

MT. BAKER HIGHWAY SCENIC BYWAY MANAGEMENT PLAN

INTRODUCTION

1. Easement objectives and philosophy
2. Interagency coordination
3. Summary of roles and responsibilities per 2004 easement
4. Plan summary
5. Mt. Baker Highway Background
 - Official designations
 - Corridor description
 - History of area
6. Areas served by SR 542, Mt. Baker Highway
 - Recreation
 - Visitor demographics and use

Introduction



Scenic Byway Logo

The **Mt. Baker Highway Scenic Byway Management Plan** has been created to identify the roles and responsibilities of the USDA Forest Service (USFS) and Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) in the coordination of transportation activities along State Route 542 (SR 542) within the National Forest boundary. The scope of work has been specified by a November 22, 2004, easement that established the expectations of this plan, the roles of the partners and protocols that need to be established.

The Mt. Baker Scenic Byway, SR 542 provides access to the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest in Whatcom County. This is a joint effort undertaken by USFS, the National Park Service, the Federal Highways Administration and WSDOT to plan the maintenance, preservation and operation of the 24-mile portion of this corridor (Milepost (MP) 33.54 to 57.26) located within the National Forest. This plan will provide the guidelines to promote safe road access and visual enrichment for travelers along SR 542 from Glacier to Austin Pass.

Easement Objectives and Philosophy

The guiding philosophy along the scenic Mt. Baker Highway is to communicate and preserve the aesthetic, recreational, and natural resource values of the National Forest. Modifications to accommodate visitor use and needs along the corridor should be consistent and contiguous with the existing landscape and meet National Forest visual, aesthetic and resource protection standards. These objectives and strategies will provide guidance for the maintenance, operation and redevelopment of the roadway along this corridor.

WSDOT is responsible for the reconstruction, operation and maintenance of SR 542 within the National Forest boundary. USFS retains ownership of the underlying land and is responsible for ensuring that National Forest lands and resources within and adjacent to the road corridor are managed and protected consistent with current direction and policies. It is of mutual interest, as well as the responsibility of both parties, to provide the public safe access on this highway.

This document provides a foundation for the management of the Mt. Baker Highway. It primarily provides guidance on how to carry out the preservation needs for this highway to enhance traveler safety and protect the unique visual and aesthetic attributes along this corridor. It provides a unified approach on how to address standard practices that are required yearly for maintenance, as well as establishing parameters for preservation and environmental retrofit projects. Although safety and design standards will change over time, every effort should be made to ensure that the partners adhere to the spirit of the concepts agreed to in this document so as to streamline the processes needed to keep this roadway safe and enjoyable.

Interagency Coordination

Interagency review of highway projects takes place in a very complex administrative arena defined by many federal, state, and local laws, ordinances and regulations.¹ This has resulted in overlapping jurisdictional responsibilities and some duplication of efforts that increase costs and time delays for transportation projects.

WSDOT and USFS both have an interest in the stewardship of SR 542 / Mount Baker Highway and surrounding environment, and therefore must work together on the development, review and construction of transportation improvements. The challenge for this interagency partnership is to clarify roles and responsibilities to avoid unnecessary delays and duplication of effort. Below is a summary taken from the 2004 easement agreement that clarifies roles and responsibilities along this corridor. This summary shows the easement provision the responsibility of the action described, and locates areas in the plan that provide further details for easy reference.

Summary of roles and responsibilities per 2004 easement			
Easement Provision	Activity identified	Responsibility or Lead	
2	Signage-National Forest information signs outside road clearing limits	USFS to WSDOT Standards	
4	Aquatic Conservation Strategy Objectives (ACS) Protection and preservation	WSDOT w/ USFS concurrence	
4	Annual coordination meeting	WSDOT and USFS	
5	Sites for temporary and permanent storage, disposal areas, pits, quarries and other O&M facilities within the ROW	WSDOT lead USFS approval	
6	Archeological and cultural resource compliance. Creation of Mt. Baker Highway Scenic Byway Management Plan. Corridor inventory and guidelines established, and agency procedures clarified.	WSDOT lead w/ USFS concurrence	
7a,b & c	Project review and final design and specification approval	WSDOT lead w/ USFS approval	

