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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Currently, more than 20 unique passes and permits<sup>1</sup> are available for recreation on state and federal lands in Washington (including state and federal, daily, annual, weekly, and seasonal). The pass(es) that may be required depend on the agency, trailhead, season, activity, mode of access, and whether an individual qualifies for a free/reduced fee program. These passes, depending on the agency, come in the form of a rearview mirror “hang tag,” window cling, sticker, or plastic card that may be linked to a specific individual, household, or up to two license plates. Specific activities and/or areas may require additional fees or permits (e.g. backcountry hiking permits, hunting/fishing licenses, off-road vehicle (ORV) tabs, etc.). The myriad of pass permutations results in uncertainty for public land users about what pass is needed where (and when, and why).

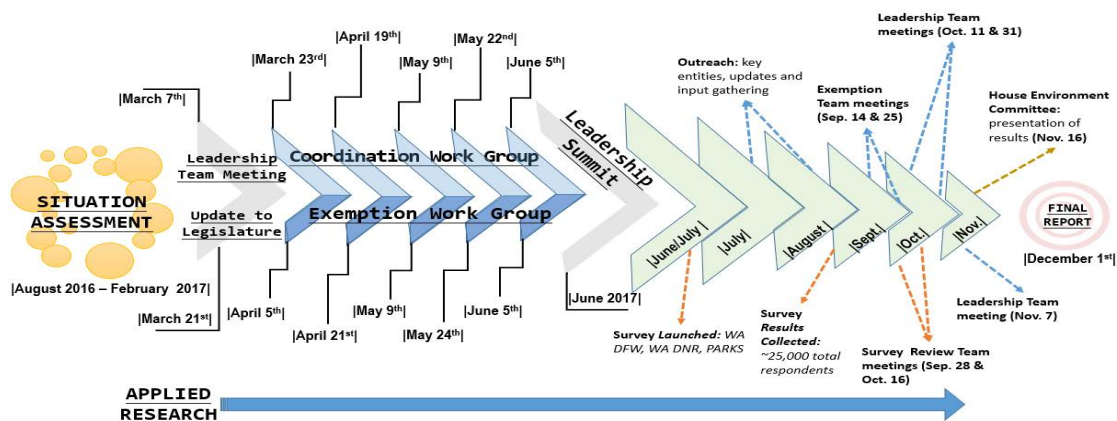
To begin addressing these challenges, the 2016 Washington State Legislature directed the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission, in partnership with the Washington Department of Natural Resources and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, to work with the William D. Ruckelshaus Center<sup>2</sup> (Center) or another neutral third party to **“coordinate a process to develop options and recommendations to improve consistency, equity, and simplicity in recreational access fee systems while accounting for the fiscal health and stability of public land management.”** The budget proviso also requested exploration of the potential for “federal and state permit fee coordination,” including a “single pass to provide access to state and federal lands,” enhance consistency in ways fees apply based on mode of travel and a “comprehensive and consistent approach to recreational fee discounts and exemptions.”

Based on the findings of a Situation Assessment, conducted from August 2016-February 2017, the Center recommended the development of a “Leadership Team” with representatives from user groups, pass holders, and veteran’s advocates. The Leadership Team commissioned issue-specific work groups tasked with gathering information, generating options, and reporting findings. The Leadership Team, informed by the work groups, ultimately finalized recommendations.

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<sup>1</sup> Although sometimes perceived as such, these passes and permits are not necessarily parking permits. Some passes grant “motor vehicle access” while others must only be displayed at authorized fee sites or in association with specific activities. Some agencies can charge access or entrance fees, others may not. This process uses the terms “passes” or “recreation fees” to refer to the many passes and permits that have specific meanings to the agency with which the pass or permit is affiliated.

<sup>2</sup> The William D. Ruckelshaus Center is a joint effort of Washington State University and the University of Washington whose mission is to help parties involved in complex public policy challenges in the state of Washington and the Pacific Northwest tap university expertise to create collaborative, durable and effective solutions.



