unique places, or places that are unreachable by other, similar means? If the road is closed, has that closure curtailed recreation use?
- **Cost of Repair/Maintenance:** Given that appropriations to agencies are miniscule in comparison to the size of the rest of the federal budget, we are not overly swayed by cost arguments. The money exists to fund our road system. Congress simply must appropriate it. But in order to be good stewards of public dollars, projects that are very expensive and do not provide much recreational opportunity are immediately suspect.
- **Impact on the Environment:** While all human actions cause some impact to the environment, that impact must be balanced against the greater good provided by connection to our public lands. In cases where roads cause permanent and unavoidable damage to threatened and endangered species, we are hard pressed to call for repair or reopening.



The Suiattle River Road

Critical access to a unique Wilderness

Washington State has always seen heavy weather, but the storms that raced through the mountains in October 2003 were nearly unprecedented. Warm rain fell on glaciers high in the Cascades, causing heavy flooding in river valleys on the west side of the mountains.

WTA's Position and Recommendation:
WTA firmly supports rebuilding Suiattle River Road to the road-end. The unique nature of this road combined with the fact that many elements of the repair—in particular, the Downey Creek Bridge—will actually benefit wildlife and restore wetlands make it an excellent candidate for repair and restoration.

The two main western access points to the Glacier Peak Wilderness, the Suiattle River Road and the White Chuck River Road, washed out in multiple locations. In 2003, flooding damaged the Suiattle Road at three sites. In 2006 and 2007, storms hit the Cascades again, washing the Suiattle out at five additional sites. With the decision to permanently close the White Chuck Road, the Suiattle increases in importance.

The Suiattle is classified as a moderate use road, with roughly 10,050 visits each year to trailheads and campgrounds. The main trailheads accessed by the Suiattle include Huckleberry Mountain, Buck Creek, Sulphur Creek, Green Mountain, Downey Creek and the Suiattle Trailhead. The Suiattle also affords access to the Buck Creek and Sulphur Creek Campgrounds. These are not discrete locations; from these trailheads, routes lead deep into the Glacier Peak Wilderness.

The Suiattle washouts cut off access to Downey Creek, Milk Creek, the Pacific Crest Trail from Suiattle Pass to Fire Creek pass, Image Lake and the famous Ptarmigan Traverse, to name just a few of the affected routes. The cost to repair all eight of the Suiattle's damaged sites is estimated at $5 million, with the Western Federal Lands Division of the Federal Highways Administration paying for most of the project. For a project of this scale, $5 million is an appropriate amount of money.

The Suiattle Road is washed out in several locations, with the most severe removing entire sections of pavement. Photo by Kim Brown

Why is the Suiattle WTA's Highest Priority Road?

Without the Suiattle, there is no access to the heart of the Glacier Peak Wilderness from the west side of the Cascade Mountains. Washington has a new generation of hikers who have never experienced the rambling meadows, massive glaciers, ancient forests and rushing streams of the Glacier Peak Wilderness.

What are the Current Conditions?

After the 2003 and 2006 washouts, the Darrington Ranger District drafted and finalized the Suiattle Road 26 Environmental Assessment (EA). In the wake of the EA's publication, storms in 2007 extended damage at several washout sites. These new sites were not analyzed in the 2006 assessment, as they occurred after the 2006 EA was complete. Since Suiattle repair was a joint project of the Forest Service and Federal Highways, the two agencies moved ahead with a Categorical Exclusion (CE) in 2010. A categorical exclusion requires extensive environmental analysis, but no final document or public comment period. The choice to do a CE would prove fateful for the Forest Service.

Claiming that a CE meant that no environmental analysis would be conducted, the appellants filed a lawsuit to stop the rebuilding of the Suiattle, arguing that new environmental analysis was needed. As a result, Federal Highways and the Darrington Ranger District dropped the repairs. The agencies subsequently collaborated on a 2012 EA that dealt with concerns that the litigants expressed in their filing and called for repairing all damaged sites. They took the opportunity to plan removal of a large causeway from the Downey Creek bridge and the development of a larger bridge at that section, which will benefit salmon and other species that depend on the river.

The Darrington District has completed an amended EA that takes into account comments received on this year's document. Money is in place from Federal Highways to repair the road. Once the agency signs a record of decision (ROD), they can put the project out to contract and begin work.

Lessons Learned

WTA firmly supports repairing the Suiattle River Road to its end. This is perfectly in line with the criteria we've laid out.

