Washington State Department of Transportation

Washington State Ferries Service Contingency Plan

MAY 2025

Washington State Ferries

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Washington State Ferries (WSF) is the largest ferry system in the United States. A part of the state highway system, it has 21 vessels connecting communities from Tacoma to the San Juan Islands.

WSF is committed to increasing service while also growing and modernizing its fleet. In early 2025, Gov. Bob Ferguson directed WSF to focus on service restoration. This renewed focus, and with the hard work of its Vessel Maintenance, Operations and Planning teams, WSF plans to return to near pre-pandemic domestic service in summer 2025 – several years earlier than previously expected. Before the governor's new direction, service restoration was on hold until the arrival of new hybrid-electric ferries, the first of which is expected in 2029 (see Appendix A: Vessel Availability for more details).

This plan explains service restoration during the 2025 summer sailing season and how WSF intends to operate if a ferry becomes unavailable due to either crewing shortages or unscheduled vessel or terminal maintenance. The goal is to be honest with customers and transparently share how WSF plans to provide as much service as possible.

Service Restoration

During the 2025 summer sailing season, WSF will bring back the following service:

- The Seattle/Bremerton run will return to its two-boat schedule starting Sunday, June 15.
- The Fauntleroy/Vashon/Southworth "Triangle" route will be restored to its three-boat pre-pandemic schedule daily beginning Monday, June 30. Unless there are unexpected service disruptions due to vessel issues, we expect that schedule to operate until spring 2026, when there will be a couple of weeks when only a smaller vessel is available and an improved two-boat schedule with a bonus boat will be used.
- A second vessel will operate on the Port Townsend/Coupeville run every Friday through Monday from July 4 through the end of the route's shoulder season on Oct. 13.

WSF will crew three more boats daily for this added service. WSF is confident it can do so because of its recent and ongoing hiring and workforce development efforts. But with more vessels in service, there will be fewer crew members available for relief requests, some of which come in just before a watch starts. This increases the risk of cancellations due to staffing shortages (see Crewing Considerations and Appendix B: Crew Availability for more details).

In addition, WSF will continue to operate without a dedicated service relief vessel and will instead provide the maximum possible service with available vessels. This means that in the event of a vessel-related disruption, a route may operate at a reduced service level (see Unplanned Service Disruptions for more details).

Goals of the Service Contingency Plan

This plan outlines how WSF will maintain service until new boats are delivered. It also explains how it will respond to unplanned disruptions. Ferries may be sidelined due to mechanical issues, hard landings, groundings or issues like entanglement with crab pot lines. Terminals can also be affected by equipment failures, electronic issues or law enforcement activity. Crew shortages can also affect service.

The graphic below shows the breakdown of cancellations for October to December 2024 (fiscal year 2025, quarter

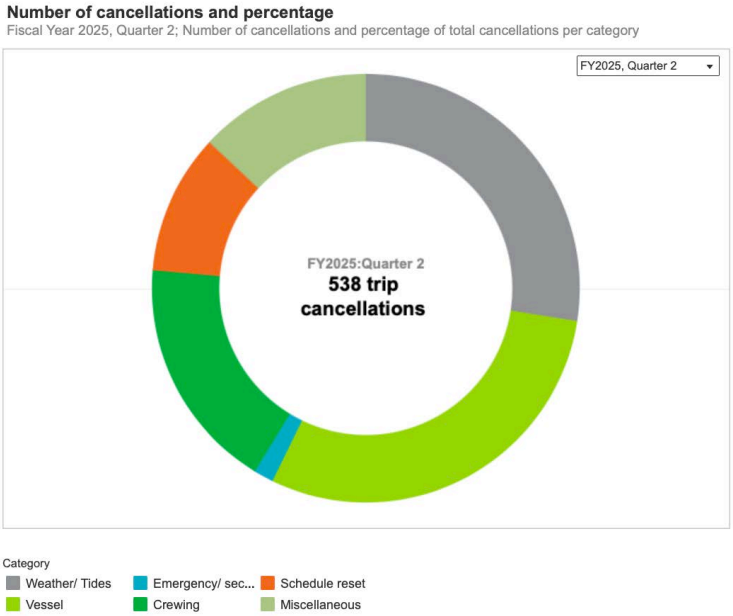
two). This data is updated four times a year in the WSDOT Gray Notebook. WSF completed 98.5% of its 36,650 scheduled trips, with 538 canceled. Cancellation causes included crew shortages (18%), mechanical issues (30%) and weather/tides (28%). While operating under this plan, WSF aims to complete at least 95% of its scheduled sailings – consistent with its typical monthly reliability of 96-97%.

