



COVID-19

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Ferry ridership at lowest level in nearly 50 years

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Annual riders down 10 million from 2019 due to pandemic

SEATTLE – Annual ridership aboard Washington State Ferries plunged by nearly 10 million customers in 2020 – a drop of 41% from the previous year – to roughly 14 million. Stay-at-home orders, remote work and decreased tourism because of COVID-19 are the main reasons for the system's lowest yearly count since 1975.

For the first time since it began operations in 1951, WSF carried more vehicles (7.6 million) than passengers (6.4 million) last year. This shift in ridership was fueled by a dramatic decline in walk-on customers on routes that serve downtown Seattle and more people choosing to drive on board because of the pandemic.

"When COVID-19 drastically altered ridership patterns, we quickly adjusted service to match this new reality," said WSF Assistant Secretary Amy Scarton. "Since late summer, we've been incrementally restoring sailings based on our COVID Response Service Plan (pdf 166 kb), which considers demand, crew availability, vessel availability and funding."

Current ridership trends

In recent months, state ferry ridership has returned to about 60% of pre-pandemic levels. Total vehicles are near 70% of 2019 numbers, while walk-ons are around 20% of last year. Ridership is expected to rebound further as more sailings are restored and when COVID-19 is under control.

2020 route-by-route ridership highlights

The largest year-to-year dip came on the Seattle/Bremerton run, where ridership was down 64%. This excludes the Sidney, British Columbia route, which only operated on the first four days of 2020 before a yearly wintertime suspension. The international route did not resume due to U.S.-Canada border restrictions. The Seattle/Bainbridge Island route had the second biggest decrease at 59%, falling out of the top spot as the system's busiest for the first time since 1958. The Mukilteo/Clinton and Edmonds/Kingston runs both carried more riders than Seattle/Bainbridge Island.

- **Mukilteo/Clinton:** Carried the most customers in the system for the first time despite a 26% drop in total riders. Remains busiest route for drivers, even with a 19% decrease in vehicles.
- **Edmonds/Kingston:** Total riders fell 29% and vehicles declined 22%.
- **Seattle/Bainbridge Island:** Total riders down 59% with the system's largest year-to-year drop in walk-on passengers at 74%, vehicles decreased 36%.
- **Fauntleroy/Vashon/Southworth:** Total riders fell 39%, vehicles declined 31%.
- **Anacortes/San Juan Islands:** Total riders dipped 30%, vehicles down 21%.
- **Seattle/Bremerton:** Largest year-to-year drop (excluding international service) with total riders down 64%, led by a decrease in walk-on passengers of 72%; vehicles fell a system high 50%.
- **Point Defiance/Tahlequah:** Smallest year-to-year dip with total riders down 22% and vehicles dropping 15%.
- **Port Townsend/Coupeville:** Total riders decreased 37%, vehicles fell 30%.
- **Anacortes/Friday Harbor/Sidney, British Columbia:** Total riders and vehicles both declined 99% due to border restrictions.

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WSF, a division of the Washington State Department of Transportation, is the largest ferry system in the U.S. and safely and efficiently carries tens of millions of people a year through some of the most majestic scenery in the world. For breaking news and the latest information, follow WSF on Twitter and Facebook.