- **Hiker Use:** The Suiattle River Road provides the last access to the heart of the Glacier Peak Wilderness and serves more than 10,000 hikers and other recreation users.
- **Cost of Repair:** The $5 million price tag repairs eight sites and restores wetland and fish habitat, a reasonable cost given the scale of the project and the environmental and recreational benefits that will result.
- **Environmental Concerns:** The restored road will not cause undue harm to the environment—rather, stitching together fragmented wetlands and habitat restoration elements will have the opposite effect.

This is an example of the benefits of thorough planning. While the cost of planning is high in terms of time and money, it ensures that a project will pass muster at all levels. Repairing the Suiattle River Road has always been a critical goal, and never one that caused undue harm to the environment.

Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Road

A successful collaborative effort

WTA's Position and Recommendation:
WTA emphatically supports the direction that stakeholders and agency staff have taken in managing the Middle Fork Road. The collaborative process to enhance safety and recreation has been a boon for this route. While the Middle Fork Public Use Concept Plan was not universally accepted by the hiking community, it changed the valley for the better.

Just 45 minutes from Seattle, the Middle Fork Road has existed since the 1930s, running from North Bend along the old railroad grade of the North Bend Timber Company. For decades, the Middle Fork Road provided access to private property owners, timber companies and mining interests. Since the decline of the timber industry, the road has become a popular route for hikers seeking the many front and backcountry trails it accesses. The Forest Service estimates that 100,000 vehicles use the Middle Fork Road annually.

Easy access to wildlands on the Middle Fork has been a mixed blessing. Along with trail users, the Middle Fork became a haunt of drug operations, target shooters and those seeking to dump trash in an out-of-the-way place. For years, this lovely place was blemished by illegal activity. Trailhead car break-ins were a common occurrence on the Middle Fork, which curtailed legitimate recreational uses of the valley.

The turning point came in the 1990s, when a few visionaries saw what the Middle Fork could be. The Middle Fork Outdoor Recreation Coalition (MIDFORC) and Friends of the Trail, led by Mark Boyar and Wade Holden respectively, worked with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the Snoqualmie Ranger District and State Parks, as well as dozens of non-profit stakeholders to develop the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Public Use Concept Plan. By developing a concept plan that enhanced outdoor recreation and preserved the environment of the valley, MIDFORC was able to win public support for an ambitious proposal that has wrought major changes in the Middle Fork.

WTA volunteers haul rock in to complete the Pratt River Connector Trail, one of the elements of the Middle Fork Public Use Concept Plan. Photo by Arlo Smith

The cornerstone of the proposal was permanent upvalley closure of nine miles of the Middle Fork Road. The Concept Plan envisioned a seasonal gate at the Taylor River Crossing and a permanent gate at Dingford Creek, along with increased recreational resource development downvalley. Closing the road at Dingford reduced environmental impacts caused by the eroding roadbed and

curtailed illegal activity further upvalley. Planners envisioned new trailheads, trails, campgrounds, and scenic turnouts, as well as shuttle buses linking all of these amenities.

Many elements of the Public Use Concept Plan have been developed. A new Mailbox Peak Trail is being constructed. The Pratt Connector Trail is built and hikeable. The Middle Fork Campground, built in the early 2000s, is the first new campground on the Forest since the Sulphur Creek Campground on the Suiattle. And the old CCC road has been converted to a route ideal for families.

A great deal still needs to happen. But the Middle Fork is gradually being reclaimed from the activities that damaged the river and wildlands and threatened human visitors.

Where We Are Today

King County and the Snoqualmie Ranger District are working with the Federal Highways Administration Western Federal Lands Division to pave the Middle Fork Road from Milepost 2.5 to the Taylor River Crossing, at Milepost 12.7. While the Middle Fork does not receive the damage that other high mountain roads experience each year, it regularly floods and is prone to deep potholes. Paving the road will inhibit pothole formation and will make the road more resilient during transient floods. Paving will also significantly decrease long term maintenance and environmental costs, by limiting sedimentation of the river. Up-front costs to pave the Middle Fork are expected to total $10 million. The Middle Fork Paving Project will likely be complete by 2015.

Lessons Learned

While the closure of the Middle Fork Road at Dingford Creek was not originally universally accepted by the hiking public, it has grown less controversial as recreation opportunity in the Middle Fork has increased and diversified. The Public Use Concept Plan is a model for stakeholder efforts to change the character of the watershed. The criteria we use to evaluate roads firmly support the actions taken on the Middle Fork.

- **Hiker Use:** The Middle Fork serves a great many hikers as a critical year-round gateway for 100,000 recreation users annually. As such it's one of the highest use recreational access roads in the state, secondly only to roads that access places like Mount Si.
- **Cost of Repair:** At $10 million, the upcoming paving project is expensive, but will reduce maintenance costs to all agencies in the long term.
- **Environmental Concerns:** The upper portion of the Middle Fork Road—above Dingford Creek—was seriously eroded, which increased sedimentation of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River. Closure of the road at Dingford Creek has significantly reduced these impacts, and paving will reduce environmental impacts occurring on the open road section.

