

Draft Alternatives Packet

Mount Rainier National Park Air Tour Management Plan



Lead Agency: Federal Aviation Administration

Cooperating Agency: National Park Service

March 2011

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Introduction

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the National Park Service (NPS) are inviting the public, agencies, tribes, and other interested parties to provide comments, suggestions, and input regarding the routes and parameters (e.g. time of day and days of the week when flights could be allowed) of the preliminary alternatives under consideration for study in the Mount Rainier National Park Air Tour Management Plan (ATMP) Environmental Assessment (EA). Three public meetings will provide opportunities for members of the public to learn more about the draft alternatives under consideration and to provide comments to the FAA and NPS. The agencies would like to know about any concerns or ideas the public has regarding the draft alternatives and their potential operating parameters (e.g. time of day and days of the week when flights would be allowed).

Comment Period

Comments must be received on or before May 16, 2011.

Public Meetings

Public meetings will be held at the following locations, dates, and times:

April 26, 2011: 6:30 - 8:30 p.m.
Mountaineers Building
Goodman A Auditorium
7700 Sand Point Way NE
Seattle, WA 98115

April 27, 2011: 6:30 – 8:30 p.m.
Mount Rainier National Park Education Center
Tahoma Woods
Ashford Headquarters
55210 238th Ave. E.
Ashford, WA 98304

April 28, 2011: 6:30 – 8:30 p.m.
Washington State History Museum
1911 Pacific Ave, Tacoma, WA 98402

How to Submit Comments on Draft Alternatives

Comments will be accepted through May 16, 2011. Comments may be submitted:

- At any of the public meetings (see above for meeting information)
- Mail: Larry Tonish, FAA, P.O. Box 92007, Los Angeles, CA 90009-2007
- Online: http://parkplanning.nps.gov/MORA_ATMP



Part 1: Federal Action and Alternatives

A. Federal Action

The proposed federal action is the establishment of an ATMP at Mount Rainier National Park (the Park) in accordance with 14 CFR Part 136. The alternative selection will be based on acceptable justification and will include any measures that are necessary to mitigate or prevent significant adverse impacts of commercial air tour operations, if any, on the Park's natural and cultural resources and visitor experiences.

The ATMP will only apply to the airspace below 5,000 feet (ft) above ground level (AGL) over the area encompassed by the park and the ½-mile buffer zone surrounding the park boundary. The ATMP applies to all commercial air tour operations in this airspace, unless, for the purposes of safe operation of an aircraft as determined under the rules and regulations of the FAA, the pilot-in-command is required to take action to ensure the safe operation of the aircraft.

The purpose and need of this project are compliance with *National Parks Air Tour Management Act of 2000 (NPATMA)*, which directs the FAA and NPS to establish an ATMP for any national park or tribal lands for which such a plan is not in effect whenever a person applies for authority to conduct a commercial air tour operation over the park. The need to develop an ATMP at the Park was triggered by statutory language in *NPATMA* that required the development of an ATMP for parks where commercial air tour operators applied for operating authority to conduct operations.

The environmental decision to be made is the selection of a preferred ATMP alternative for the Park. Once completed, the ATMP will be incorporated either directly or by reference into Title 14, Code of Federal Regulations, Part 136, National Park Air Tour Management. Appropriate actions will be taken to implement the selected ATMP alternative, in compliance with the existing legislative, regulatory, and policy mandates of both agencies.

NPATMA specifies that the ATMP be developed by means of a public process. A scoping period held in April and May 2010 was the first element of that public process. This current public comment period on preliminary alternatives is the second opportunity for public involvement in the ATMP development. Input received will be used to refine the preliminary alternatives. The Draft EA will identify and evaluate a final set of alternatives. The Draft EA will be made available for public review and comment.

B. Alternatives Development

The alternatives are the “heart” of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) process and must meet the *NPATMA* objective to develop acceptable and effective measures to mitigate or prevent the significant adverse impacts, if any, of commercial air tour operations upon the natural and cultural resources and visitor experiences at the Park.

The FAA and NPS have identified general reasonableness criteria that each ATMP alternative should: (1) be safe, (2) satisfy the Purpose and Need, (3) be technically and economically feasible, (4) minimize or prevent significant impacts to park resources and values and (5) avoid repeating actions in other alternatives. As required by NEPA and Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations, the “No Action Alternative” must also be evaluated. FAA and the NPS have agreed that “no action” for purposes of developing an ATMP is “no change” from current management direction or level of management intensity, as recommended in CEQ Guidance. Therefore, the No Action Alternative for the Park will be an ATMP that codifies current and existing flight track conditions at the interim operating authority (IOA) level of annual operations. Figure 2 shows existing typical flight tracks and operating altitudes over and within ½ mile of the Park's boundary. Commercial air tour operations over the Park would be required to comply only with existing applicable Federal Aviation Regulations.



In addition to these criteria, the *NPATMA* and implementing regulations at 14 CFR Part 136 state that the ATMP for a park:

- May prohibit commercial air tour operations within ½ mile outside the boundary of a national park.
- May establish conditions for the conduct of commercial air tour operations, including, but not limited to, commercial air tour routes, maximum number of flights per unit of time, maximum and minimum altitudes, time of day restrictions, restrictions for particular events, intrusions on privacy on tribal lands, and mitigation of noise, visual, or other impacts.
- Shall apply to all commercial air tour operations within ½ mile outside the boundary of a national park.
- Shall include incentives (such as preferred commercial air tour routes and altitudes, relief from caps and curfews) for the adoption of quiet aircraft technology by commercial air tour operators conducting commercial air tour operations at a park.
- Shall provide for the initial allocation of opportunities to conduct commercial air tour operations if the plan includes a limitation on the number of commercial air tour operations for any time period.
- Shall justify and document the need for measures taken pursuant to the items above.