Goals of the Service Contingency Plan

This plan focuses on how WSF intends to provide service over the next four-to-five years, until new vessels are constructed and delivered, as well as how WSF intends to provide service in the event of unplanned disruptions. There are numerous reasons a vessel might be taken out of service—not only mechanical issues, but also hard landings, groundings, or propeller shafts getting tangled in crab pot lines. Similarly, a terminal might become inoperable because of mechanical failure of a loading bridge or trestle, electronic malfunction, or even law enforcement activity. Service disruptions also occur when there is a lack of crew resources dispatched to operate a vessel. The graphic below shows the breakdown of cancellations for July-September 2023 (fiscal year 2024, quarter 1), from the WSDOT Gray Notebook. WSF schedule 37,025 trips and 1,069 were cancelled. 60% of trip cancellations were due to lack of crew, with 12% due to vessel mechanical issues, and another 12% due to schedule resets due to severe delays. While operating under this Service Contingency Plan, the goal is for WSF to complete 95% of its scheduled sailings. WSF generally operates over 95% reliability, with most months between 96-97%.

The goals of the Service Contingency Plan are to:

- Provide a measure of **predictability** about service levels WSF will be able to operate until new vessels arrive.
- Be **transparent** about decisions, considerations and priorities when service adjustments
- Provide **consistency** in service to enhance reliability for customers.
- Outline how WSF will **communicate** with customers, community members, and other partners.



SERVICE PLAN

Thanks to a robust workforce development pipeline, WSF expects crewing levels to continue to increase, which will allow for the crewing of more ferries. However, vessel constraints will continue while the fleet awaits new ferries. Until that happens, WSF can reliably operate a Baseline Contingency Plan of 17 or 18 vessels, depending on the season. During the spring shoulder, summer and fall shoulder seasons (peak), 18 ferries are needed. The fall, winter and spring seasons (off-peak) require 17 vessels.

Vessels are assigned to provide the following service:

Route	Baseline Contingency Plan: 17 (off-peak) or 18 (peak) vessels	Full Service*
Anacortes/San Juan Islands	4 vessels, including 1 interisland-only vessel (interisland does not run on winter weekends)	4 vessels including 1 interisland-only vessel (interisland does not run on winter weekends)
Port Townsend/Coupeville	1 vessel late fall through winter to early spring; 2 vessels early spring through summer to late fall #	1 vessel late fall through winter to early spring; 2 vessels early spring through summer to late fall
Mukilteo/Clinton	2 vessels	2 vessels
Edmonds/Kingston	2 vessels	2 vessels
Seattle/Bainbridge Island	2 vessels	2 vessels
Seattle/Bremerton	2 vessels	2 vessels
Fauntleroy/Vashon/Southworth	3 vessels (2-boat service on winter weekends) %	3 vessels (2-boat service on winter weekends)
Point Defiance/Tahlequah	1 vessel	1 vessel
Anacortes/Sidney	No service	1 vessel (spring/summer/fall)

*Full service requires 19 vessels in summer, 18 in spring and fall "shoulder" seasons and 17 from late fall to early spring.
#Second vessel operates only Fridays through Mondays in 2025.

% Partial service for #3 boat in summer 2025, using a single 8-hour watch on weekends.

As important as it is to have enough boats, WSF must also have the right classes of vessels available to match terminal infrastructure to maintain full service on certain routes. Specifically, WSF requires two 64-car Kwa-di Tabil-class vessels to operate peak season service at Port Townsend/Coupeville; and three 124-car expanded Issaquah-class ferries to maintain full three-boat service at Fauntleroy/Vashon/Southworth.