This process has led to a safer Middle Fork Valley, increased recreation opportunity for a whole range of users, and the impetus to preserve new Wilderness in the Middle Fork. We fully support efforts to pave the road. While some access was lost due to the upvalley closure, the payoffs derived from a much safer, more visitor-friendly valley more than compensate.

A committed group of stakeholders with strong leadership and a clear vision can work wonders in conjunction with agency staff.

Carbon River Road

A dynamic landscape renders road realignment unfeasible

WTA's Position and Recommendation: WTA supports the closure of the Carbon River Road, due to the high cost of repair and likelihood of future washouts. Constructing a trail along the 1.2 mile stretch of road from the Ranger Station would reduce hiker/cyclist/vehicle interactions.

The Carbon River flows from a glacier on the north side of Mount Rainier National Park (MRNP) through rainforests and out of the park at the northwest corner. A road along its south bank has been an attraction for visitors since the 1920's. It was routed by National Park landscape architects to maximize the scenic qualities of the drive. In 2006, the Carbon River Road washed out in multiple locations. Pre-washout, the road ended at Ipsut Campground.

The Carbon River entrance to Mount Rainier National Park is a one hour drive from SeaTac Airport and affords an easy portal into this deeply forested area. The Carbon River Road also led to the Carbon Glacier Trail, the closest access to a glacier in the lower 48 states. Prior to the 2006 closure, about 57,000 visitors entered the park there each year. As the elevation is relatively low, the park maintained year-round access to Ipsut Campground. Trailheads to Chenuis Falls and Green Lake are located along the now-closed road. From Ipsut Campground hikers access the Wonderland and Northern Loop Trails. Day hikes from Ipsut Campground included Ipsut Pass, Carbon Glacier, Tolmie Peak and Seattle Park. Travelling round-trip to these locations in a day is now impossible from the Carbon River Entrance.

Glaciers, Aggradation and the Peril of Rivers

The Carbon River Road is in the floodplain of its namesake river. Since it was built, flooding has occurred a few times each decade, with damage to the road accompanying about half those events. In the 1990's, repeated flooding caused extensive road damage which was repaired at considerable expense. The severity of the flood damage was increased by a process called aggradation in which rocks from the Carbon Glacier washed into the river bed, forcing the river over its banks and encouraging the formation of new channels in unpredictable locations. Aggradation has also built the bed of the Carbon River higher than the Carbon River Road, which places the road in a very vulnerable position.

Mount Rainier's massive foothills seen from the Carbon River Road. Photo by Amy Csink

Knowing that aggradation was not going to end, Park managers decided that the road would be permanently closed to vehicle traffic after the next major damaging event. That event occurred in November of 2006 and the five miles of

road between the ranger station and Ipsut Campground have been closed to cars ever since. It was determined that where the road was totally washed out, new trail would be built around the damaged area. The cost of this alternative is $3.6 million.

The Carbon River Road washout, Mount Rainier. Photo by Jason Biehner

Where is the Carbon Now?

The road is closed at the entry to the park. The five mile road walk to Ipsut Creek is pleasant with reroutes around or repairs to the most major washouts. The hike is easy with almost no elevation gain and is ideal for an early spring or late autumn outing, but there are still a number of very rocky and muddy sections.

MRNP published an Environmental Assessment discussing alternatives for access to the Carbon River area. The Park selected an alternative that would close the road to vehicles at milepost 1.2. While a turn-around and passenger drop-off area would be situated at the gate, parking would not. The remainder of the road would be maintained as a high quality hiking and biking trail.

Lessons Learned

The Carbon River Road should never have been built in its historic alignment. While we are saddened to see such an iconic road closed, when we applied our criteria, we agreed that the Carbon's vulnerability to washout, and cost of repair and potential environmental impacts outweighed its importance as an access route.

- **Hiker Use:** The Carbon was a portal for 57,000 hikers annually.
- **Cost of Repair:** Rebuilding the road as far as Chenuis Falls would have cost more than $11 million, and would have been as washout-prone as the previous road. Repeated washouts over time would add to the cost of this road.
- **Environmental Concerns:** Continual washouts add more road material to Ipsut Creek, which can harm water quality and fish habitat.