C. Draft Alternatives

More than 800 comments were received during the Park's ATMP/EA public scoping period in 2010. These comments were used by the FAA and NPS in combination with knowledge of Park staff to brainstorm alternative concepts and parameters. This brainstorming process led to the development of four draft alternatives:

1. No Air Tours Alternative
2. IOA No Action Alternative
3. Existing Flights Alternative
4. Highway 123 and Southern Route Alternative

A map and a list of potential operating parameters for each draft alternative are presented on the following pages. The FAA and NPS are now inviting the public, agencies, tribes, and other interested parties to provide comments, suggestions, and input regarding the draft alternatives for the Park's ATMP EA. Three public meetings will provide opportunities for members of the public to learn more about the alternatives under consideration and to provide comments to the FAA and NPS. The agencies would like to know about any concerns or ideas the public has regarding the draft alternatives and their potential operating parameters (e.g. time of day and days of the week when flights would be allowed).

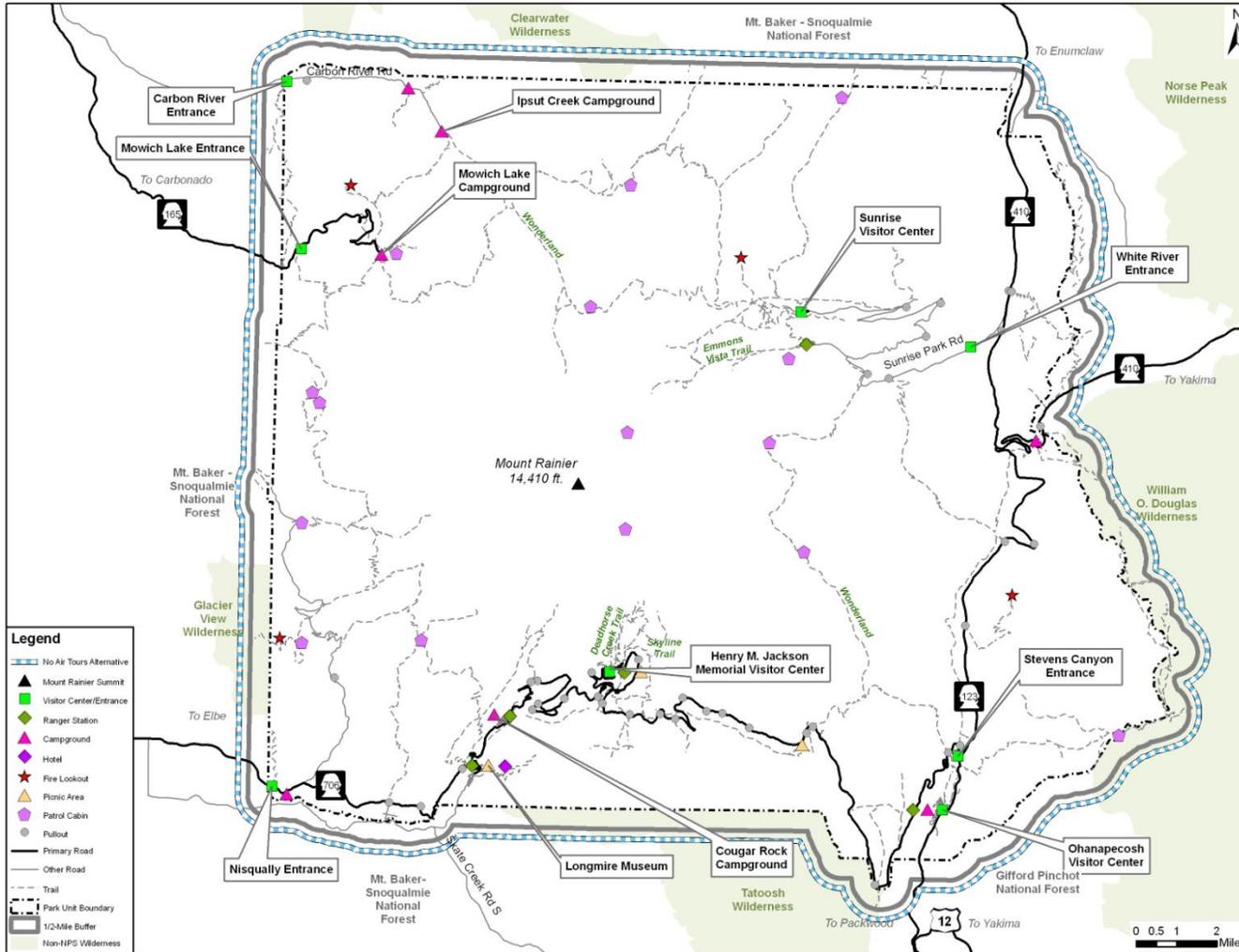
How to Submit Comments on Draft Alternatives

Comments will be accepted through May 16, 2011. Comments may be submitted:

- At any of the public meetings (see Introduction for meeting information)
- Mail: Larry Tonish, FAA, P.O. Box 92007, Los Angeles, CA 90009-2007
- Online: http://parkplanning.nps.gov/MORA_ATMP