¹ *Nothing in this document is intended to conflict with current directives of any of these agencies. If the terms of this plan are found to be inconsistent with current directives, then those portions of this agreement that are determined to be inconsistent shall be invalid, but the remaining terms and conditions not affected by the inconsistency shall remain in full force and effect. At the first opportunity for review of the plan, all necessary changes will be accomplished by either an amendment to this plan or by entering into a new plan, whichever is deemed expedient to the interest of all parties.*



Easement Provision	Activity identified	Responsibility or Lead
7d	Prevention and control of soil erosion. Vegetate and keep re-vegetated, with suitable species, areas affected by construction and other disturbed areas.	WSDOT- Maintenance & Construction
8a	Vegetation management- Preserve soil, vegetative cover, scenic and aesthetic values on the right of way (ROW).	WSDOT- Construction & Maintenance
8b	Revegetate, protect and maintain failed slopes, ditches or other drainage management works after reconstruction.	WSDOT Construction & Maintenance
8d	Maintenance of vegetation within ROW: clearing by means of chemicals in conformance with Integrated Vegetative Management Plan.	WSDOT Maintenance USFS Consultation
8e	Noxious weed prevention and control planning within the easement areas in substantial accordance with the Best Management Practices listed in Exhibit B of easement.	WSDOT Maintenance when within easement
8f	Roadside hazard tree identification and removal	WSDOT lead. USFS consultation
8g	Maintain highway roadway, drainage, signing, pavement marking and safety appurtenances to a standard consistent with WSDOT standard and specifications for state highways approval by FHWA.	WSDOT – Maintenance
8h	Highway maintenance during winter road sanding season shall be conducted in a manner that limits and reduces road sand and sediments from entering streams and rivers, consistent with the 4(d) Rule.	WSDOT- Maintenance

Easement Provision	Activity identified	Responsibility or Lead
8i	Jointly agree on plan to regulate vehicle parking, pavement marking, highway signing, end-of-road seasonal gating, and closures and snow plowing activity within the Heather Meadows areas, addressing all Forest Service permittees and including the Firs and Mountaineers adjacent parking areas. WSDOT responsible for conduct of snow and ice removal from the highway traveled lanes.	WSDOT- Maintenance lead and USFS Consultation
8j	Access issues per latest MOU between WSDOT and USDA Forest Service Pacific Northwest region.	WSDOT Development Services
9	These stipulations shall be reviewed at intervals not to exceed five years	WSDOT and USFS

Plan Summary

This plan has four sections formulated to share the information needed to maintain and enhance SR 542 per the easement agreement.

- 1) Easement objectives and philosophy
 - a. Background
 - b. Identification of natural and scenic values and aesthetic treatment suggested in the development guidelines for the Mather Memorial Parkway,
 - c. Places of social, cultural, historic, recreational and scenic importance along the corridor.
 - d. Natural forces that influence the corridor
- 2) Management plans
 - a. Background
 - b. Maintenance operations plan
 - c. Capital project development and funding options,
 - d. Traffic operations criteria, and
 - e. Integrated vegetative management plan
- 3) Schedule and responsibilities for discussion at annual coordination meeting
- 4) Appendix that includes agreements, MOU, and standards discussed throughout the plan.