There are still problems to address in the Park's plan. The plan does not deal well with the first 1.2 miles of road. The Park plans to have pedestrians, bikes and vehicles sharing the road up to the closed section, which would be unsafe for hikers. A hiking trail from the planned parking lot to the beginning of the closed section of the road would mitigate this problem. WTA will continue to advocate for solutions that improve the experience of hiking this area as well as public safety.

Dosewallips River Road

An important access road should be reopened

The 15-mile Dosewallips River Road provides access to the east side of the Olympic Mountains and is a popular destination for those who live in Puget Sound and visitors making a multi-day tour of Olympic National Park (ONP). The Dosewallips River flows from Anderson Glacier through the middle of the Hood Canal Ranger District into Puget Sound just south of the town of Quilcene.

WTA's Position and Recommendation:
WTA supports reopening the Dosewallips Road. New information on the Dosewallips indicates that road construction techniques will result in a road that is more stable, smaller in footprint and less likely to harm the environment. The agencies must take pains to ensure that the rerouted road is sufficiently armored against washout in order to preserve the public investment in this route.

The Dosewallips Road begins as a two lane paved road off Highway 101 near Dosewallips State Park. It runs along the north side of the river into Olympic National Forest (ONF) where it becomes the smaller, dirt National Forest Road #2610. Once in Olympic National Forest, it is flanked by two wilderness areas, the Buckhorn to the north and the Brothers to the south. About 11 miles in, the route moves upslope and starts a gradual climb to ONP. Near the end, at milepost 15, it rejoins the river for a very steep section next to lovely Dosewallips Falls before ending at the Dosewallips Campground. Only the eastern one mile of the road is in the park.

In January 2002, a storm washed out about 300 feet of road at milepost 10, leaving the remaining five miles of road inaccessible by car. The washout has expanded to more than 500 feet in the intervening years. Since that time, the road past the first large washout has only been open to foot and bicycle traffic. A trail bypass constructed by WTA leads around the washout. The road is still easily hiked to the end despite some additional minor rock slides, washouts and overgrowth and is in remarkably good condition for a road that hasn't been maintained in 10 years.

The Dosewallips River Road ends abruptly at the washout. Photo by Amy Csink

Much of the road passes through uninteresting forest, though the first half mile is right next to the river and is very pleasant. The second half of the road/trail moves much higher above the river in a region that has been partially burned. Views open up at the falls and the area around the National Park campground and Dosewallips trailhead is lovely.

The Unique Experience of the Dosewallips

The Dosewallips road provides a number of important recreation opportunities and is one of only two roads on the east side that allowed visitors motorized access into the park. The road end is an easy 1.5 hour drive from the Seattle Ferry dock on Bainbridge Island. There are two campgrounds on

the road that are now being utilized as hike-in camps at a significantly reduced visitation level. These campgrounds were very popular prior to the washout.

There are a number of trailheads on the closed portion of the road. Just after the Park boundary at milepost 14, the grueling Lake Constance trail begins. At the road end, the Dosewallips Trail heads up the west fork of the river over Anderson Pass, traverses the Enchanted Valley to the Graves Creek trailhead on the Quinault River and crosses the southern section of the park. The Dosewallips Trail also makes a pleasant day hike, as does the climb to Constance Pass.

In addition to these recreational resources, ONP has $1.8 million in infrastructure near the end of the road which is not being adequately maintained and would have to be removed and relocated if motorized access is not restored. This includes an important helicopter search and rescue base near the campground.

What are the Agencies' Plans?

The timeline of agency planning on the Dosewallips Road has been complex:

- **February 2003:** The Forest Service published an Environmental Assessment that identified an upslope reroute as the preferred alternative for reopening the Dosewallips. The reroute had significant environmental impacts, including damage to spotted owl and marbled murrelet habitat. The agency withdrew the EA in order to conduct a more stringent Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).
- **August 2005:** The Forest Service published a Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an EIS, indicating that the preferred alternative would be to rebuild the road in place using a low water crossing. In September 2005, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) commented on the NOI, indicating that rebuilding the road in place would damage habitat for returning chinook salmon. Until the release of the NMFS Letter, WTA had supported rebuilding the Dosewallips. But WTA could not balance restoring hiker access with the extremely damaging nature of the reroute and rebuild options and chose to support decommissioning.
- **September 2008:** The Forest Service published their draft environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), identifying four alternatives—rebuilding in place, bridging the washout, and two upslope reroutes with much smaller footprints. WTA had very strong concerns that slope instability would doom this road to recurring damage. WTA took a novel tack, suggesting that the Forest and Park Services consider developing new alternative routes into the Park from the east instead of restoring the road.
- **September 2010:** The Forest Service released a Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) that chose an upslope reroute for the road and provided significantly more detail on road construction standards and actual road footprint. New route reconnaissance indicates that soil instability is limited to a 1,750 foot segment of the reroute and that instability can likely be mitigated by erosion control devices and substantial culverts. The rest of the route does not show ground cracks, soil movement or other evidence of instability, and it is clear that there are no viable alternative access points.