Alternative 1: No Air Tours Alternative

Figure 1. No Air Tours Alternative



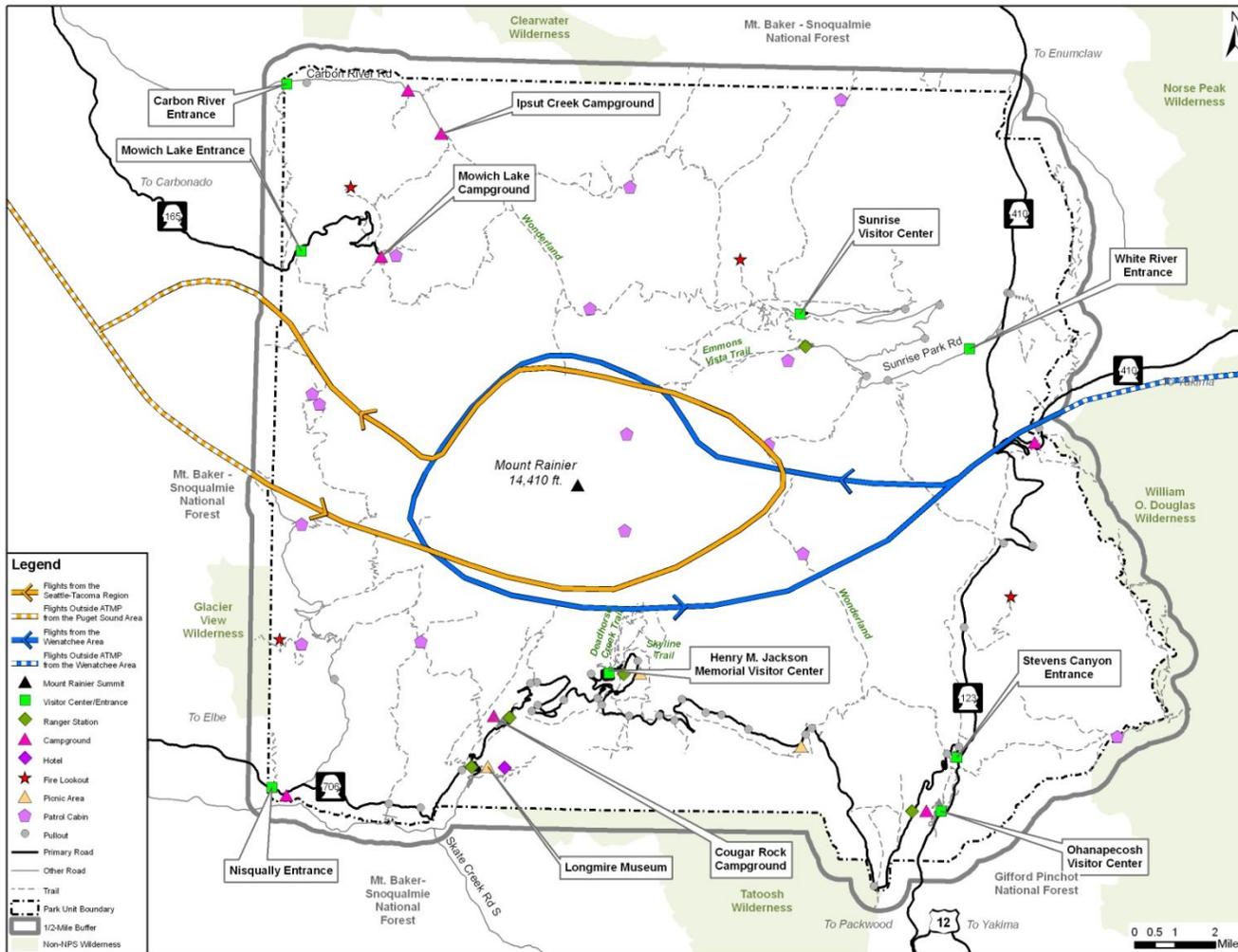
Key Features:

- No air tours over the Park or ½-mile buffer unless above 5,000 feet above ground level (AGL)

Operating Parameter	Restrictions
Annual operation levels	0 flights/year
Time of day	N/A
Season	N/A
Day(s) of week	N/A
Maximum number of flights per day	N/A
Minimum altitude	5,000 feet AGL over the Park or within ½-mile buffer; in accordance with FAA regulations 14 CFR 91.119
2-way vs. 1-way flights	N/A
Clockwise vs. counter clockwise	N/A
Type of aircraft	N/A