Mount Baker Highway Background

Official designations

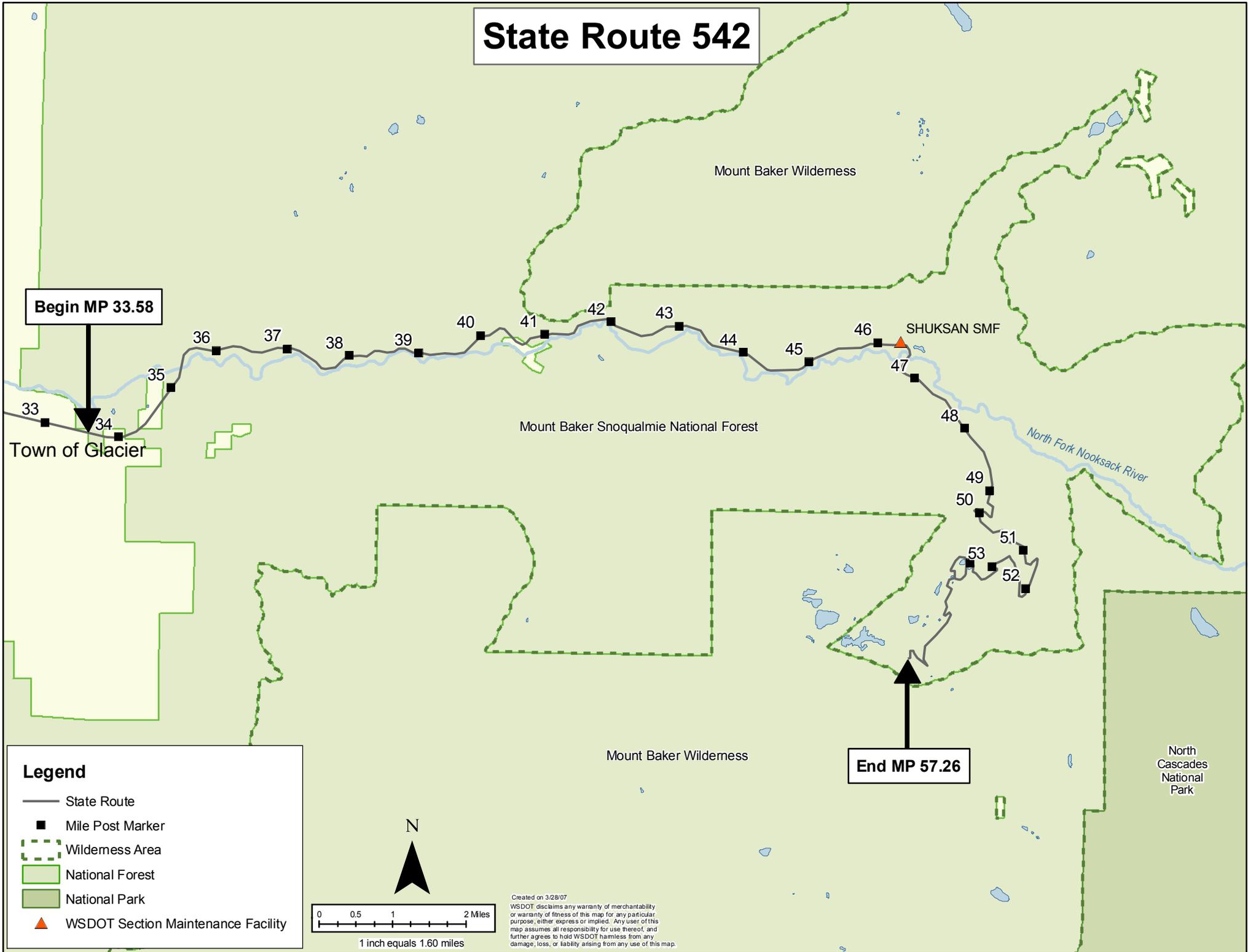
Scenic Byway programs recognize highways that are outstanding examples of natural beauty, history, culture, and recreational experience by designating them as a “Scenic Byway.” The segment of SR 542 from Deming east to Artist Point was designated a Washington State Scenic and Recreation Highway in 1967. In 1987, SR 542 was also designated a Washington State Scenic Byway. Then in 1989, the upper 24 miles of SR 542 east of the town of Glacier to Artist Point was designated a National Forest Scenic Byway. National Scenic Byway status has not been obtained for this corridor, but is being considered for nomination by the Washington State Scenic Byway Coordinator.



Corridor description

SR 542 is located in Whatcom County, in the northwest corner of Washington state. It originates near sea level at Interstate 5 in the city of Bellingham and travels east to its terminus at Artist Point, elevation 5,200 feet. The portion of the roadway within the National Forest starts at MP 33.54 east of the town of Glacier. The next 24 miles climbs in elevation as it leaves the north fork of the Nooksack River valley and ascends the mountain ending at Artist Point. The tree-lined corridor leads travelers to historic Heather Meadows, home of the Mt. Baker Ski Area. Forest roads lead off the main highway into the heart of the National Forest and trails accessing the Mt. Baker Wilderness and the backcountry of North Cascades National Park.