Agency plans to reroute the Dosewallips depend on as-yet-unidentified funding—about $4.5 million.

WTA 2012 Position and Lessons Learned

When we applied the three criteria as outlined in this Access Report to the new FEIS information, it became clear to us that we should support reopening the Dosewallips River Road. The change is based on our analysis of new detail in the 2010 FEIS regarding the proposed reroute of the Dosewallips, combined with our conclusion that the creation of new road access to the eastern Olympics has next to no chance of becoming reality. We are also persuaded by proposed mitigation measures, erosion controls and construction standards delineated in the FEIS all of which give us confidence that this road will be more resilient, smaller in footprint and therefore will not cause undue environmental damage. We agree that Federal Highways, the Forest Service and the National Park Service should reroute this important road.

This conclusion is clear when analyzed against our Access Report criteria:

- **Hiker Use:** The Dosewallips is the portal to the Olympic National Park from the west side of the mountains, seeing roughly 200 visits per day in 2001. No new access to the Olympics from this side has been identified.
- **Cost of Repair:** Given the high visitor use of the Dosewallips, $4.5 million is a relatively small price to pay.
- **Environmental Concerns:** Reopening the Dosewallips would not cause long-term environmental problems. Our earlier concerns about reroute stability have been addressed in the 2010 FEIS, and we are confident that the agency has a workable plan to keep the rerouted road in place.

Morning at Big Timber Camp, The Dosewallips River Road in the Olympic Peninsula is . Photo by by John Mortenson

Stehekin River Road

A little-used mountain road that cannot be repaired

WTA's Position and Recommendation: The Stehekin Road cannot be repaired in place, and its reroute would be so expensive and prone to damage that WTA does not support reopening. The steady increase in backcountry visitor use of the Upper Stehekin Valley demonstrates that hikers have not suffered due to this washout.

Surrounded by North Cascades National Park and the Stephen Mather Wilderness, the Stehekin River Road runs from the small land-locked town of Stehekin at the north end of Lake Chelan to a dead-end below Cascade Pass. No other roads connect with either the road or the town, so the only way to access either is via a ferry or plane that leaves from the town of Chelan. From the town of Stehekin, the only way to travel uproad is via a National Park shuttle bus, hiking or biking.

Prior to the washout, from the north end of the road at Cottonwood Camp (milepost 22.8), hikers and climbers were able to travel to Horseshoe Basin, resonant with cascading waterfalls and ringed by icy peaks. From Horseshoe Basin, they could traverse Sahale Pass and exit via the Cascade Pass Trail to the Cascade River Road. This hike was a Washington classic, as it pieced together some of the most scenic places in our most wild National Park. However, the hike's remoteness kept visitor numbers low. In 2000, the first year that permitting was instituted for backcountry camping in the National Park, camps accessed from the Stehekin Road saw only 1,340 visitors. Even when the Stehekin Road was undamaged, it was a little-used route.

In 2003, the Stehekin Road washed out at milepost 12.9, rendering the final 9.9 miles of road inaccessible. Since the Stehekin Road washed out, backcountry visitor use has increased to 1,735 annually.

What is the State of the Stehekin?

There are two options for reopening the Stehekin—repair in place or reroute. Both of these options have insurmountable hurdles.

Cascade Pass/Sahale Arm can still be accessed from the Stehekin River Road by those willing to road-walk. Photo by Andrey Cherepakhin

The Stehekin Road cannot be rebuilt in place, since landslide activity and vertical slopes prevent bridging the washed out and damaged section between mileposts 12.9 and 15.3. That section of road is entirely gone in many places, leaving large swathes of vertical bare earth. Data released by North Cascades National Park indicate that rebuilding the Stehekin in place would also have significant negative environmental impacts.

Rerouting the road is also not likely. North Cascades National Park managers do not have the authority to adjust the Wilderness boundary to relocate the road. Congress would have to act to give North Cascades National Park that authority. In the unlikely event that Congressional action did allow for adjustment of the Wilderness boundary, the one feasible route would be the current alignment of the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT). However, the PCT is a vitally important non-motorized route, and requiring hikers to hike a road section would conflict with that management directive. Designating a segment of the PCT as motorized is adamantly opposed by the Pacific Crest Trail Association, one of WTA's strongest partners, and would set a damaging precedent for other sections of the PCT.