Alternative 2: IOA No Action Alternative

Figure 2. IOA No Action Alternative



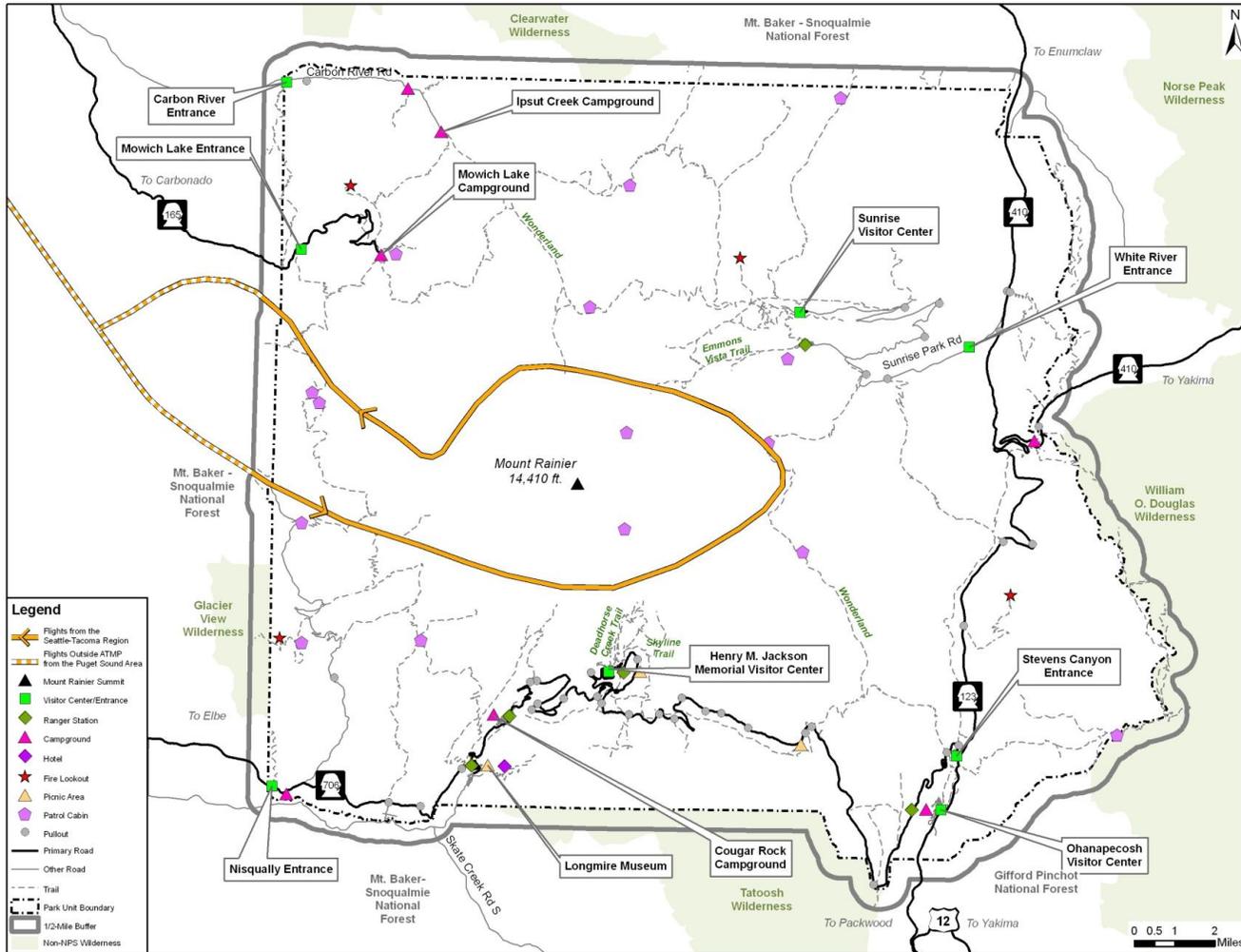
Key Features:

- Generalized existing flight routes
- Codifies Interim Operating Authority levels

Operating Parameter	Restrictions
Annual operation levels	114 flights/year
Time of day	No restrictions
Season	No restrictions
Day(s) of week	No restrictions
Maximum number of flights per day	Limited by IOA
Minimum altitude	In accordance with FAA regulations 14 CFR 91.119
2-way vs. 1-way flights	1-way
Clockwise vs. counter clockwise	Counter clockwise
Type of aircraft	Fixed wing and rotorcraft

Alternative 3: Existing Flights Alternative

Figure 3. Existing Flights Alternative



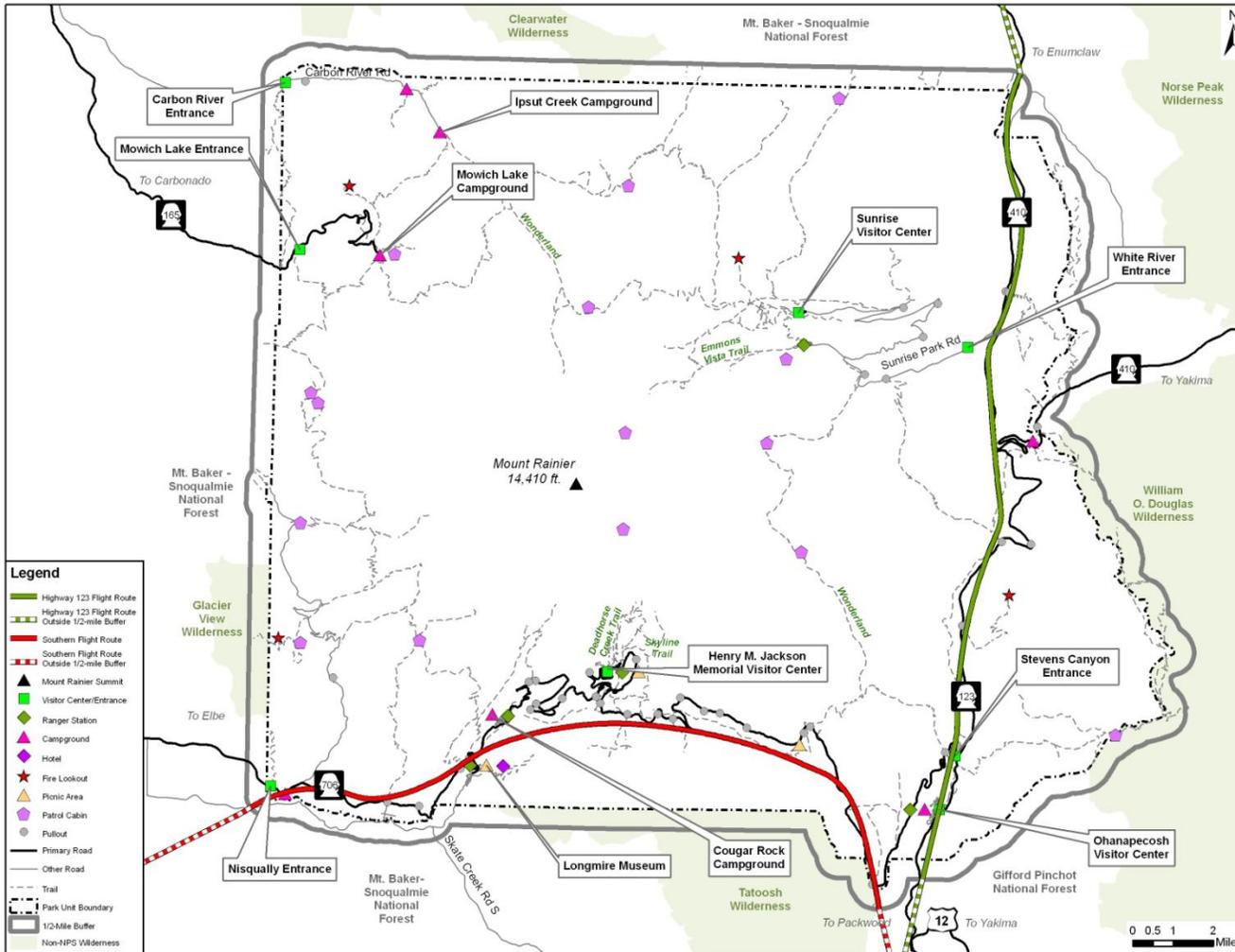
Key Features:

- Generalized existing flight route; depends on weather conditions, customer requests etc.
- Annual operation levels reflect current operations (2010)

Operating Parameter	Restrictions
Annual operation levels	55 flights/year
Time of day	No restrictions
Season	No restrictions
Day(s) of week	No restrictions
Maximum number of flights per day	Limited to 55 annual operations
Minimum altitude	2,000 feet AGL and 3-4 miles lateral from the mountain
2-way vs. 1-way flights	1-way
Clockwise vs. counter clockwise	Counter clockwise
Type of aircraft	4-6 seat single engine fixed wing and rotorcraft

Alternative 4: Highway 123 and Southern Route Alternative

Figure 4. Highway 123 and Southern Route Alternative



Key Features:

- Allows flights in Park over roadways

Operating Parameter	Restrictions
Annual operation levels	0-114 flights/year
Time of day	November 1st - April 30th: No time of day restrictions May 1st - October 31st: Allowed 2 hours after official sunrise to 2 hours prior to official sunset June 15th - September 15th: Allowed 2 hours after official sunrise to 11:00 am and 3:00 pm to 2 hours prior to official sunset
Season	None
Day(s) of week	Monday-Thursday
Maximum number of flights per day	No more than 4 flights/day
Minimum altitude	Northbound flights: 7,500 feet MSL <i>mandatory</i> altitude Southbound flights: 8,500 feet MSL <i>mandatory</i> altitude Westbound flights: 8,000 feet MSL <i>mandatory</i> altitude for rotorcraft and 8,500 feet MSL <i>mandatory</i> altitude for fixed wing Eastbound flights: 9,000 feet MSL <i>mandatory</i> altitude for rotorcraft and 9,500 feet MSL <i>mandatory</i> altitude for fixed wing
2-way vs. 1-way flights	2-way over Highway 123 and 410 2-way over Highway 706
Clockwise vs. counter clockwise	N/A
Type of aircraft	Fixed wing and rotorcraft

***** End Part 1 *****



Part 2: Background Information

A. National Parks Air Tour Management Act of 2000

The FAA, in cooperation with the NPS has initiated development of an ATMP for the Park, pursuant to the *NPATMA*. The *NPATMA* and its implementing regulations (Title 14, Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] Part 136) require the FAA and NPS to develop an ATMP for each unit of the national park system or tribal land that does not have a plan in effect at the time an operator applies for FAA authority to conduct commercial air tours. The objective of an ATMP is to develop acceptable and effective measures to mitigate or prevent significant adverse impacts, if any, of commercial air tour operations upon natural and cultural resources, visitor experiences, and tribal lands.

The *NPATMA* applies to any person who conducts a commercial air tour operation over a unit of the national park system, over tribal lands that are within or abutting a unit of the national park system, or over any area within ½ mile outside a unit of the national park system. A commercial air tour operation is defined as a flight conducted for compensation or hire in a powered aircraft where the purpose of the flight is sightseeing, during which the aircraft flies below a minimum altitude of 5,000 feet AGL.

Several steps are required for the development and implementation of an ATMP. First, as required by NEPA, the FAA and NPS will prepare an EA for public review including various alternatives for the ATMP. If no significant environmental impacts are identified, the FAA in cooperation with the NPS will prepare a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and Record of Decision (ROD). The ROD will identify a preferred alternative for the ATMP. Based on the preferred alternative, the agencies will next develop the ATMP, which will identify specific measures and conditions applying to air tour operations for the Park. The ATMP may include the conditions for conducting commercial air tour operations and other administrative requirements, such as transferability or termination of Operating Authority, handling requests for increase in Operating Authority, and reporting requirements. The last step in the process is FAA rulemaking, to establish enforceable rules for implementing the ATMP.

At the Park, five air tour operators have received IOA from the FAA (Table 1). In order to determine IOA, each existing operator was required by 14 CFR Part 136 to report the greater of (a) the number of commercial air tour operations conducted during the 12-month period preceding *NPATMA* or (b) the average number of commercial air tour operations conducted by the operator during the three-year period preceding *NPATMA*. Air tour operators can fly up to their IOA level annually. IOA terminates 180 days after an ATMP has been established for the park. The number of existing operations reported by each operator represents the IOA.

Table 1. Air Tour Operators with Interim Operating Authority (IOA) to Conduct Air Tours at Mount Rainier National Park.

Existing Operators with IOA	Flights Per Year under IOA
Vashon Air	74
Classic Helicopter Corp	32
Island Air, Inc.	3
Rite Bros. Aviation, Inc.	2
Wings of Wenatchee, Inc.	2



B. ATMP Development and the NEPA Process

The *NPATMA* and 14 CFR Part 136 specifically require that the environmental impacts of an ATMP be assessed under NEPA and its implementing regulations (40 CFR Parts 1500-1508). The assessment of commercial air tour operations on units of the national park system is different in many respects from other aviation assessments. Air tour aircraft operations differ from the average national air transportation system operations, occurring in most cases seasonally, and only during daylight hours. Air tour aircraft are by nature flying low for sightseeing purposes, and in national parks are operating relatively close to the ground in low ambient noise environments. These factors require specialized noise assessment. The assessment of visual effects is more rigorous when aircraft are in closer visual range of ground visitors in national parks and there is more potential for intrusion on scenic views. Depending on the environment to be viewed air tour aircraft may also fly at higher altitudes to get a more panoramic perspective. For all these reasons, this assessment of commercial air tour operations over park units is highly specialized and is not applicable to other types of environmental impact analysis.

