

CWC Capacity Committee Approach and Discussion Prompts Memo

MEMO

To: CWC Capacity Committee

From: Lindsey Nielsen, Executive Director,
Sam Kilpack, Director of Operations,
Will McKay, Communications Director

Subject: CWC Capacity Committee Approach and Discussion Prompts

The Central Wasatch Commission created a Capacity Committee during its May 2026 Board meeting and will convene its first meeting on Monday, June 8th, 2026. This memo should provide some background context, discussion questions and prompts, and potential pathway options for the committee to consider during that meeting.

Background

Carrying capacity for the Central Wasatch Mountains has been discussed amongst stakeholders and interest groups for years, but to date, no specific capacity thresholds have been set for the region. In 2019, the Interagency Visitor Use Management Council published the [Visitor Capacity Guidebook](#), which states, “Visitor use management is essential for maximizing benefits for visitors while achieving and maintaining desired resource conditions and visitor experiences on federally managed lands and waters. Visitor capacity, a component of visitor use management, is defined as the maximum amounts and types of visitor use that an area can accommodate while achieving and maintaining the desired resource conditions and visitor experiences that are consistent with the purposes for which the area was established.” The guidebook provides options for collaborative frameworks for visitor-use management to protect resources, improve access, and achieve desired conditions in a specific place, and could aid the CWC in its pursuit of defining desired conditions across the Central Wasatch and determining thresholds for those conditions. However, given the dynamic nature of the environmental systems and the human interactions within these systems, a capacity study may only be useful so long as it is not limited to a point in time determination.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Chair: Roger Bourke
Town of Alta Mayor

Voting Members:

- Emily Gray
Holladay City Council
- Erin Mendenhall
Salt Lake City Mayor
- Monica Zoltanski
Sandy City Mayor

Non-Voting Members:

- Laura Briefer
Salt Lake City Public Utilities
- Jack Stauss
Save Our Canyons
- CJ Blye
University of Utah
- John Adams
Cottonwood Heights resident
- Morgan Mingle
Park City Chamber

Here in the Wasatch, the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest adheres to management protocol and frameworks set in the [2003 Wasatch-Cache National Forest Plan](#). Pages 152-165 of the 2003 forest plan address the Central Wasatch Mountains Management Area and specifically notes that because of the importance of a healthy watershed originating in the Cottonwood Canyons, watershed maintenance, protection and enhancement will be a primary consideration in all area management decisions. The plan includes broad desired future conditions for Watershed, Biodiversity, Research Natural Areas, Special Interest Areas, Inventoried Roadless Areas, Wilderness and Recommended Wilderness Areas, Eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers, Roads/Trails/Access, Recreation, Land Ownership, Timber Management, Rangeland/Livestock Grazing, Non-Recreation Special Use, and Social (non-recreation) conditions. This is the management protocol the Forest service uses for the Central Wasatch Mountain Area.

The Forest Service also monitors the area through periodic data collection. The [CWC's 2023 Visitor-Use Study](#) was a partnership with the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest to perform data collection at specific recreation nodes across Millcreek and the Cottonwood Canyons. The design and administration of the survey followed the [USDA Forest Service's National Visitor Use Monitoring program](#), which is a requirement for the Forest Service to be able to utilize any data collected on federal lands. The 2023 Visitor-Use Study assessed:

- The total recreational visits by canyon.
- The total recreational visits to different types of sites within the canyons.
- The proportion of visits involving different outdoor recreation activities.
- The total time visitors to the canyons spend participating in different activities.
- The average number of times visitors recreate in the canyons each year.
- Characterize the variation in use across individual trails within the region.
- Visitors' perceptions of crowding in the canyon.
- Visitors' overall satisfaction with their visits to the canyons.
- The importance and satisfaction with site-specific attributes of recreation settings.
- The distance traveled to recreate in the canyons.
- The sociodemographic characteristics of visitors to each of the canyons.

Each National Forest is fully surveyed on a rolling 5-year cycle, meaning that there is another opportunity for the CWC to partner with the Forest Service on visitor-use data collection at those same nodes across Millcreek and the Cottonwood Canyons where data were collected between 2020-2021.

In 2015, the Mountain Accord Charter called for the development of an Adaptive Management Plan for Central Wasatch utilizing the conditions and thresholds contained within the [Central Wasatch Dashboard](#). Instead of setting ideal conditions for the Wasatch Mountains and identifying indicators for those ideal conditions and setting thresholds, that if surpassed, would

degrade conditions, the Dashboard instead became a centralized location for all the environmental data available for the Central Wasatch. The Dashboard is still a valuable tool, but without the ideal conditions, thresholds, or indicators, the Dashboard does not provide the necessary limits necessary for the Adaptive Management Plan prescribed by the Mountain Accord Charter.