Lessons Learned

WTA does not support reopening the Stehekin River Road. Use levels are historically low and recreation opportunity has not been adversely affected. Reconstruction in place would potentially cause severe environmental impacts. Applying WTA's criteria makes this clear.

- **Hiker Use:** The Stehekin River Road is little used by hikers, and that small usage has actually increased since the 2003 washout.
- **Cost of Repair:** At an estimated cost of more than $6.5 million, repair of the Stehekin is very expensive, particularly in light of its low usage. Maintenance of the rebuilt road would add nearly $100,000 annually to the budget. Finally, operation of the National Park bus beyond the washout would add significantly to the Parks annual operating budget.
- **Environmental Concerns:** According to National Park Service documentation, rebuilding the Stehekin in place would cause "major, short-term adverse impacts to fisheries and aquatic habitat during the 3.5 to 11 year construction period." Further, the rebuilt road would be susceptible to future washout and attendant delivery of sediment into the Stehekin River, based on the 2006 Environmental Assessment.

Illabot Creek Road

A well-built road that should remain open

WTA's Position and Recommendation: The Illabot Creek Road is in good condition and there is no evidence that it poses environmental problems. WTA is pleased that the proposed decommissioning of this road was turned back on appeal, and will work to ensure that it remains open.

Located in the Mount Baker Ranger District of the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, the Illabot Creek Road is just one watershed north of the Suiattle. One of the few points of access to trails in the Glacier Peak Wilderness from the west side of the Cascades, the Illabot road takes hikers to a trailhead accessing Slide Lake, with off-trail routes leading to Jordan and Enjar Lakes. These trails invite parents and grandparents with children in tow, as they are significantly easier to hike than many other outings in the Glacier Peak Wilderness. None of these trails head very deep into the Glacier Peak backcountry. For those long and challenging trips, hikers need to start from the Suiattle or White Chuck River Roads. Both are currently inaccessible due to washouts. At the moment, the Illabot is the only road open to Glacier Peak Trailheads from the west.

The Illabot Creek Road has been on the landscape since the early 1960s, and compared to many roads in the north Mount Baker-Snoqualmie, is in excellent condition and poses little threat to Illabot Creek and the salmon that spawn there.

Slide Lake is an easy four mile round trip hike from the Illabot Creek Road. Photo by Amy Csink

What is the State of the Illabot?

In September 2011, the Mount Baker Ranger District released the Illabot Road Project Environmental Assessment (EA), with a preferred alternative that would have decommissioned seven miles of the Illabot Creek Road from milepost 9 to milepost 16. After receiving public comment on the proposal, the District Ranger chose the preferred alternative, which triggered an appeal by a five people who had commented on the original EA. The appeal was upheld by Forest Service Region 6, and the Illabot Road will stay open for the time being.

It is possible that the Ranger District will try to close the Illabot again in the future, and it may be true that the road does pose some environmental and aquatic impact. But the EA published by the District does not show that the Illabot Creek Road is a problem, and the road itself is in

excellent condition. In fact, the Skagit Watershed Council, a local non-profit dedicated to preserving salmon habitat, lists decommissioning the Illabot Road as one of its lowest priority projects for salmon restoration purposes.

Lessons Learned

A look at WTA's criteria indicates that the Illabot should remain open.

- **Hiker Use:** The Illabot Road provides great recreational access to the Glacier Peak Wilderness.
- **Cost of Repair:** Beyond regular annual maintenance, there is no cost associated with the Illabot.
- **Environmental Concerns:** There are no demonstrated environmental problems stemming from the Illabot Creek Road.

The Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest's press release on the appeal decision gives us a clue as to the motivation behind this closure "Road maintenance funds fall far short of maintaining our current road system. Without cuts in the road network, environmental damage is inevitable," said Forest staff.

That quote reflects an agency that is under tremendous pressure to do too much with too few resources. Road maintenance budgets do indeed fall short of what's needed to repair and maintain National Forest Roads, and agency staff scrambles to fill the gap. In 2011, the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest had just $1.89 million to maintain roads. That is just enough to maintain the system open to passenger vehicles, with nothing left over to deal with emergencies or their high-clearance vehicle road system. Those funds are expected to decline by another 3 to 8% in 2013, exacerbating an already untenable situation.

White Pass in the Glacier Peak Wilderness is one recreational area accessible via the Illabot Road. Photo by Erica Martell

Mountain Loop Highway

A critical recreation access road with a challenging section

WTA's Position and Recommendation: The Mountain Loop Highway is simply too important to not repair. The recreation opportunities from this road are critical to hikers.