The FAA and NPS have determined that an EA will be initiated for the Park's ATMP. For the purposes of complying with NEPA regulations, the FAA is the lead agency, and the NPS is a cooperating agency. Under *NPATMA* both the FAA Administrator and NPS Director shall each sign the environmental decision document.

In October 2009, the NPS and FAA held a two-day kickoff meeting at the Park. The purpose of the kickoff meeting was for the FAA and NPS to have the opportunity to share information regarding environmental and other issues to consider in the development of the ATMP. Materials presented at the meeting included information on: park resources; the acoustical environment at the Park; current air tour operations; and, maps of current air tour flight paths. In addition, Park staff provided information regarding sensitive park resources, tribal concerns, and tourism patterns.

In April and May 2010, the FAA and NPS solicited public input during the public scoping period for the ATMP EA. Based on input received during the scoping period, in combination with knowledge of staff at Mount Rainier, the FAA and NPS have developed four draft alternatives that may be evaluated in the ATMP EA.

The FAA and NPS are now making a second request for public input on the Mount Rainier ATMP. The agencies are inviting the public, agencies, tribes, and other interested parties to provide comments, suggestions, and input regarding the routes and parameters (e.g. time of day and days of the week when flights could be allowed) of the preliminary alternatives under consideration for study in the Mount Rainier ATMP EA. During the comment period, three public meetings will provide opportunities for members of the public to learn more about the draft alternatives under consideration and to provide comments to the FAA and NPS.

Instructions for submitting comments may be found in Part 1 of this packet.

After considering input from the public comments on the alternatives, the FAA in cooperation with the NPS will prepare an EA for public review and comment. If, after finalizing the EA, no significant impacts are found, a FONSI and a ROD will be prepared.

Additional information on the ATMP Program in general is available at:

http://www.faa.gov/about/office_org/headquarters_offices/arc/programs/air_tour_management_plan/

Interested parties may request information regarding the development of the ATMP for the Park, as well as other parks' ATMPs, on this website.

***** End Part 2 *****



Part 3: Setting

A. Introduction

This section describes the setting for the Park's ATMP project. Descriptions of the Park's natural and cultural resources, visitor experiences, and current commercial air tour activity are provided to assist the public and other interested parties in preparing meaningful comments. The most useful comments are those that address the draft alternatives.

The *NPATMA* limits applicability of the ATMP to operations conducted within the Park and the area within ½ mile of its boundary. Although the scope of authority is limited, the FAA recognizes its responsibility under applicable environmental laws to consider impacts on potentially affected resources located in the vicinity of the Park but in excess of ½ mile outside the boundary of the park.

B. Mount Rainier National Park

The Park is located approximately 65 miles southeast of Seattle on the western slope of the Cascade Range. The Park was established in 1899; making it the nation's fifth national park (Figure 5). Of the Park's 235,625 acres, 97 percent was designated as wilderness in 1988. 1,700 acres of the Park is designated as the Mount Rainier National Historic Landmark. At 14,410 feet, Mount Rainier is the focal point of the Park and a prominent landmark in the Pacific Northwest.

The Park is within close proximity to several major cities including Seattle, Tacoma, and Yakima in Washington and Portland, Oregon. In 2010 the Park received 1,731,917 visitors, with July and August being the busiest months.

The purposes of the Park, as stated in the establishing legislation, are to:

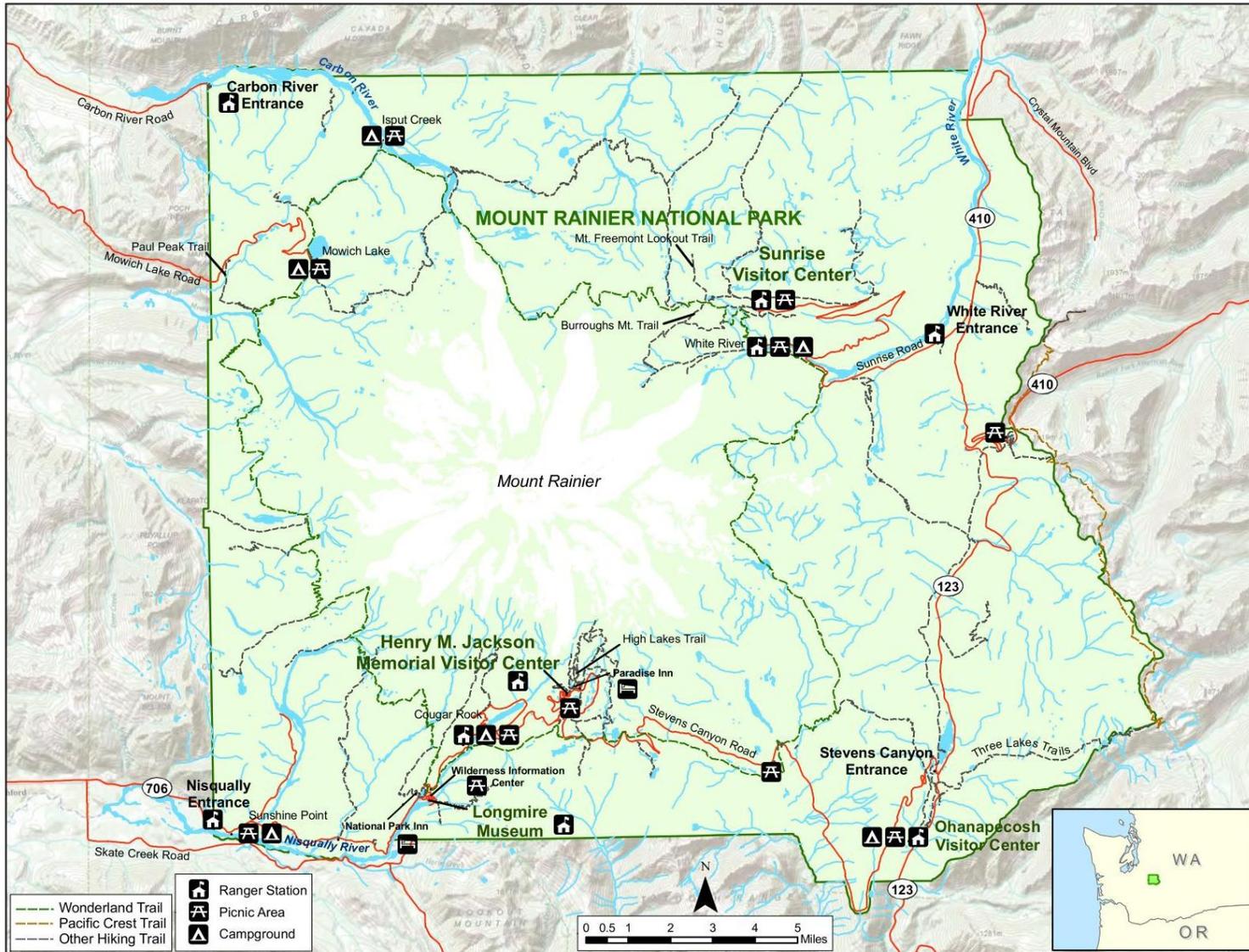
- Protect and preserve its natural and cultural resources, processes, and values, while recognizing their increasing importance in the region, the nation and the world
- Provide opportunities for visitors to experience and understand the park environment without impairing its resources to maintain wilderness values
- Provide for wilderness experiences

Geology and Hydrology

At 14,410 feet, Mount Rainier is the highest peak in the Cascade Range and, at one million years old, it is a relatively young volcano. The Park also includes other outstanding geologic and hydrologic resources, such as 25 major glaciers, that represent key physical elements in the Park's ecosystem. Together, volcanic and glacier activities have shaped the Park's landscape.

At the Park there is the potential for several geologic hazards including: volcanic eruptions, glacial outburst floods, debris flows, and avalanches.

Figure 5. Map showing general features of Mount Rainier National Park.





Vegetation and Wildlife

Existing ecological systems at the Park include:

- Forest uplands
- Subalpine uplands
- Alpine uplands
- Wetlands
- Glaciers

Fourteen rare plant species, identified as sensitive by the state of Washington, are known to occur in the Park.

Wildlife observed or known to occur in the Park includes:

- 56 species of mammals including the black bear, cougar and mountain goat
- 229 species of birds including the northern spotted owl
- 11 species of amphibians including the northwestern salamander, long-toed salamander, red legged frog and the western toad
- 5 species of reptiles including the common garter snake, rubber boa, and northern alligator lizard
- 3 native species of fish, the bull trout, rainbow, and coastal cutthroat

Eight federal special status species, listed as threatened or endangered, occur in the Park, the gray wolf, grizzly bear, wolverine, northern spotted owl, marbled murrelet, Chinook salmon, bull trout, and steelhead, as do 14 other species of concern.

Cultural Resources: Archaeological and Historic Sites

Archaeological

At least 3,400 years ago, prehistoric hunters and gatherers traveled in the area around Mount Rainier. In a 1995 archaeological survey, 20 prehistoric sites and two historic sites were recorded. Further surveys from 1995 to 1999 identified additional sites, increasing the total number of archaeological sites to 54.

Ethnographic

Ethnographic resources are defined as landscapes, sites, structures, objects or natural features that have significance due to the importance attached to them by a sociocultural group associated with the Park. At least six contemporary Native American tribes are associated with traditional uses of the Park.

Historic

The Park has approximately 158 historic resources on the National Register of Historic Places – many more sites are potentially eligible. The Mount Rainier National Historic Landmark District was designated in 1997. This district includes most of the Park's developed areas, such as the Longmire, Paradise and Sunrise areas. It also includes roads and bridges, scenic pullouts or overlooks, and includes roadside structures such as gates and interpretive displays.



Ground-based Visitor Experience

In 2010, there were 1,731,917 visitors to the Park. While this is somewhat less than the peak visitation of 2.4 million in 1977, it represents an increase over the previous couple years. The peak visitor months are July and August.

Visitor Services/Facilities

There are five main entrances into the Park: Carbon River - which provides walk-in access only, Mowich Lake - which provides vehicle access only as far as Mowich Lake, White River, Stevens Canyon and Nisqually. Once in the Park, the primary visitor destinations are Paradise, which includes the Henry M. Jackson Memorial Visitor Center, Sunrise, Longmire, Ohanapecosh, Carbon River and Mowich Lake areas. Along Park roads are several scenic pullouts or overlooks that provide opportunities for viewing the summit of Mount Rainier and other Park features. A few picnic areas are also provided alongside roads or near visitor centers. For overnight stays, the Park has several developed campgrounds and numerous backcountry camp sites. In addition, the National Park Inn is located in the Longmire area and lodging is available at the Paradise Inn during the summer season.