Because of necessary maintenance and preservation work on its vessels, WSF may not be able to always maintain three-boat service on the Fauntleroy/Vashon/Southworth route. When the three extended Issaquah Class vessels aren't all available, WSF will use the 90-car Sealth to maintain three-boat service. The Sealth, while smaller than the expanded Issaquah class, is fast enough to maintain the three-boat schedule. When ferries of appropriate size and speed are not available, the Fauntleroy/Vashon/Southworth route will operate on the two-boat schedule with a third unscheduled "bonus" boat.

There may also be times when WSF is forced to reduce service below the 18-vessel peak/17-vessel off-peak baseline.

When this is necessary, WSF will reduce service to:

1. Two-boat service at Fauntleroy/Vashon/Southworth
2. One-boat service at Seattle/Bremerton
3. One-boat service (shoulder/summer only) at Port Townsend/Coupeville

Operating reduced service affects customers and ferry-served communities. With that in mind, WSF will only operate reduced service when absolutely necessary, for as short a time as possible, with the goal to operate the maximum possible service allowable with the vessels available.

Restoration of service to Sidney, British Columbia, remains projected for 2030, when all domestic routes are fully restored to reliable pre-pandemic service.

Unplanned Service Disruptions

When a vessel unexpectedly goes out of service, WSF's first priority is the safety of our passengers and our crews. In the rare event that a ferry breaks down while in transit, our focus is first to move to a dock as soon as possible so that passengers can disembark. Crews are then dispatched from WSF headquarters and the Eagle Harbor Maintenance Facility to help troubleshoot the problem. The Coast Guard will also be notified so they can assess the situation.

How quickly WSF can restore service after a vessel breaks down depends on several variables, including the nature of the problem, whether WSF has parts immediately available for repair, whether the repair will require a dry dock, whether dry dock space is available, and more. After holding for 24 hours, if it is determined the issue is, WSF will consider moving our service relief vessel (if available) or moving vessels around the fleet.

In general, during the **first 24 hours** following a vessel taken out service, the route where the vessel is assigned will operate without that vessel. The reasons for this are twofold:

- **WSF needs time to make an assessment** as to whether the cause for removal can easily be fixed or will last more than 24 hours. Often, vessels can be repaired within hours.
- **It is a logistical challenge to move a vessel within a few hours**, especially when a ferry has a mechanical breakdown on a route far from Eagle Harbor. WSF needs time to assemble crews to move vessels to new routes, and our customers need to plan accordingly.

There are a couple of exceptions to the general rule that vessel reassignments will not occur within 24 hours of a vessel's removal from service:

- **WSF will restore service as quickly as possible on routes already on reduced service.** On routes where service has already been reduced, it is necessary to maintain service to ensure essential transportation connectivity and not strand passengers. This may require same-day vessel moves and a reduction in service on other routes.
- **WSF can rearrange some schedules on multi-destination routes with more than two vessels.** In the San Juan Islands, alternate schedules are available that allow WSF to reassign existing vessels to cover important connections to island communities.

In general, **24 hours after** a vessel has been taken out of service and when a relief vessel is available, the relief vessel will be put into service. WSF's ability to shuffle vessel assignments may be limited, and provided it can work the route, the relief vessel would likely be substituted directly for the missing vessel. If it cannot, then the relief vessel would be assigned to another route and a vessel would be taken from that other route.

When a relief vessel is not available, WSF must make difficult decisions about reallocating its service. To do this, WSF does its best to take into consideration several factors, including:

- **Minimal service:** A minimum of one vessel needs to remain on any given route to maintain basic transportation connections.
- **Alternative routes:** WSF considers whether an affected ferry route has an alternative through another ferry route or highway access.
- **Traffic/ridership:** WSF considers how many people use the route, its utilization rate, and mix of traffic. On

routes with higher commuter traffic, a service disruption on a weekend is more tolerable than a service disruption on a weekday. On some routes serving recreational destinations, it is often more crucial to maintain full capacity on weekends.