The above figure depicts work coordinated by the Ruckelshaus Center, including key dates and targets. Since August 2016, participants have shared perspectives, identified information needs, and developed work products to inform the development of packages of options to achieve the principles in the Legislative proviso and guide selection of preferred options and recommendations.

## Guiding Principles: Simplicity and Consistency, Equity, and Fiscal Health

The proviso directed this process to identify opportunities to increase simplicity, consistency, and equity while maintaining agency fiscal health. The Leadership Team developed and applied the following definitions of these terms as guiding principles for recreation fees in Washington.

### Simplicity & Consistency

Individuals should not need to understand agency boundaries to navigate the recreation fee system and should be able to easily access information to confidently identify what pass/permit is needed where and when. Uniformity should exist across land management agencies on pricing, exemptions, mode of access, and activities covered by recreation fees. Product(s) should be easy to purchase/acquire and use. Agencies and retailers should be able to clearly communicate the fee system and help user purchase correct pass(es).

### Equity

The people who access public recreation lands should mirror Washington state's diverse population. The Legislature, in partnership with the public land management agencies, should pursue opportunities that minimize or eliminate barriers (financial, informational, accessibility, etc.) for individuals to use public lands.

### Agency Fiscal Health

Recognizing that agencies manage natural, cultural, and historic resources for the benefit of the entire state, public recreation land management agencies should receive sustainable and stable funding from diverse sources, including the State General Fund and/or other broad-based public funding.

## Leadership Team: Options and Recommendations

With the complexity of the existing system of recreational fees and passes, improvements must contain multiple, interdependent elements. To address this, the Leadership Team developed and discussed many packages of potential solutions. Several were considered, but not recommended (see full report); three packages are recommended (see overview below, or full report for more detail), each containing several interconnected components. *All three packages assume that fees remain for backcountry permits, hunting and fishing licenses, campgrounds, outdoor recreational vehicle (ORV) tabs, and other special use permits/ passes and that agencies retain current levels of General Fund Support.*

The “Pass-Free Access Package” is the preferred recommendation, based on the voting members of the Leadership Team seeing it as the best fit with the parameters of the proviso. The “Two-Vehicle Pass System - Building on Success Package” and “One-Vehicle Pass System - Reduced Fees Package” are also recommended as potential improvements to the status quo.

### Pass-Free Access Package

This is the preferred recommendation of the voting members of the Leadership Team, concluding that it is the best fit with the guiding principles/parameters of the proviso. This package replaces the Discover Pass and other state recreation passes with a source of broad-based public funding, resulting in the simplest, most consistent and equitable fee system and stable funding for land management agencies. Broad-based public funding reduces the need for exemptions and discounted passes. The funding source given the most consideration was a mandatory public land management fee at the time of vehicle registration; however, the Leadership Team did not prescribe this source and was open to other funding methods. With more Washingtonians supporting public land management, further fiscal analysis on a registration fee should begin in the \$7-15 per vehicle range. Under this package, agency budgets should still include allocations from the State General Fund.

### Two-Vehicle Pass System, Building on Success Package

This package is also recommended as a potential improvement to the status quo. It recognizes the successes of the Discover Pass program, while identifying opportunities to (a) simplify and bundle the many state passes that currently exist, (b) pursue the development of a pass that would work on state and federal lands in Washington, and (c) evaluate and standardize exempt/discounted passes. Under this package, individuals who recreate on public lands would continue to support recreation operations/ programming through the purchase of user-based passes/fees. Fiscal analysis is required to identify consistent price point to user (starting in \$30-35 range) and mechanisms to adjust price for inflation. This package recognizes that fees can support some recreation management needs, but not all agency funding needs so agencies should receive support from the State General Fund.