The Mountain Loop HIghway is one of Western Washington's classic drives. Starting in Darrington and passing a number of trailheads on its way to Granite Falls, the Mountain Loop passes through diverse forest scenery as it travels along the Sauk and Stillaguamish Rivers. The Glacier Peak Wilderness and the remains of the White Chuck and Sauk River Roads lie to the east. To the west is an amalgam of National Forest and Department of Natural Resources (DNR) land, including the small-but-lovely Boulder River Wilderness. Hikes branching off the Mountain Loop are abundant and include Mount Pugh, Round Lake, Goat Lake, Headlee Pass, Mount Dickerman and Perry Creek. Much of the road is paved, but between Barlow Pass and the White Chuck River Road, the Mountain Loop is a single-lane gravel route reminiscent of the level 3 roads that run through our National Forests.

Very few places are this dense with trails, and still fewer see a substantial number of hikers each year. While current use data for the Mountain Loop does not exist, the April 2006 Mountain Loop Repair Environmental Assessment (EA) cites Snohomish County traffic data indicating that in 1995, average daily use at Buck Creek, 2.5 miles west of Barlow Pass was 232 visitors. Repairs to the Mountain Loop were projected to cost $700,000 and came in at budget.

The strenuous Headless Pass hike is just one of many lovely trails accessed from the Mountain Loop Highway. Photo by Paul Bestock

Challenges on the Mountain Loop

While the paved section of the Mountain Loop is generally in good condition, the unpaved section causes problems. In 2003, the record floods that washed out roads and trails across the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie damaged four sections of the Mountain Loop. The Darrington Ranger District proposed a program of repairs on site and relocations away from the Sauk River that would fortify the road against further washouts at problem locations.

Repair of the Mountain Loop was delayed by more flooding in 2006, and further put off by an appeal. The appellants contended that the Forest Service was working below the high water line of the river during salmon spawning. The Forest Service denied those claims and rejected the appeal. The appellants further argued that the

unpaved section of the Mountain Loop should remain closed, as it is too prone to washout. The road finally reopened again in June 2008. In 2010, the river and the road came into contact again, and the eastbound travel lanes were closed until May 2011, when the road finally reopened to the public.

Lessons Learned

Applying WTA's criteria to the Mountain Loop Highway makes it clear that the road should remain open and well-maintained.

- **Hiker Use:** The Mountain Loop is a fundamental recreational route for nearly 85,000 recreationists annually.
- **Cost of Repair:** Repairs are not prohibitively expensive. Indeed, after the 2003 floods, repairing damaged sites on the Mountain Loop cost $700,000 on Forest Service-managed sections. That's very little for a road repair project.
- **Environmental Concerns:** The Mountain Loop is not causing severe environmental impact. It is generally far enough away from the Sauk River that it does not impact aquatic species or deliver sediment.

The Mountain Loop would benefit from planning. While it is not a problem road from and environmental or social perspective, the Mountain Loop provides enough recreation opportunity that investing in an Access and Travel Management Plan would pay dividends. The Forest Service should plan for future repairs and recreational enhancements and seek funds to carry out those important projects.

Mitchell Peak/DNR Road 10

Private ownership blocks public access

WTA's Position and Recommendation:
The Mitchell Peak Road is representative of the problems caused by inholdings and checkerboard ownership of public land. DNR should take all reasonable steps to secure an easement for recreational travel and to ensure that, where possible, land trades and acquisitions are effected to consolidate DNR lands.

Hikers have a wealth of opportunities on DNR and Forest Service land. But hikes in the Southwest Region often suffer from a lack of maintenance that extends to roads, so routes are often inaccessible and trails are heavily grown in with brush. WTA keeps up with much of the trail work in the region, but it is an uphill climb. That's why losing access to even one trail is tragic. Such is the case with the Mitchell Peak Trail, which is accessed by DNR Road #10, just south of Swift Reservoir. Mitchell Peak is popular with people from Southwest Washington and Portlanders. That's no surprise, given Mitchell Peak's rocky prominence, Cascade Volcano views and profuse wildflowers.

But Mitchell Peak is currently inaccessible, because the land owner who controls road access to the trailhead has chosen to construct a locked gate.

The Challenge of Easements

An easement is defined as the right of use of one's property by another. Managed appropriately, easements are a powerful tool for preserving recreation opportunities and protection lands from development. Many roads statewide traverse private land and are governed by easement agreements. More often than not, it's not a problem. Either the landowner has granted an unrestricted travel easement to the agency that manages the land around their property, or the landowner allows the public to drive the road to access recreation opportunities. In some cases—like Mitchell Peak—the agency only has a single purpose easement. In this case, it is for timber harvest, and the landowner has now blocked recreational access.

