

30 August 2019

Attn: Duncan Toogood
DOC Geraldine



FMC feedback on Mt Somers hut bookings proposal

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Department's proposal to add Woolshed Creek and Pinnacles Huts to the online booking system, starting summer 2019/2020.

FMC canvassed clubs and individual supporters in Canterbury and Otago for their feedback on the proposal. This was done via social media, our monthly newsletter and a one-off email campaign. The FMC Executive also considered how the proposal fits in with our policies on hut booking systems and access to backcountry facilities.

FMC's position on hut booking systems in general

FMC has a strong policy on huts and booking systems, available on our website. Two points of the policy are especially relevant to the proposed booking system at Woolshed and Pinnacles huts:

- *"booking systems should operate only where occupancy rates indicate need; for example, weekends at certain times of the year."*
- *"where booking systems have been introduced for huts on tracks that may be travelled in more than one direction, sufficient campsites should be established to cater for people able to book some, but not all, of the tracks' huts."*

FMC's recommendations on the proposed booking system at Woolshed and Pinnacles Huts

DOC's own guidelines suggest that a booking system should only be triggered when overcrowding (more people staying overnight than there are bunks) happens more than 10% of the time. For the last season DOC has data for, Woolshed Creek Hut was overcrowded approximately 10% of the time. During the same time period, Pinnacles Hut was only overcrowded approximately 3% of the time. Using DOC's own guidelines, Pinnacles Hut is not overcrowded and should not be added to the booking system.

However, FMC recognises that limiting the booking system to Woolshed Creek would only result in adverse outcomes at Pinnacles Hut. Accordingly, any booking system would need to apply to both huts.

Taking into account our policy on hut booking systems, and the feedback received from local clubs and individual supporters, FMC does not oppose Woolshed Creek Hut and Pinnacles Hut being added to the nationwide online booking system.

However, we do not believe DOC is currently ready to manage an online booking system for these two huts, and we request the following to be considered:

- Addition of the huts to the booking system be delayed until the online booking system has been reconfigured to accept the Annual Hut Pass.
- A radio link is installed at Woolshed Creek Hut prior to the hut being added to the online booking system.
- Camping should not be included in the booking system at either hut, and both huts must still be available to trampers who require shelter from adverse weather.
- DOC should undertake further analysis of hut occupancy data and consider introducing hut bookings on weekends and holidays only. Given that 85% of hut users are New Zealanders, it is logical to assume that overcrowding occurs mainly on weekends and holidays.
- Occupancy data should be analysed annually to determine what, if any, booking system is appropriate for the following season.
- Print and online messaging on the purpose and etiquette of huts should be strengthened, including recommendations that trampers come prepared to camp. We consider Mt Somers to be a gateway to the backcountry socially as well as environmentally.

Bookings to open at short notice

In addition to the above, we believe DOC should consider an amendment to the booking system to make bookings available only at short notice.

The reason most frequently cited against a booking system is the loss of ability to plan a trip spontaneously and around the weather and conditions. This is not a concern DOC can afford to ignore.

We feel that the most logical solution is to open hut bookings at short notice only, e.g. three days in advance. Weather forecasts nowadays are generally quite reliable three days ahead.

There are successful precedents overseas of short-notice booking systems e.g. permits to climb Half Dome, Yosemite National Park, California.

We would like to suggest that a similar system could apply to bookings for DOC huts, including the huts on Mount Somers. In order to favour local trampers, who value being able to plan trips at short notice, half of the bunks should only be made available three days before the intended trip date. For instance, at each hut:

- Half of the bunks in each hut to be made available *X* months in advance, to enable school groups and other parties that may need planning ahead to plan their trips.
- The remaining half of the bunks to open for booking only three days ahead of a trip.

“A booking system would limit our club’s ability to use the huts at anytime, but if the booking system is designed so that huts are not booked up months in advance then local clubs can book spaces in the huts for their trips”

Radio link at Woolshed Creek Hut

This is a no-brainer in our opinion. In order to be able to manage a booking system, DOC needs to get a radio link to work first, for the following reasons:

- people must be able to book at short notice
- people must be able to cancel their booking at short notice, especially in the event of adverse weather and conditions, or unforeseen circumstances
- the hut warden must be able to get updates from Geraldine DOC office on the day, and double check bookings if required

“And sort out warden communication at the huts properly BEFORE requiring bookings rather than trying to handle the inevitable glitches afterwards”

Summary of feedback

Eight tramping clubs in Canterbury and Otago consulted with their membership and responded to our request for feedback. Of these:

- four clubs are in favour of a booking system,
- two oppose the booking system, and
- two listed pros and cons and reluctantly accept it with reservations.