- **Special events:** Community events and their economic effect are considered (e.g., Seahawks games, summer festivals).
- **Reservations:** WSF's current reservation system does not allow it to redistribute reservations to other sailings. WSF may temporarily adjust the reservation system's business and operational rules until normal service is restored and the traffic effects are resolved. To the extent possible, WSF will prioritize travel for customers holding a reservation for any sailings during the service day over customers traveling from the same terminal without a reservation.
- **Vessel capacity:** WSF must consider the capacity of each vessel to carry vehicles and passengers, especially on high-demand routes.
- **Resources:** Crew availability, the ability of other vessels to operate safely and efficiently on other routes, and the availability of maintenance resources (Eagle Harbor, drydock) are all factors in service decisions.
- **Costs:** Each vessel has a home port and this location is considered as it affects cost. It typically costs $14,000 per boat move, plus additional ongoing costs to operate vessels away from their home port.
- **Other factors:** Terminal construction work and nearby highway projects are some of the other factors considered.
- **Duration of disruption:** How long a disruption lasts has a direct effect on many other factors, including traffic/ridership, resources, reservations, costs, etc.

Flow charts that outline WSF's plan for addressing service disruptions are shown in **Figures 1 and 2** on the following pages. The flowcharts cover the two most likely scenarios but cannot cover all possible situations. WSF will use the criteria above when making service decisions during disruptions and may not strictly adhere to the flowcharts.