### Single-Vehicle Pass System with Reduced Fees Package

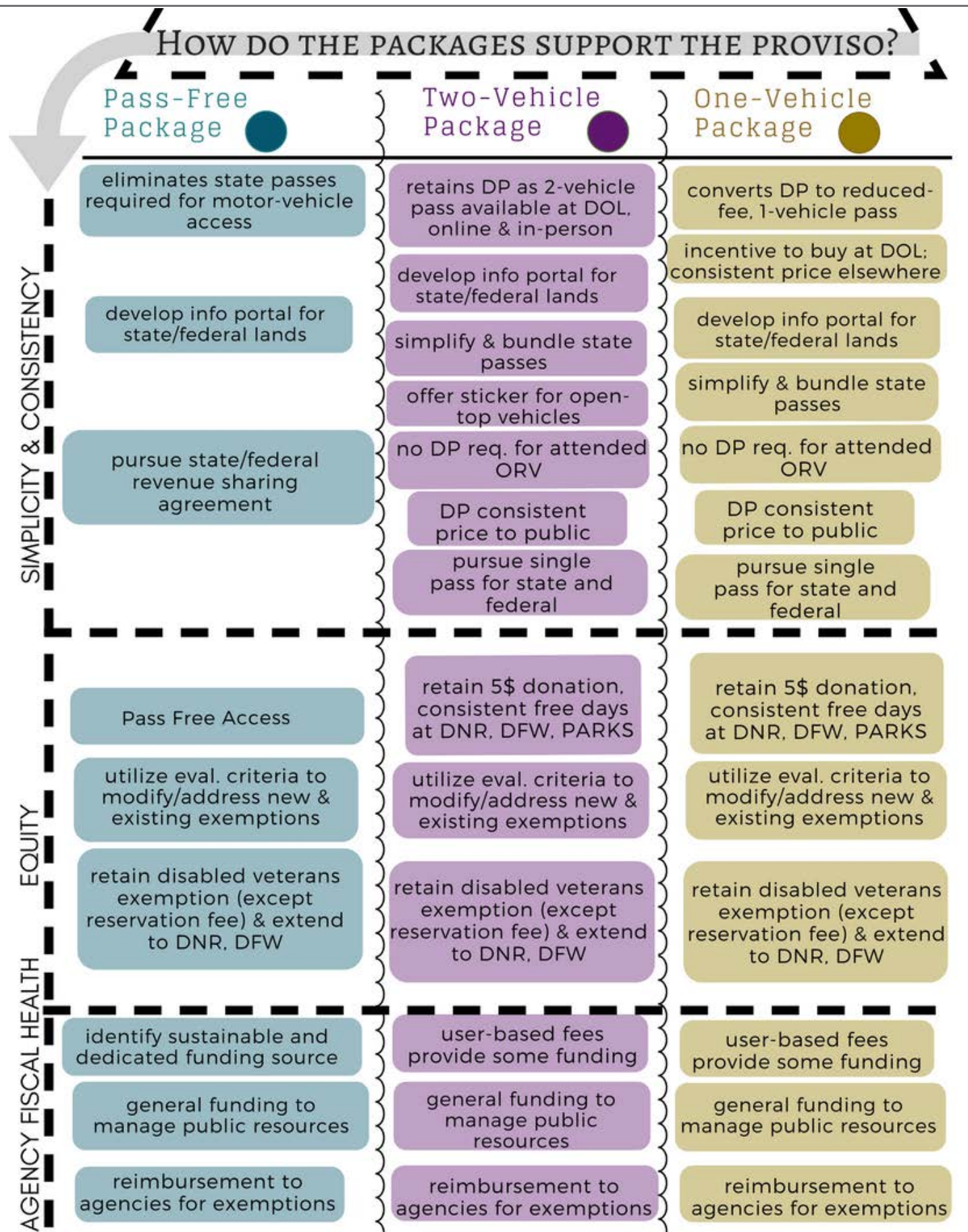
This package was also recommended as a potential improvement to the status quo. It has many similarities to the Two-Vehicle package. It identifies opportunities to simplify and bundle state passes, pursues the development of a state/federal pass, and evaluates and standardize exemptions. But instead of a household, two-vehicle pass, the Discover Pass would become a lower-priced, single-vehicle pass, potentially required in conjunction with more activities such as camping (at State Parks) or hunting (at WDFW managed lands). A lower price would enable more households to participate in the Discover Pass program and recreate on state-managed lands. To encourage participation, buying a Discover Pass at the