Of 26 individuals who responded:

- 17 (65%) are in favour of the Mt Somers huts being on the booking system, although most didn't offer reasons
- 9 (35%) are against.

Trampers appear to be split in two camps:

- Those who welcome the booking system because they like the certainty of a guaranteed bunk.
- Those who oppose the booking system because it takes away the freedom of planning spontaneous trips at short notice depending on weather and conditions.

Based on numbers alone, the majority of respondents appear to be in favour of a booking system for the huts, not for the campsites.

At the same time, trampers (including those who are in favour of a booking system) expect to be able to book the huts using their Annual Hut Pass, and to be able to camp outside the huts without having to book.

Extracts of the feedback received are included as an appendix to this submission. Thank you again for the opportunity to consult with our membership and the wider outdoor community on the proposed booking system for Woolshed Creek and Pinnacles Hut.

Nga mihi,

Jan Finlayson
FMC President

APPENDIX 1 - SELECTED FEEDBACK FROM CLUBS AND INDIVIDUAL SUPPORTERS

Feedback in support of a booking system

The most common reasons used in support of a booking system are:

- the certainty of a bunk
- not having to carry a tent
- staying in an overcrowded hut is unpleasant
- trampers not paying hut fees

"We have consulted with our members and support the proposed booking system for both huts, and agree with the booking season being from October through to the end of April. We support young families getting out into the hills, and an overfull hut can diminish future interest in tramping – we know the Woolshed Creek Hut in particular is popular with families, so the booking system makes sense"

"At our recent committee meeting it was agreed that the booking system planned for the Woolshed Creek Hut and Pinnacles Hut was a good move. It was felt that it definitely would enhance the experience during those busy months"

"I'm very supportive. As an Aucklander travelling down to the South Island to go tramping its a relief to know that there will be a bunk for the night"

"I go into this area very frequently. I have found the Mt Somers Hut to be very overcrowded which must detract from the experience of people who stay there. I support it's being a booked hut for this reason even though I am into spontaneous trips and stays at the hut."

"I have been to these huts when there are more people than bunks and it's not a great experience especially with a family"

"It's awesome for kids up there. Makes it much more enjoyable / less stuff for me to carry, when taking kids if you have bunks booked. Much different from tramping in my youth!"

"I think it's a good move. I can now be guaranteed a bed for me and my family"

"Good place to take family, so would like to book... otherwise have to carry extra gear, sleeping mats etc."

"Being able to book the Woolshed Creek Hut seems pretty logical as it's a perfect family hike and hopefully, the security of knowing you have a bunk might get the families that really don't want to carry extra gear or sleep on the floor out there hiking"

Feedback against a booking system

The most common reasons used in support of a booking system are:

- not being able to spontaneously plan a trip at short notice
- the risk of being stuck with a booking in unsuitable weather
- the loss of a culture of sharing in the hills
- booking is unnecessary; trampers should be prepared and carry a tent regardless

"We feel our members interests are best served on the current first come first served basis. Largely because it enables much greater flexibility and spontaneity for local people . These huts are two of very few front country huts in Mid/South Canterbury and we believe the interests of the local population matter and are best served by the present system"

"We feel this is a shame in some ways as it will take away the joy of just being able to randomly plan a trip and go ad hoc. (It will seem more like a Great Walk and have to plan so far in advance"

"I am wholly opposed to hut booking - anywhere as a matter of principle. Huts are primarily about shelter not beds. If late-in then it is usual to expect that bunks may be all taken. The other objection is a reduction in flexibility if huts are restricted for normal use by folk who have booked bunks. I often tramp with a loose base route but subject to options A, B or C depending on mood/rivers etc. I turn up where I end up - or choose to hang out for three days for zen time instead of continuing. Booking removes freedom. Plus I wonder if it sets a mindset of backpackers / motel booking for privatisation. Keep it communal!"

"I really have trouble with the idea that a booking system can result in my being locked in to a trip in unsuitable, un-enjoyable or dangerous weather regardless of what my experience and judgment is telling me"

"I do not support this proposal as it reduces the time-honoured Kiwi culture of undertaking spontaneous trips according to a favourable weather window. Our weather is notoriously changeable. Booking ahead commits one to often having to complete a trip in poor conditions or forgo the booking charge. Moreover, some parties will make the trip in unsafe conditions because they have a booking so they press on with consequent risk of injury, rescue or worse"

"It is important that we can remain spontaneous, making and changing plans based on latest weather forecasts. In fact I can see a danger in people feeling committed to go on a bad forecast if they have already booked and paid for the bunk.