Figure 1: Service plan flowchart, Sealth as Fauntleroy/Vashon/Southworth #3 boat

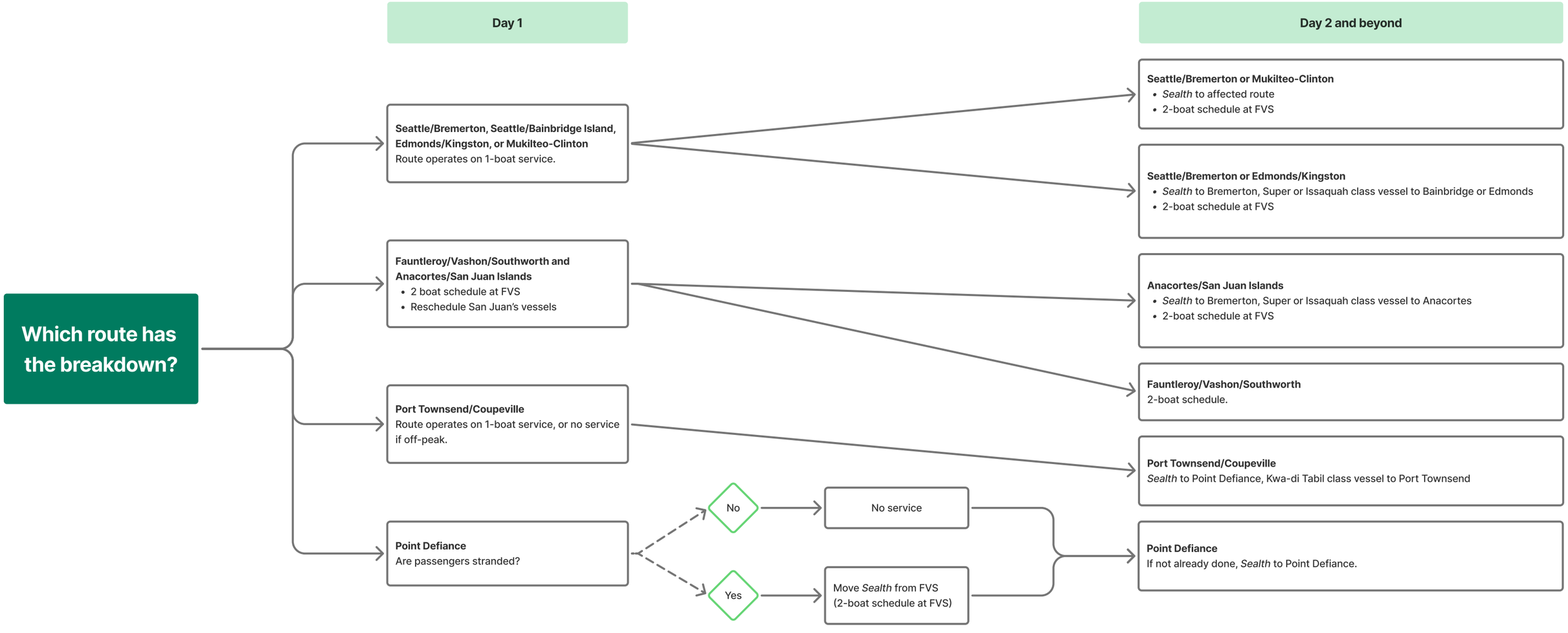
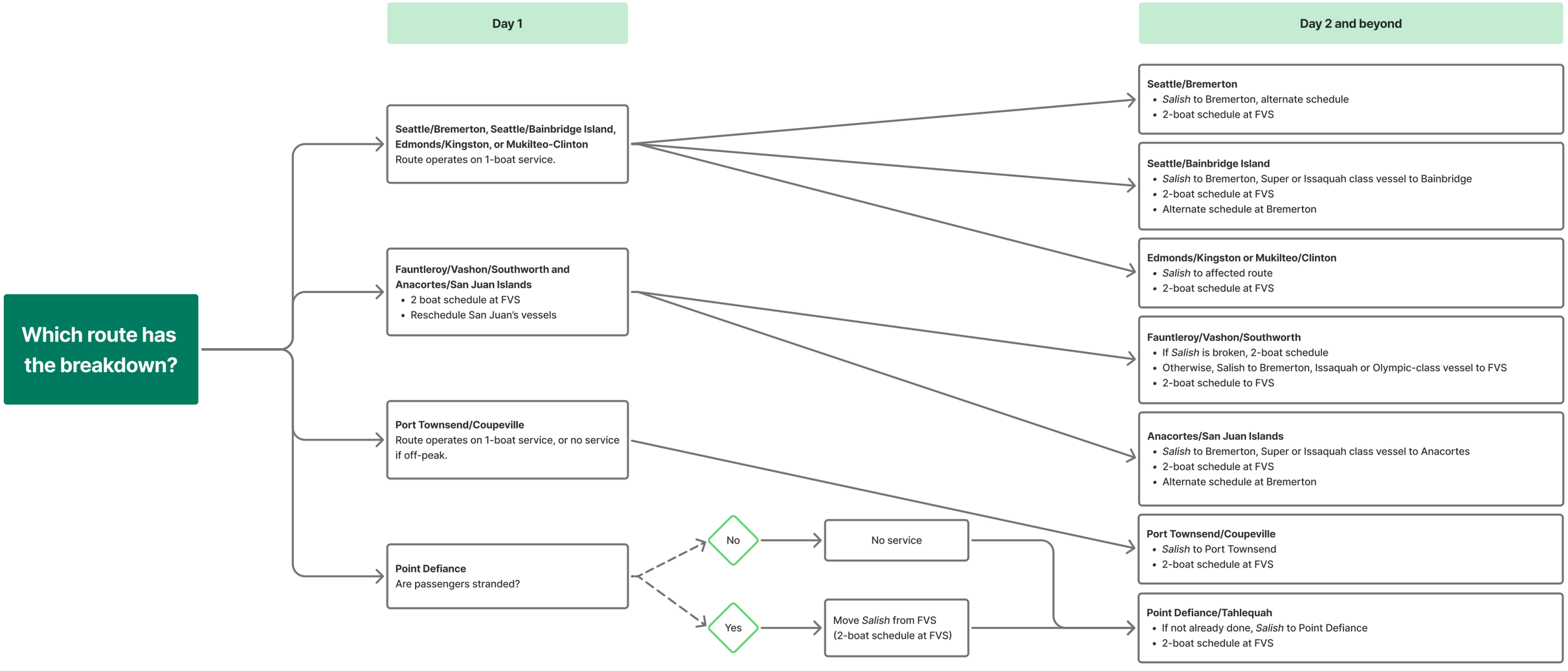


Figure 2: Service plan flowchart, Salish as Fauntleroy/Vashon/Southworth #3 boat



VESSEL CONSIDERATIONS

WSF's vessels operate in service more than 20 hours each day, 365 days a year. This puts stress on the fleet, which is complicated by additional factors:

- **Aging vessels:** The fleet has an average age of 34 years. Half of the fleet is more than 30 years old, including five of 21 that are more than 50 years old. This aging fleet requires more maintenance to deal with problems such as steel corrosion, replacing or repairing obsolete equipment, and preservation projects that have been deferred, leading to a higher risk of vessel breakdown.