The CWC could re-engage with the University of Utah's DIGIT Lab to expand the Dashboard by identifying and outlining the Human Element's framework and indicators. This will also include identifying and prioritizing data collection needs required to build out the Human Element. It is well understood that the availability of existing data to support the Human Element is extremely limited and that data collection will be an integral component to determine the complete scope of the human element and level of data collection effort required. Currently, the Human Element on the Dashboard consists of the Central Wasatch Commission's Visitor-Use Study data. This study explored outdoor recreation use and its associated impacts quantified through hourly trail use data. The DIGIT Lab could expand the Human Element by including the recreation ecology of the Central Wasatch. More specifically, the impacts of recreation on natural resources (i.e. geology & soil, vegetation, wildlife, water and air quality) and the pattern and trends of these impacts (i.e. how and where people are going).

As the CWC is a recommending body and the CWNCRRA has not yet passed, we could embark upon a capacity analysis to provide information to the road and land and water managers to assist in the proper management of the area. We would certainly want to engage each resource authority to solicit their help in identifying ideal conditions, indicators, and thresholds.

Defining capacity – a thought exercise

Ideal conditions:

- What is your ideal visitor experience (social capacity) in the Central Wasatch? Is the reality of your current visitor experience close to your ideal visitor experience?
- What is your ideal ecological condition (water, wildlife, soil quality, trail use, Wilderness, air quality capacity) of the Central Wasatch?
- What is the number of parking spaces in the canyons, or what is the number of people that can access a specific viewpoint or area or activity (physical capacity) of the Central Wasatch?
- What is your ideal number of restrooms, parking spaces, infrastructure, transportation options, etc. (facility capacity) in the Central Wasatch?
- What is your ideal condition for humans, the environment, the physical space, and the facilities in the Central Wasatch combined?

Indicators of those ideal conditions:

A typical social capacity indicator is crowding; a typical ecological indicator is water quality; a physical capacity indicator is a comprehensive survey of the area and determining what is possible within what exists in the area; and a typical facility capacity indicator is the kinds of infrastructure available including trailheads, restrooms, and parking. A capacity researcher or expert would be able to expand on these indicators. The public may also be able to help define capacity indicators if the CWC opts to embark on a capacity analysis.

- Do these typical capacity indicators resonate with you? Do other indicators come to mind?
- The water, land, and road managers may be able to provide key insight in determining and understanding capacity indicators.

Thresholds:

- At what point does your ideal visitor experience degrade? Can this threshold be applied universally?
- Does it matter if thresholds are objective or subjective?
- Do ubiquitous and objective thresholds exist? If indeed not, at what point is it appropriate to make subjective statements about the thresholds of the systems of the Central Wasatch?
- The water, land, and road managers may also be able to provide key insight in determining and understanding capacity thresholds.

Through a capacity analysis, experts and resource managers could define thresholds that, if surpassed, would degrade the condition of a system (social, ecological, facility, etc.) Only after we **1)** define ideal conditions for the Central Wasatch; **2)** identify and agree to indicators that those ideal conditions are present; and **3)** set thresholds at which the ideal conditions degrade can we adequately define capacity for the Central Wasatch.

CWNCRA

It is important to consider that if the CWNCRA is passed, the law would require the USFS to create an area-specific management plan that would theoretically incorporate visitation metrics, desired conditions, indicators for those ideal conditions, thresholds, and management protocol reflective of those metrics. The USFS is the land manager and the authority to enforce desired conditions, identify indicators and enforce behavior changes if thresholds are met. If the CWC moves to embark upon defining ideal conditions for social, ecological, physical, or facility capacity before the CWNCRA is passed into law, there is no guarantee that those recommendations would be enforced. However, it may be even more important to embark upon a capacity study if the

CWNCRA is not passed, and if we complete a capacity study preceding the passage of the NCRA, our capacity study could theoretically inform the management plan for the designated area.

Pathways for the Committee to Explore

Option 1: Re-engage with the DIGIT Lab to expand the human element of the Dashboard.

Option 2: Second round of visitor-use data collection and monitoring in partnership with the Salt Lake Ranger District.

Option 3: Determine ideal conditions, identify indicators and set thresholds and apply those thresholds to data we already have and any future data collected. This could involve drafting an RFP for a capacity proposal and engaging the public to assist in determining the areas to assess ideal temporal and spatial distributions, as well as indicators and thresholds. This option could also involve performing a literature review of other capacity studies performed elsewhere and the methodologies used.

Other options? A combination of these options? None of these options?

Carrying capacity studies are complex models that could have some subjectivity and could be used in unintended ways. Having a clear purpose and need is important. In consultation with Laura Briefer, she suggested thinking about capacity from the lens of the capacity needed from public agencies to mitigate negative impacts on the environment and recreational experience caused by increasing recreational use. From a watershed and water resources management perspective, Salt Lake City Public Utilities uses sensitivity, vulnerability, and risk-based studies to inform how we adaptively manage and protect the watershed environment to protect water quality and access to water resources. This is an iterative process and vulnerability and risk are critical considerations.

Goals for the Committee in Meeting One

Task 1: Determine the purpose of this committee and a capacity study.

Task 2: Determine the need of this committee and of a more thorough capacity analysis than the Visitor-Use Study.

Task 3: Consider the thought exercises included in this memo relating to ideal conditions, indicators, and thresholds.

Task 4: Determine the desired outcome of this endeavor.

Task 5: Agree to a meeting cadence. Staff recommend monthly one-hour meetings occurring 2-3p.m. on the second Monday of each month.