"I enjoy sharing huts with others. There is not much I love more than talking with fellow trampers about New Zealand's backcountry and sharing ideas for future trips. However if you slowly move more and more of our huts to a booking system it is really going to alter the way New Zealanders approach their tramping and I believe over time this could lead to resentment towards our foreign visitors as it is clearly as a result of the growing numbers of them that this change is being considered"

"I dislike booking systems because they are another thing that steals the spirit and feeling of the outdoors. And it's often pushed as an idea by those who haven't got used to the shared experience of huts, and are new to the country or tramping. Flexibility spontaneity the ability to redact decisions and plans are a really important part of outdoor culture to me. And it's turning into another organised box ticking-better book it early thing. The kiwi spirit is more important than convenience or comfort, outdoors is our educator. One of the weaknesses of the doc hut booking system is people who renege or don't come have little vested interest in navigating the uncompromising and clunky website to cancel(no refunds) so they don't"

"Every time I read or hear about a new hut being put under the booking system I feel our freedom disappearing. I am an individual trumper, often making last minute decisions according to the weather and time available from work. I also organise my tramps to where the weather is best at that given moment. Often I connect trips or add days which have not been planned ahead. Too much comfort

destroys the wilderness experience. I take a tent or a mat in case of a full hut and just put up with what I get. The spontaneous experience gets lost with too much planning and expectations”

“Woolshed makes a lot of sense to me, but the Pinnacles causes concern as it is frequently used by climbers (probably the best climbing in Canterbury north of Cook) who could easily be displaced by trampers as one activity is highly sensitive to the weather while the other is much less so”

“If we have to book, especially if we can't use our annual hut pass, it removes our flexibility to take the children only when the weather is suitable and everyone is well. We've always had good experiences taking our kids to non-bookable huts. I think the booking system erodes this goodwill”

An on-line booking system must accept Annual Hut Passes

We had a phone call from the concerned president of a local tramping club based in a town close to Mt Somers. The club isn't opposed to a booking system, however, they do expect to be able to use their Annual Hut Passes to book either hut. If the online booking system were not able to take Annual Hut Passes, local trampers would be in the absurd situation of having to travel away from Mount Somers to the Geraldine DOC office to book the huts

“At the very least, let DOC get the on-line system working first, including purchasing the annual hut pass and 6 month backcountry pass (incorporating the FMC discount)”

“What is the state of paying for bookable huts with backcountry hut passes? This would be another challenge to climbers who cannot move their recreation elsewhere as the cost could be prohibitive to anyone trying to project a route”

“I'm glad that the hut pass is still valid, but you can only use it to book at DOC offices and not online which is a shame”

“Those who have an annual hut pass wanting to book should be able to do it on the DOC website, rather than having to contact Geraldine office”

“I think the booking system for these two huts is an excellent idea provided the on-line system is user friendly and can take annual hut passes”

“If you could continue to use your annual hut pass for these huts that would be good”

Booking huts only on weekends and holidays

We do not have the data to test whether this is a sensible option or not, but DOC does. Given that 85% of hut users are New Zealanders, we can only assume that overcrowding occurs mainly on weekends and holidays.

“Our club's preference would be for a trial booking system for this hut during weekends only over the busy summer months”

“October to April the same as other bookable huts. It would be confusing to have it otherwise. On the other hand; has DoC considered having them bookable only on long weekends when they are in maximum demand?”

Camping should not be included in the booking system at either hut, and both huts must still be able to accept trampers who require shelter from adverse weather.

“As long as I can still turn up any time and bunk down on my Exped inflatable mattress... just need some shelter from the storm”

“Also if one turns up needing a bit of shelter and one is happy to sleep on the floor under the table if no bunks are available, then one should not be made to feel like a criminal. Even though I carry a tent, I believe that there will be times when the shelter of a hut could be life-saving for me. That is why previous generations of trampers and hunters built and/or cared for them”

“Our club suggests camping should be left off the proposed booking scheme, remaining first in first served”

“I think that booking should not be compulsory but that means you could be out on the deck (not the kitchen area) if bookers show up after you arrive”

“Watch that doc don’t start restricting camping outside huts”

“One member suggested that at Woolshed Creek Hut, for the area to accommodate more people at one time, there be a shelter built for campers to cook in. This seems a good idea”