State Route 542



Begin MP 33.58

Town of Glacier

Mount Baker Wilderness

SHUKSAN SMF

Mount Baker Snoqualmie National Forest

North Fork Nooksack River

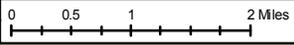
Mount Baker Wilderness

End MP 57.26

North Cascades National Park

Legend

- State Route
- Mile Post Marker
- - - Wilderness Area
- National Forest
- National Park
- ▲ WSDOT Section Maintenance Facility



1 inch equals 1.60 miles

Created on 3/28/07
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Map 1: SR 542 located within the Mt. Baker -Snoqualmie National Forest



History of area

The Mt. Baker Highway had its inception in 1879 with the idea that the road would run from Bellingham Bay to the mines near Ruby Creek at the southern slope of Mount Baker. At that time, the road from Bellingham ended at the Nooksack River, west of Everson. In 1886, a surveyor named Banning Austin and his party tried to map out a northern route for the proposed road. Fourteen years later it had reached Maple Falls, which was a thriving community, with several sawmills, a shingle mill, three hotels, seven saloons, several stores, a newspaper office and two doctors' offices.

The Milwaukee Railroad had reached there in 1901, opening up logging in the area and this provided the way to get the finished products to market. There were ten mills in the vicinity, and around each was a settlement, with its own schools. Eleven schools were consolidated into the Maple Falls School District around 1914. There was a limestone quarry, a clay mine and several mineral mines on up the mountains. The final stretch of the corridor from Excelsior to Mt. Baker, the extension of the road to Austin Pass was constructed in 1921. These nine additional miles were built to the Mt. Baker Lodge that was built at Heather Meadows in 1927. (The Lodge burned down in 1931.)

Starting in 1933, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) established by President Roosevelt during the Great Depression built numerous roads, campgrounds trails, cabins, and fire lookouts in the Mt. Baker region. The legacy of these projects continues at several key locations along this route. (Mt. Baker Foothills Chamber of Commerce Historical Accounting, 2006)

Areas served by SR 542:

Located in the U.S., just south of the Canadian border, the 524,719-acre Mt. Baker Ranger District shares its eastern boundary with the North Cascades National Park, managed by the National Park Service. The Forest Service and National Park Service jointly operate the Glacier Public Service Center on SR 542, during the summer and a fall. The Forest Service also provides visitor information services at the Heather Meadows Visitor Center during the summer season. Located in the north end of the Ranger District, SR 542 provides the only road access to the Whatcom County portion of the following exceptional scenic and well visited areas:

Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest

The Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest extends more than 140 miles along the western slopes of the Cascade Mountains from the Canadian border to the northern boundary of Mount Rainier National Park. The forest covers portions of Whatcom, Skagit, Snohomish, King and Pierce Counties. Together with other central Puget Sound counties, 62 percent (3.563 million people) of the state's population lives within a 70-mile drive of the forest. Another 1.5 million people in Vancouver, British Columbia, metro area are also within easy reach of the northern part of the Forest. The large population factor, coupled with easy road access, makes the Mt. Baker Snoqualmie National Forest one of the most visited National Forests in the country. (Taken from USDA Mt. Baker National Forest <http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/mbs/>)



Mt. Baker Ranger District

Encompassing Mt. Baker itself, the Mt. Baker Ranger District is one of four ranger districts on the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. The heaviest recreational use of the lands within the district is within the Heather Meadows Area near the end of SR 542 and the Baker Lake Basin located north of the North Cascades Highway (SR 20). The Mount Baker Wilderness, Noisy-Diobsud Wilderness and a small segment of the Glacier Peak Wilderness are also located within the district boundaries. Both day hikes and backpacking trails are popular during the summer season. Winter recreation includes the Mt. Baker Ski Area, cross country skiing and snowmobile use in designated areas.

The district is a popular sight-seeing, camping, hiking and backpacking destination with a total of 412 trail miles, twelve campgrounds and two separate picnic areas. Recreation opportunities can be accessed either through Sedro-Woolley via SR 20, or Glacier, via SR 542. The Ranger District's Glacier Public Service Center is located in Glacier, the Heather Meadows Visitor Center at MP 56 on SR 542, and the Mount Baker Ranger District office is located in Sedro-Woolley at 810 SR 20, Sedro-Woolley, WA 98284, (360) 856-5700 ext 515.