An extensive network of trails is provided, ranging in lengths from the shorter, and popular, Skyline Trail in the Paradise area to the 93 mile Wonderland Trail which passes through most of the Park. There are also several interpretive programs offered in the Park; both self-guided and led by NPS staff. A historic walking tour is offered at the Longmire area. In the Paradise area there is the Nisqually Vista self-guided interpretive trail. During the summer months, evening campfire programs and naturalist-led walks occur at Ohanapecosh.

Visitor Activities

In 2000, the Park conducted a study to learn more about its visitors and the activities they participate in. From this survey the top five visitor activities were: day hikes (73 %), view wildflowers/view scenery (65 %/63 %), photography (56 %), visitor centers/museums (53 %), and observing wildlife (45 %).

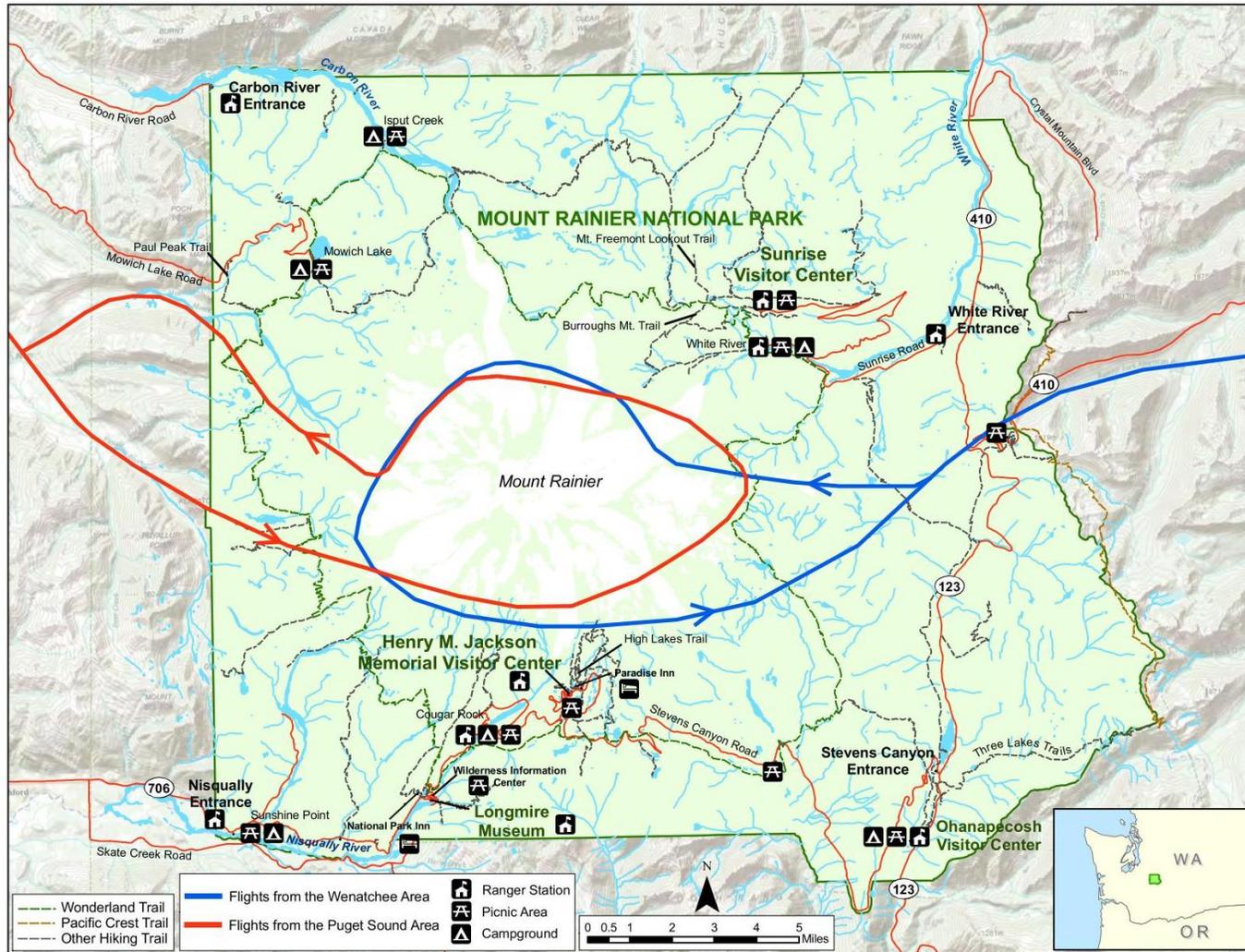
C. Commercial Air Tour Activity and Air Tour Visitor Experience

Five air tour operators currently provide commercial air tours over and within ½ mile of the Park. As of January 23, 2003, these five operators have had Interim Operating Authority (IOA) to conduct a maximum total of 114 tours annually. In recent years, less than 114 tours have been conducted annually due to a variety of economic and other factors.

The majority of commercial air tour operations flying over the Park currently originate from the Puget Sound area. A minority of commercial air tours flying over the Park also originate from the Wenatchee area. Current commercial air tour flight tracks over the park are presented in Figure 6.

The air tour visitor experience varies depending on weather conditions and the desires of the air tour client (i.e., length of flight, geographic features of special interest, etc.). However, the primary attraction for air tour visitors would be the summit of Mount Rainier.

Figure 6. Map illustrating current generalized flight tracks of commercial air tours over Mount Rainier National Park, as allowed under Interim Operating Authority.



***** End Part 3 *****



Part 4: References

Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), *Air Tour Management Program*
(http://www.faa.gov/about/office_org/headquarters_offices/arc/programs/air_tour_management_plan/)

National Park Service (NPS), *Mount Rainier* (<http://www.nps.gov/mora>)

NPS Public Use Statistics Office (<http://www.nature.nps.gov/stats/>)

NPS (2002), *General Management Plan*

***** End Part 4 *****

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