- **Limited spare vessels:** With only 21 vessels and an aging fleet requiring additional maintenance, WSF does not always have a standby vessel for emergency relief. Even when one is available, unscheduled repairs can quickly consume this extra capacity, and there will be periods when WSF will lack enough vessels to operate even the "baseline" level of service.

WSF vessels are highly regulated by the Coast Guard and must meet stringent requirements before they are allowed to carry passengers. Some of these requirements include an underwater inspection twice every five years, an annual safety inspection, quarterly random inspections and additional testing of sprinkler systems and marine evacuation systems. Scheduling these tests and any related maintenance projects is often a delicate negotiation between the vessel's maintenance needs, its assigned route's service needs and the scarce availability of drydock space in the Puget Sound region. Shipyard capacity in the region is very limited with other vessels taking priority over WSF like military ships in the region. WSF must schedule drydock periods well in advance and often our partner shipyards have minimal or no flexibility on scheduling to accommodate emerging needs. Annual system reviews for the USCG-issued Certificate of Inspection has an expiration date that is non-negotiable and WSF is unable to defer this date to increase flexibility when we are short of vessels.

WSF is often able to shift vessels around, juggle maintenance needs and reallocate resources across the system to ensure a minimal loss of service in the event of unplanned maintenance. However, with only 21 vessels and typically no service relief vessel, taking a vessel out of service for repairs is more complicated.

Based on current planned maintenance at WSF's Eagle Harbor Maintenance Facility and commercial shipyards, WSF expects to have between 17 and 18 vessels available at any given time over the next few years, with the number of vessels available varying throughout the year due to maintenance requirements and scheduling. However, recent experience has shown that WSF has, on average, one or two vessels out of service for unplanned maintenance or repair at any given time. Accounting for unplanned out-of-service time further reduces vessel availability and complicates the process of scheduling needed maintenance for the fleet.

CREWING CONSIDERATIONS

Vessel crewing varies by class, with smaller vessels such as the Kwa-di Tabil class requiring fewer crew members and larger vessels such as the Jumbo Mark II class requiring more personnel. Total crew on a vessel while it is in service could range from 10 to 16 crew members, with a typical range of 12-15, depending on the vessel and route. Each vessel has two or three deck shifts and two 12-hour engine room watches a day. Fleetwide, between 430 and 505 crew are needed every day. WSF crews are broadly divided into deck crew, those who steer and navigate the vessel, load vehicles and monitor and clean the passenger cabin; and engine crew, who are responsible for the vessel's propulsion and other mechanical systems.

WSF is budgeted to staff vessels with just enough crew to meet the Coast Guard-minimum Certificate of Inspection requirements. This means if even one crew member is missing, the ferry may not be able to sail. The USCG sets these minimum levels to make sure there is enough crew to carry out essential emergency functions.

WSF Crew Required for Each Vessel Class

	Jumbo Mk II	Jumbo	Super	Olympic	Issaquah	Evergreen State	Kwa-di Tabil
Captain and Mates	3	3	3[a]	2[b]	2	2	2
Able-Bodied Sailors	4	4	4	5[c]	4	4	4
Ordinary Sailors	4	3	3[d]	4[c]	3	2	3[e]
Licensed Engineers	2	2	2	2	2	1	1
Oilers & Wipers	2	2	2	2	1	2	2

Notes:

a – Super class: One mate not needed late fall to early spring, Anacortes/San Juan Islands route only.

b – Olympic class: One additional mate is required on the Seattle/Bremerton route.

c – Olympic class: One AB and one OS are not needed when the passenger capacity is reduced to 50% and the sun deck is closed.

d – Super class: One OS not needed at low passenger loads and the promenade deck is closed.

e – Kwa-di Tabil class: One or two OSs not needed when passenger capacity is reduced to 50%.