Mount Baker Wilderness

The Mt. Baker Wilderness was created by the 1984 Washington Wilderness Act and contains 117,500 acres. Its eastern border is shared with the boundary of the North Cascades National Park for a distance of 40 miles. The Wilderness extends from SR 20 north to the Canadian border.

This entire wilderness lies on the western slopes of the Cascade Mountains. Two drainages emanate from this area, the Nooksack River and the Skagit River. The Nooksack River drains directly into Puget Sound. Terrain is extremely rugged, with steep slopes, numerous ridges dissected by small intermittent or permanent drainages. Mt. Baker is the most northern of Washington's volcanoes and is one of the area's most unique features. The mountain periodically exhibits thermal activity.

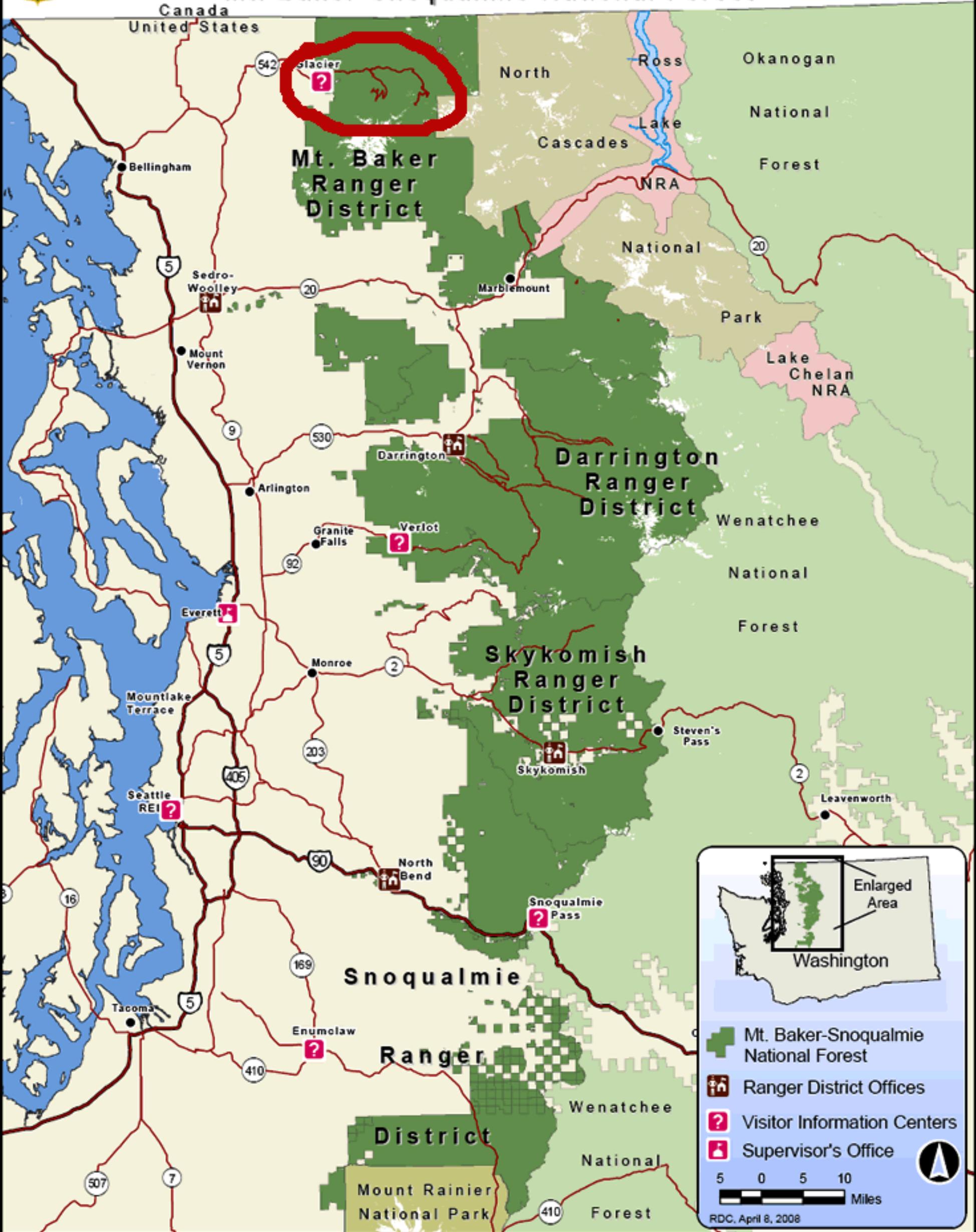
Mount Baker, a 10,778 ft. glacier-covered volcano, is the second most active volcanic formation in the Cascade Range (nearby Mount Saint Helens is the first) and a world-record setter for the most annual snowfall.





