



Background Information Upper Stehekin Valley Road August 2009

- ✓ The decision to close the Upper Stehekin Valley Road beyond Car Wash Falls was based on the combination of effects from constraints from the Wilderness boundary, environmental impacts, construction and lifecycle maintenance costs and the ability to provide access via hiking and stock trails.
- ✓ The upper Stehekin Road above High Bridge has been maintained differently than the lower Stehekin Valley Road. The upper Stehekin Road above High Bridge is in the North Cascades National Park and the Lower road is in the Lake Chelan National Recreation Area. The 1995 General Management Plan called for these two road sections to be managed differently. Specifically the road in the Upper Stehekin Valley was to be “a heavy-duty, high clearance shuttle vehicle road from High Bridge to Cottonwood.” The upper Stehekin Road provided access to NPS trailheads and camps. No private property was accessed by this section of road.
- ✓ When Lake Chelan National Recreation Area was established in 1968, the Stehekin Valley Road was unpaved with limited maintenance by Chelan County due to its isolation, extreme snow loads and periodic flood damage. Road dust was also a chronic problem in the Lower Valley. The upper 7 miles of road from Bridge Creek to Cottonwood was closed to vehicles due to the structural decay of the wooden bridge across bridge creek. As a result that section of road was largely overgrown with vegetation and impassible to vehicles. Due to the high costs and challenges of maintaining the road, Chelan County in 1970 conveyed the road via quit claim deed to the United States government, stating "it is in the public interest that the administration and responsibility for [the Stehekin Valley Road] be vested in the National Park Service" (Chelan County Resolution No. 642-E, April 1970).*
- ✓ Since 1970, the NPS has assumed responsibility for road maintenance including brushing, grading, snow removal, ditch and drainage repairs, bridge repairs, and overall upkeep. From 1970 to 1980, the NPS spent approximately \$1.4 million dollars on road improvements including replacement of eleven bridges, paving the lower four miles, repairing several slides, replacing culverts, reconstructing several sections of lost roadway and implementing a public shuttle system.*
- ✓ The NPS spent a similar amount of money from 1980 to 1990 on road maintenance, repairs and operation of the public shuttle system.*
- ✓ NPS is committed to maintaining the lower Stehekin Valley Road in Lake Chelan National Recreation Area for recreation, administrative uses and community sustainability. \$1,564,776 million has been spent on repairs to the lower Stehekin Valley Road area since the 2003 flood.

*Citation: *United States District Court, Eastern District of Washington. June 4, 1993. Order Granting Motion for Summary Judgment. United States of America, plaintiff and North Cascades Conservation Council, intervener plaintiff --vs-- Chelan County, a Municipal Corporation of the State of Washington, Defendant. Case Number CS-92-331-AMM.*

Plans are progressing to pave and secure this road for the future through the Stehekin River Corridor Implementation Plan and EIS. Cost estimates for creating a sustainable road in the Lower Valley range from \$6 to \$9 million, depending on which alternative in the Plan/EIS is selected. These estimates are made by the Federal Highway Administration.

- ✓ The impact of the road closure on visitation to Lake Chelan NRA and North Cascades National Park appears to have been small. Backcountry overnight users in the Upper Stehekin Valley have rebounded. In 2003 there were 1238 people that used a campground along the road in the Upper Stehekin Valley. In 2008 there were 1385 people that used these campgrounds. Day hiker numbers have not been measured (before or after the road was closed).

Total Backcountry Camp Visitors - Upper Stehekin Valley 2000-2008

Camp	Number of Visitors per Year (All Upper Stehekin Valley Camps)								
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008*
High Bridge	232	141	215	189	140	150	135	159	260
Tumwater	98	88	114	89	71	96	89	109	124
Dolly Varden△	51	31	52	51	0	4	18	0	0
Shady	20	29	11	10	0	2	2	0	2
Bridge Creek	286	169	251	198	156	189	181	331	333
Bridge Creek Group	80	57	92	80	87	89	96	39	68
Park Creek	49	15	83	68	69	70	115	99	109
Flat Creek	29	36	4	41	27	19	59	60	55
Cottonwood	170	106	141	132	87	145	125	123	156
Basin Creek★	325	335	296	380	94	137	278	176	278
Bridge Creek Tent Camp*	na	na	na	na	na	11	46	58	n/a
Cottonwood Tent Camp*	na	na	na	na	na	19	35	42	n/a
Total Visitors	1340	1007	1259	1238	731	931	1179	1196	1385

*Thru 10/17/08

- ✓ The NPS shuttle statistics show that an average of 2500 visitors used the shuttle service in the upper Stehekin Valley in the last six years of operation. In addition to fare revenue collect the shuttle service on the Upper Stehekin Valley Road cost approximately an additional \$35,000 per year to operate.
- ✓ The NPS prepared an Environmental Assessment to consider what to do to provide access to the Upper Stehekin Valley when the road was destroyed. Federal Law requires that federal agencies undertake environmental review when an agency considers taking a federal action. Four alternatives were evaluated: A) no action (as required by law), B) Permanently close the road above Car Wash falls, C) Reconstruct the road in place, D) and Re-route the road from Car Wash Falls to Bridge Creek and from Glory to Cottonwood Camp. For a variety of reasons, the Alternative B (Close the Road Above Car Wash Falls) was selected. This alternative, called for providing access by using sections of the existing Pacific Crest Trail, sections of the remaining roadbed and trail re-routes around washouts would ensure a continuous trail provided access to the Upper Stehekin Valley, including other trails and established camps. The alternative also called for removing culverts from washed out sections of road to ensure these did not cause resource damage through unnatural erosion or simply getting washed into the river. The culmination of the selection of Alternative B was a Finding of No Significant Impact. Since no significant impacts were identified, an EIS was not required.

