

# Trailhead Management Ideas

With increased visitation many Wilderness areas have seen increasing impacts at trailheads and many trailheads have exceeded capacity. This can result in parking lot expansion, denuded vegetation and other resource impacts. It can also lead to unsafe parking and access issues for other visitors or emergency vehicles. In some locations overflow effects may impact highways or other rights-of-way.

There are a range of potential actions that can be taken, ranging from short-term mitigations to longer term efforts that may require planning and significant funding. Solutions are likely to be highly context dependent. When considering options be sure to consider capacity with associated trails, destinations, or access roads. It is important to also consider potential impacts to wilderness character. For example, expanded parking might lead to additional use that impacts solitude. This document is intended to be a brief overview of some potential management responses related to trailhead capacity issues.

## **Trailhead hosts**

Trailhead hosts can help mitigate parking issues, answer visitor questions, provide informal interpretation and provide LNT and backcountry etiquette. There are examples of both USFS staffed programs and [volunteer/partner](#) programs.

## **Provide alternate locations**

Visitors will often try to find a place to park even if a trailhead is full. This is especially true when the trailhead is a major destination or requires significant travel time to access. Brochures or signage describing other options nearby can provide visitors with alternatives that they might not be aware of. Information can also be provided in advance at in-town locations like District Offices or gear stores. The capacity of other locations to absorb additional use should be considered.

## **Define parking area and limit potential for expansion**

Improper parking can reduce trail capacity, and signage such as “head in parking” can be used to define parking arrangements that maximize capacity. Other techniques involve the use of bumpers, wheel stops, or other parking space markers to define parking stalls. Other units have experimented with providing parking diagrams, with mixed success. Bollards, fencing or rocks can be used to confine vehicle use and limit parking lot expansion.

It may make sense to provide discrete parking for different use types. Differentiated parking for hikers and equestrians is a common example. These two uses have different vehicle requirements and space needs at the trailhead.

## **Move the trailhead**

Trailheads can be moved to locations with more capacity or that are better suited to handle the use. In some cases, moving the trailhead can add distance to and travel time which ends up reducing the overall level of use in Wilderness.

### **Expanded parking**

Parking areas can be expanded provided appropriate planning and NEPA have been undertaken. Some units have also created overflow parking nearby and linked parking with short access trails or routes. The potential resource and wilderness character impacts of expanded parking and corresponding increase in trail use should be considered.

### **Shuttles**

Prior to COVID both public and private shuttles have been used to provide access to trailheads with limited capacity. This approach is generally used for high use areas or areas that are easily accessible as a part of a shuttle route.

### **Set expectations**

Some locations have experimented with parking lot camera's showing current parking availability. Other locations have put "parking lot full" signs at critical road access junctions. Another option is to use social media, press releases, partner and community to get the word out that a location is crowded, and that parking might not be available.

### **One-way-trails**

One-way-trails can distribute visitors across the landscape and reduce the number of visitors encounters. It can be challenging to find suitable locations where broader trail system connectivity can be maintained. Tradeoffs between solitude and unconfined recreation should be considered.

### **Limited entry permits systems**

These can be one of the only long-term options when other limiting factors are unable to constrain use. Any such efforts will typically require significant planning and public engagement.

### **Timed entry**

Reservation or timed entry can be to spread out use, and manage site turnover. Such an approach requires controllable access points and commitment of management resources. As a result, this approach is most frequently seen front country settings.

### **Subpart B CFR Restrictions**

These can be used to address some trailhead issues. For example, vehicle trailer or length restrictions, or another example might be the prohibition of overnight camping at a trailhead.