Deck crews are assigned to a specific route regardless of which vessel is assigned and work only while the vessel is in service, while engine crews are assigned to a vessel 24 hours a day every day of the year, regardless of which route the vessel is on or whether the vessel is in service. The number of licensed and unlicensed deck crew needed in the WSF workforce to reliably operate different numbers of vessels in service is shown in the table below.

Vessels in Service	Licensed and Unlicensed Deck Crew Members Required
15	710
16	733
17	770
18	791

WSF has determined that it will need to hire 60 entry-level deck hands (ordinary sailors) and 36 able-bodied sailors every year in perpetuity to restore 18 vessel service in 2025 and maintain the Baseline Contingency Plan level of service. At the same time, WSF needs to continue developing licensed deck offices (mates and captains) through recently implemented programs that support workforce development.

Even when WSF can hire and train crew to reach full staffing levels, last-minute relief requests can still lead to canceled sailings. At the beginning of every sailing season all watches are crewed. As relief requests come in, WSF's dispatchers work tirelessly to fill open jobs to allow vessels to sail on time. However, when an employee requests relief at the last minute – wakes up sick, has a childcare challenge, gets a flat tire on the way to work – it takes time to find a replacement and dispatch another crew member to the ferry. Regardless of the reason for the crew absence, it is not safe or legal to sail without a full crew.

On average WSF receives 130 relief requests a day, with some of them coming just before the start of a shift. This number fluctuates wildly depending on the season and circumstances. Pre-COVID, people were more willing to work with mild cold symptoms, but post-pandemic , we are seeing a societal change where those people call in sick and stay home instead. When WSF had higher relief staffing levels in prior years, there was a solid bench to fill these requests. With fewer relief crewmembers available, it can take longer to fill a last-minute request, especially on more remote routes like the San Juan Islands or for watches that occur at the start of the sailing day. Unfortunately, this leads to canceled sailings that can last until a full crew is available.

PRESEASON PLANNING AND SETTING SEASONAL SERVICE LEVELS

WSF operates four seasonal schedules:

1. Summer (mid-June to late September)
2. Fall (late September to end of December)
3. Winter (January to mid-March)
4. Spring (mid-March to mid-June)

The Port Townsend/Coupeville route has a shoulder season spanning parts of spring and fall, from around Mother's Day in mid-May through Indigenous Peoples' Day in early October.

For each seasonal sailing schedule, WSF works across departments to determine how to provide service on each route and when each of its 21 vessels will undergo its required maintenance. Both the "where" and "when" come with a significant number of constraints. For example, a vessel may be too large to physically fit in a particular terminal, or a vessel may be too slow for a particular route, making it a bad fit to maintain the sailing schedule and on-time performance (**see Table 1 on next page**).

WSF sets a seasonal schedule at least two months in advance. This timing is essential to support preparation of sailing schedules, vehicle reservations, crew bidding for watch assignments, determination of tidal cancellations and vessel assignments.

Among the policies or assumptions WSF attempts to adhere to during this planning phase includes:

- Scheduling no more than three boats to be out for planned maintenance at any given time.
- Assuming at least one vessel will be unavailable due to unplanned maintenance at any given time.
- Avoiding situations where two vessels of the largest classes (Jumbo class or Jumbo Mark II class) are out at the same time (except for major midlife upgrades).
- Noting which routes are operating on reduced service, as this may dictate the assignment of larger vessels to partially mitigate fewer sailings, or to not assign a smaller-than-normal vessel.

Along with a list of other considerations – including contracting, crewing and training needs, the capacity of WSF's maintenance facility at Eagle Harbor, budgetary concerns, and public or community commitments, among others – the initial planning process can take some time to complete and involves representatives from all parts of the organization.