time of vehicle registration would be the incentivized option. Individuals who chose not to buy a pass at the time of registration, and/or out-of-state visitors, could buy a higher-priced pass at a later date online or in-person. Fiscal analysis is required to determine pricing (starting at \$15-20 range) and mechanisms to adjust for inflation. Under this package, agency budgets should still include allocations from the State General Fund.

## Common Elements Across Packages

Each package presents a different, yet internally cohesive approach to increasing simplicity, consistency, and equity while maintaining agency fiscal health. However, some elements are consistent across multiple packages or would not preclude progress towards a specific package.

- **Access To and Usability Of Information:** encourage/support state agencies (DNR, WDFW, and State Parks) to coordinate with federal agencies and other appropriate entities to develop a common information portal.
- **State/Federal Fee Coordination:** encourage/support state agencies to engage with federal agencies to develop a single pass valid for state and federal recreation lands in Washington, along with a corresponding revenue-sharing agreement.
- **Implement Policy of Consistent Free Days** at state managed recreation lands.
- **Motor-Vehicle Access:** eliminate need for attended dual-registered ORVs to display a Discover Pass.
- **Informed Pricing:** prior to any decision to change products or prices conduct fiscal and cost/benefit analysis, accounting for price elasticity, inflation, and parameters of fee/funding mechanism described in package(s)
- **Statewide Approach to Exemptions/Discounted Passes:**
  - Develop and adopt statutory language requiring agencies and the Legislature to apply principles of the the fiscal and social impact evaluation criteria/tool to existing and proposed exemptions; and
  - Retain exemptions for disabled veterans, except the reservation transaction exemption, and extend free day-use access to DNR and WDFW.
- **State Funding to Agencies:**
  - To increase usability of facilities/amenities;
  - Reimburesment to implement exemptions/discount programs; and
  - To manage cultural, historic, and other public resources.



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## Next Steps

**Project Wrap-Up:** The Leadership Team provided guidance and oversight as the Center compiled this report. Members of the Leadership and Agency Core Teams, as well as other interested entities, had an opportunity to review the final draft for factual errors before it was finalized.

The proviso required a “report to the appropriate committees of the Legislature.” In addition to submitting the final written report, the Center, members of the Agency Core Team, and Leadership Team provided presentations to the House Environment Committee and House Community Development, Housing & Tribal Affairs Committee.

**Implementation:** Some elements within the packages are ready for implementation, while others require further data gathering and careful analysis and/or require further collaboration by various combinations of state and federal agencies, the Legislature, and interested parties.

The legislature and agencies should complete the work of this process by conducting a fiscal cost/benefit analysis, accounting for price elasticity, mechanisms to adjust for inflation, and parameters of fee/funding mechanism described in package(s) prior to any decision to change products or prices.

Each package presents a different, yet cohesive approach to increasing simplicity, consistency, and equity while maintaining agency fiscal health. However, some elements are consistent across multiple packages or would not preclude progress towards a pass-free package (i.e. policy of consistent free days at state managed recreation lands). Implementation of many of these elements can be led by the state agencies, but may require support from the Legislature. Regarding the development of a regional state/federal pass, state land management agencies, with support from the Legislature, should engage with regional federal fee program managers at US Forest Service, US Bureau of Reclamation, US Bureau of Land Management, US Army Corps of Engineers, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service (including Interagency Pass program).

The agencies and Leadership Team look forward to working with the Governor and Legislature to understand your preferences moving forward.