- ✓ 2003 cost estimate for Federal Highways to rebuild the road in place was **\$6,575,379**, which would include blasting into bedrock and cliff bands and/or importing extensive amounts of fill (*see pg 37 of EA*). Because a major landslide has been actively eroding further since 2003 (Appendix A2), the actual cost would likely be more than the initial estimate. This engineering approach, however, would cause a variety of potentially significant environmental impacts and it would be likely that sections of the road would be washed out again by future floods.
- ✓ Because the NPS found in the EA that attempting to repair the road in place or using a combination of re-routing and reconstruction in place would likely cause significant environmental impacts, an EIS would be required to reevaluate these alternatives for further road repair in the Upper Stehekin Valley. It is estimated that an EIS would take 3 to 5 years and cost a minimum of \$500,000 to prepare. The park does not have the capacity to do this EIS and funding would need to be appropriated.
- ✓ The NPS cannot implement an Administrative option to adjust the Wilderness boundaries to create a 100' road corridor. According to NPS Management Policies: "Wilderness boundaries have the force of federal law and may only be modified through the legislative process—unless minor adjustments and corrections are specifically authorized within the wilderness designation enabling legislation." 2006 Management Policies, 6.3.11.1 Legal Descriptions and Boundary Maps. The Washington Wilderness Act of 1988 did not provide the authority to do boundary adjustments.
- ✓ Congress does have the authority to create or change Wilderness boundaries. This requires a law to be passed and signed by the President. When Congress passes legislation the NPS is responsible for implementing and administering the law in the context of other applicable laws and regulations.
- ✓ As part of the decision to close the road, the NPS will maintain access to the Upper Stehekin Valley as part of the trail system to a hiker and stock standard. (e.g. The road above Car Wash falls was officially closed and removed from the NPS road system.) Because bicycles are not allowed on any trails within North Cascades National Park Complex, the trail in the Upper Stehekin Valley is now closed to all bicycles. In addition, it is not possible to transport a bicycle from the existing road (below Car Wash Falls) to what remains of the old road bed in the non-wilderness corridor without passing through Wilderness due to washouts and hazardous terrain. Third, there are occasional enforcement issues with bikes on other park trails. Having this trail, which serves several cross park trails including the Pacific Crest Trail, open to bikes would only add confusion to the public and likely increase enforcement issues on other trails.
- ✓ The NPS remains committed to providing access and promoting visitor use in the Stehekin area. To this end the park continues to do a variety of work ranging from working to establish a long term concession contract, improvements to trails, the visitor center, docks and other visitor facilities and working with partners to provide public information to support visitation.
- ✓ Approximately \$2.5 million have been spent in public money since 2007 for improvements and repairs to the concession operation in Stehekin to ensure positive visitor experiences and promote visitation. The concession operation is currently held by a local Stehekin business.

- ✓ Changes to infrastructure have been made along the Upper Stehekin Valley. New trail reroutes have been and will continue to be created in order to retain hiker and stock access to the Upper Stehekin Valley. Signage and visitor information have been changed to help use these trails for day and overnight use. Campgrounds are being maintained. Two campgrounds, Shady and Dolly Varden that were impacted by the flood are being relocated to more sustainable sites. Culverts have been removed from sections of the old road bed to help with the restoration of the terrain and prevent unnecessary erosion from occurring when the unneeded culverts become blocked. Because vehicles cannot access the Upper Valley, vault toilets could not be pumped out. These were pumped by hand, removed and replaced with pit toilets.
- ✓ New Commercial Use opportunity has been created to operate a Tent-to-Tent camping operation in the Upper Stehekin Valley. This provides a way for people that either unable or prefer not to carry camping gear to travel in the Upper Stehekin Valley and spend the night. This is operated by a local Stehekin business.
- ✓ Several easy, moderate and difficult day hikes are easily accessible to visitors to Stehekin. Some examples include the Imus Loop Trail (easy, .8 mile), Stehekin River Trail (easy, 8 miles round trip), Agnes Gorge Trail (easy, 5 miles round trip), Rainbow Loop Trail (moderate, 4.4 miles), McGregor Mountain Trail (difficult, 15 miles round trip), Purple Pass Trail (difficult, 14 miles round trip), and the easy hike up to Bridge Creek on the Old Wagon Trail (PCT), which now serves as an excellent base camp for more dayhikes and a hub for numerous trails to other parts of the park. Numerous other hiking destinations easily reached from Stehekin that offer opportunities to visit the high country include McAlester Pass, Rainbow Lakes, Summit Trail and Boulder Basin. In addition Cascade Pass is still accessible by a 4 mile hike from the west side trailhead.
- ✓ Fire suppression:
 - The most important response to fire in the Stehekin Valley is an active fuels management program that reduces fuel load in and near the Urban Wildland Interface.
 - The NPS has had such a program in place in the Stehekin Valley for the last 7 years. In 2008, NPS spent \$217,000 on fire fuel reduction projects in Stehekin Valley. In 2007, NPS spent \$280,000.
 - In addition, Chelan Fire District 10 has played a key role in reducing fuel loads on private property throughout the Valley through the use of volunteer work parties.
 - It is logical to assume that a road would provide easier logistical support. However, a large wildland fire's growth has more to do with the fuels, environmental conditions, weather, and topography, than whether we can get to it fast. The key to community safety and fire protection is fuel reduction and prescribed burning projects. (*see p 131 in EA for previous discussion*)
 - Wildland fire suppression in the Stehekin Valley will always rely on helicopter support and management because of the terrain and for safety of fire fighters (e.g. relying on vehicles access to a deadend road can put fire fighters in unsafe situations.)

Total Backcountry Visitors, Upper Stehekin Valley Camps 2000 - 2008