Mitchell Peak affords great views for hikers willing to tackle a strenuous outing. Photo by Douglas Pearson

In the case of Mitchell Peak, DNR is working with the landowner to allow recreational access. If an informal agreement to grant recreational access proves impossible, the agency can prevail upon the Attorney General's office to take this issue up and ask the court to interpret the easement as recreational as well as harvest-related. This would reopen access to the Mitchell Peak Trailhead. We would prefer amicable solution to this or any other easement situation to one in which a landowner was forced in court to grant access unwillingly.

Conflict between private landowners and public access is not unique to Mitchell Peak. For instance, there is no unrestricted access to the Juniper Dunes Wilderness in Southeast Washington. Juniper Dunes can only be reached by a road that crosses private property and can only be travelled with landowner permission, which can be revoked at any time.

The Forest Service and other land management agencies must take corrective action. First, they should update all their easements on a more regular basis to allow for continued appropriate recreational access to trailheads and other facilities. Second, they should begin purchasing property underlying easements from willing sellers to consolidate their lands and access system.

As with so many issues related to roads, problems with easements have to do with funding and capacity. Congress must act to properly fund agency planning and implementation efforts. Critical programs like the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program, which are essential to purchasing and protecting private lands that have critical habitat and recreational value, must be funded to the limits of their authorizations.

Lessons Learned

The Mitchell Peak Road poses no problems to DNR or the public. The only problem with DNR Road 10 is related to the current easement-holder. WTA firmly believes that DNR Road #10 should be open to recreational travel, and that DNR should take all reasonable measures to achieve that end.

- **Hiker Use:** Recreation use is moderate on this road and includes both hikers and hunters.
- **Cost of Repair:** The small cost associated with this road is for regular maintenance.
- **Environmental Concerns:** No environmental problems have been identified.

Conclusions

It is clear that agencies have limited power to preserve their roads. While planning, constructive decommissioning and public engagement are all necessary elements of any sustainable road network, these processes must be funded. By funding planning, Congress creates a virtuous circle, since completed plans often drive implementation funding and action.

Planning puts in place a mechanism whereby agencies are able to analyze their systems and make cogent arguments for the funds to implement proposals.

We make individual recommendations for each road in this report. Our broad recommendations to elected officials and land managers are:

- **Fund Planning:** Congress must fund our National Forest Road system adequately. WTA proposes a two part fund that would pay for planning at the Ranger District and National Forest levels. Similar to the Capital Maintenance Program, National Forest Regions would disburse these funds based on project proposals. Each planning grant would include funding for implementation of alternatives. This would ensure that planning and implementation of projects is done commensurate with the agency's goal of protecting the land and serving the public.
- **Give the Forest Service its Fair Share of Fuel Tax:** For the first time, the Forest Service has access to fuel tax funds to manage its road system, which corrects a massive injustice. But their entire allocation was a pittance in 2011. That does not approach the funding needed to deal with backlog maintenance on the National Forest Road system, much less plan and prepare for trouble areas. Congress must recognize the invaluable contribution of the Forest Service to the economy. For FY 2004-2008, the National Forest recreation contributed $11.2 billion to GDP annually. This contribution is dependent on an open and maintained road system.

Middle Fork Snoqualmie River at Snoqualmie Pass. Photo by Paul Wolman

- **Create Coalitions to Make Change:** The Coalition that gathered around the Middle Fork Road should not be unique. Washington's National Forests are host to dozens of routes as important as the Middle Fork. We've covered a couple of them in this report. The Suiattle Road and the Mountain Loop Highway are as critical to recreation users as the Middle Fork, and deserve the kind of steady, concentrated advocacy that was applied to that route.

What can Hikers do?

The public voice is all-important. WTA has almost 12,000 members in Washington. That strong, eloquent voice for our wildlands is very powerful, but only if hikers speak up! WTA can move mountains if we get our voices heard.

Here are two simple things you can do to make a difference:

- **Stay Informed:** Be sure to comment on land management agency decisions. WTA can help you stay informed on our website and in our magazine. To learn more about how get active, go to **wta.org/action**. While you're there, join our Trail Action Network. We'll keep you informed of opportunities to comment through email alerts.
- **Contact Elected Officials:** Legislators make decisions each day that impact our public lands, roads and trails. WTA makes sure that hikers are included in those discussions, but we're more powerful when you act with us. As noted above, joining the Trail Action Network will ensure that you receive frequent updates on legislative policy issues. And you can get more deeply involved by contact Jonathan Guzzo, WTA Advocacy Director or Kindra Ramos, WTA Engagement Manager. We'll plug you in to issues you care about.