Vicinity Map

Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest



Legend

- Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest
- Ranger District Offices
- Visitor Information Centers
- Supervisor's Office

5 0 5 10 Miles

RDC, April 8, 2008

Recreation

Recreation opportunities along the SR 542 corridor are varied and extensive, depending on the season. In the spring and summer, visitors can camp, hike, climb, hunt, fish and enjoy water recreation. In the winter months Mt. Baker slopes accommodate downhill and cross-country skiing, snowboarding, and other winter sports. WSDOT's role is to maximize safe access to these amenities via SR 542.

Snow sports

This area has exceptional snowboarding opportunities and extensive usage throughout the season. Mt. Baker is consistently rated by national publications as one of the best snowboarding, skiing and snowshoeing havens in the nation.

As an interesting aside, Mount Baker set a world record in 1999 for having the most snowfall in one year with 1,140 inches. This tops the previous record of 1,122 inches set at Mount Rainier during the winter of 1971-72 (National Climatic Data Center, August 1999). Also, Mt. Baker has the longest ski season in Washington state (Nov.-April).



Campgrounds and Dispersed Campsites

There are three developed campgrounds accessed via SR 542: Douglas Fir and Silver Fir campgrounds and Excelsior Group Camp. There are numerous additional primitive dispersed campsites accessed by the SR 542 and the adjacent forest roads.

Trails

One of the most prominent recreational activities along SR 542 is hiking. There are approximately 412 miles of trails in the region. Many lead into the surrounding Mt. Baker Wilderness. Direct access points to trails include Horseshoe Bend, Excelsior Pass, Picture Lake, Bagley Lakes, Fire and Ice, Lake Ann, Table Mountain, Chain Lakes and Artist Ridge trails. In addition to those trails accessed directly from the highway, at least 17 designated trails can be accessed from forest roads off of SR 542 providing a wide variety of hiking opportunities. Dedicated hikers travel from other regions to take advantage of the diverse hiking opportunities offered along this corridor. Designated hiking trails in this category include those below:

Off highway hiking trails

Damfino, High Divide, Church Mountain, Heliotrope Ridge, Skyline Divide, Boundary Way, Canyon Ridge, Ptarmigan Ridge, Silesia Creek, Goat Mt., High Pass, Hannigan Pass, Winchester Mt., Yellow Aster Butte, Tomyhoi Lake, Welcome Pass.

These unique areas are accessed via SR 542. It is important to realize that these destinations are the reason most travelers visit this area. Safe and efficient access



needs to be accommodated while also taking into account the preservation of the natural and scenic values of the area.

Visitor demographics and use patterns

This corridor has year-round usage and an especially intense recreational demand associated with Mount Baker and its large ski area. In the winter several side roads are groomed, turning them into a winter, playland for snowmobiles and cross-country skiers. During summer months, this roadway provides access to the National Forest where visitors can enjoy the rustic natural settings. The fall months bring cooler temperatures and lowered snow levels.

Due to the diversity of this area, SR 542 is a well-used corridor providing year-round access to places of solitude and beauty, recreation and relaxation. This system supports a full range of transportation users including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorcyclists, automobiles, pickup trucks, recreational vehicles, buses, and commercial trucks. Our goal is to safely accommodate these multiple users. While the intent of the typical corridor visitor varies with the seasons, the experience gained from each trip is similar. The “sense of place” is well defined. The varied aspects of the SR 542 experience offer tourists views of the North Fork Nooksack River as well as magnificent panoramic vistas of Mount Baker, Mount Shuksan, and surrounding Cascade peaks. The dynamic river setting and groupings of rocky peaks and glaciers form a strong attraction and welcome break from urban life.