

About Our Washington State Ferries

Basics about the system:

- Washington State Ferries (WSF) operates 10 routes, 20 terminals, and 21 vessels (when all are operational). Currently, 9 of the state's 21 ferries are considered in "good" shape.
- Peak summer service with all routes fully restored would require 19/20 boats (with no Sidney BC Service).
- Over the next 17 years (by 2040), WSF has a plan to acquire 16 new ferries to replace aging vessels. However, building new vessels is on hold while the legislature decides how to navigate state laws about procurement, sources, and negotiates with a builder.
- Three existing ferries are scheduled to be upgraded to hybrid electric power by the end of 2026. They are being retrofitted, and will go to the Bainbridge, Mukilteo, and Edmonds routes.
- About 83% (almost 1,500) of the roughly 1,800 WSF employees operate the boats and terminals. That includes Coast Guard licensed deck officers, deck crew, and engine officers, plus unlicensed engine support crew.

Service Restoration Plan

The WSF Service Restoration Plan was rolled out in March 2022 to address staffing losses and COVID challenges, the number and condition of boats, and declining Coast Guard licensed staff including retirement of Coast Guard licensed Captains, Mates, and Engineers.

The Service Restoration Plan prioritizes ridership level, service performance, travel alternatives availability, plus vessel and crew availability. Restoration does not move to the next route on the list until a trial shows it can operate at 95% reliability for three weeks.

As of August 2023, WSF has declared four of the ten routes restored with 4 boat service for those routes. Vashon remains as a 5th priority route, despite the lack of travel alternatives:

- Anacortes/San Juan Islands: 1,890,458 riders (restored)
- Seattle/Bainbridge: 4,435,933 riders (restored)
- Mukilteo/Clinton: 3,397,956 riders (restored)
- Edmonds/Kingston: 3,090,025 riders (restored)
- Triangle Route: 2,078,521 riders (projected 1st quarter 2024)
- Seattle/Bremerton 979,883 riders (restoration date unknown)
- Port Townsend/Coupeville 662,007 (projected 2nd quarter 2024)
- Anacortes/Sydney BC (temporarily suspended)
- Pt. Defiance/Tahlequah 839,386 (historically a one-boat route)

Reliability on the restored routes as reported by WSF averaged 96.4% in the August update. The same update for the period August 7 – 20 shows the triangle route at a 74% rating. You can find the Service Restoration plan online, but you must have the Adobe Acrobat plugin to read it and subsequent progress reports. Search "WSF Restoration Plan." Learn more about the state of the fleet: www.Tinyurl.com/TimesBoats



The Washington State Legislature Study of WSF Staffing Problems

The Washington Legislature Joint Transportation Committee commissioned a study into escalating overtime and other ferry system staffing challenges. The final report was released in December 2022, providing a series of findings and recommendations. WSF has started to implement some of the recommendations, some reflected in the 2023 Service Restoration Plan.

Highlights from the 2022 Study Findings

- **Staffing Model:** WSF staffing model is too lean and cannot cover day-to-day unplanned absences thus requiring service reductions. The model also does not support the career pipelines WSF depends on to fill highly skilled senior positions.
- **Staffing Shortage:** Lean staffing, combined with changes in the workforce, forced WSF to use an increasing amount of overtime pay and, more recently, required service cuts.
- **Career Advancement and Retention:** WSF depends on an internal career pipeline to fill skilled senior positions. However, promotion openings are rare, and the process provides little institutional support. Therefore, new people are stalled in entry- and low-ranking positions.
- **Recruitment and Hiring:** WSF's hiring practices have not kept pace with the evolving WSF and Washington state labor force. As a result, recruiting does not generate enough qualified candidates. In addition, WSF does not reliably bring on BIPOC workers despite the state's increasingly diverse labor force.
- **Cultural Issues:** WSF employees described an outdated non-inclusive working culture. Because they also feel disconnected from leadership, there is limited potential for cultural change under current conditions.

2022 Study Recommendations

- **Expand Staffing:** In the short term, WSF should expand staffing in positions that will most help improve operations. That won't be easy. Senior positions have complex licensure and experience requirements, and unemployment rates remain at historic lows.
- **Modernize Staffing Model:** WSF will need additional investment in technology resources and administrative capacity to build and maintain a workforce model so that it can be done on an ongoing basis.
- **Career Advancement and Retention:** WSF needs investment in programs that identify and lift employees to help them move from entry-level to senior jobs. Investing in technical and soft skills training will improve retention.
- **Recruitment and Hiring:** WSF must commit additional resources and develop expertise in recruiting from communities historically excluded from maritime careers in Washington.
- **Cultural Issues:** WSF should invest in training for managers and supervisors so they provide support to a diversifying workforce and have expectations for doing so built into their roles.
- **Succession Planning:** WSF could lose operational capacity and institutional knowledge as its leadership ages out. WSF must invest in capturing and passing on critical knowledge and plan to capture and pass on that knowledge while planning how to fill vacated critical positions.

The full workforce report to the legislature can be found at: www.bit.ly/WSFworkforce