Table 1: "Fit" of Vessel Classes to Routes

Size	Class	Veh Spaces	Vessel	Route: Home Port	South: Point Defiance-Tahlequah PD-TAL	Fauntleroy-Vashon-Southworth FVS	Seattle-Bremerton SEA-BR	Seattle-Bainbridge SEA-BI	Edmonds-Kingston ED-KING	Mukilteo-Clinton MUK-CL	è: Port Townsend-Coupeville PT-KEY	Anacortes-San Juan Islands ANA-SJ	San Juan Interisland ANA-SJ 4	North: Anacortes-Sidney ANA-SID
Big	Jumbo Mark II	202	Tacoma	Seattle	Oversize for route	Oversize for route; lengthy loading and unloading	More capacity than needed	Meets demand	Meets demand	Oversize for route	Will not fit in Keystone Harbor	Oversize for route; lengthy loading and unloading	Oversize for route; lengthy loading and unloading	No SOLAS
			Wenatchee	Seattle										
			Puyallup	Kingston										
	Jumbo	188	Spokane	Edmonds	Oversize for route	Oversize for route; lengthy loading and unloading	More capacity than needed	Meets demand	Meets demand	Oversize for route	Will not fit in Keystone Harbor	Oversize for route; lengthy loading and unloading	Oversize for route; lengthy loading and unloading	No SOLAS
			Walla Walla	Seattle										
	Super	144	Kaleetan	Seattle	More capacity than needed	Lengthy loading & offloading	Good fit for route	Moderate overloads	Moderate overloads	Lengthy loading & off-loading	Will not fit in Keystone Harbor	Good fit for route	More capacity than needed	No SOLAS
			Yakima	Anacortes										
	Olympic	144	Tokitae	Mukilteo	More capacity than needed	Good fit for route	Good fit for route	Moderate overloads	Moderate overloads	Good fit for route	Will not fit in Keystone Harbor	Good fit for route	More capacity than needed	No SOLAS
			Samish	Anacortes										
			Chimacum	Seattle										
			Suquamish	Mukilteo										
ê	Issaquah 124	124	Issaquah	Fauntleroy	More capacity than needed	Good fit for route	Good fit for route	Severe overloads	Moderate overloads	Good fit for route	Will not fit in Keystone Harbor	Good fit for route	More capacity than needed Chelan: SOLAS	Issaquah, Kitsap, Kittitas, Cathlamet: No SOLAS
			Kitsap	Seattle										
			Kittitas	Fauntleroy										
			Cathlamet	Fauntleroy										
			Chelan	Anacortes										Chelan: SOLAS
	Issaquah 90	90	Sealth	Bainbridge Isl.	Good fit for route	Good fit for route	Moderate overloads	Can't meet demand	Moderate overloads	Moderate overloads	Will not fit in Keystone Harbor	**Winter**: Good fit for route / **Spring to Fall:**Moderate overloads	Good fit for route	No SOLAS
	E-State	87	Tillikum	Friday Harbor	Poor operational fit	Moderate overloads	Too slow to keep schedule	Can't meet demand. Too slow to keep schedule	Severe overloads	Severe overloads	Will not fit in Keystone Harbor	Too slow to keep schedule	Good fit for route	No SOLAS
	Kwa-di Tabil	64	Chetzemoka	Pt Def	Good fit for route	Lengthy loading & off-loading	Too slow to keep schedule	Can't meet demand. Poor fit to terminal	Severe overloads	Severe overloads	Good fit for route	Can't meet demand. Too slow to keep schedule.	**Fall to Spring:** Lengthy loading and off-loading	**Summer:** Moderate overloads. Lengthy loading and off-loading. / No SOLAS
			Salish	Pt Town										
Small			Kennewick	Pt Town										

Key: Good fit for route. Vessel not ideal but is acceptable. Vessel can work the route but it's not optimal due to vessel size/speed. Vessel does not work on the route

CUSTOMER INFORMATION AND SERVICE DISRUPTION COMMUNICATIONS

To allow customers enough time to plan their travel, WSF works hard to communicate any service disruptions to the traveling public and to the broader community. WSF shares service information and context around service disruptions, and provides travel information in the following ways:

- **Text or email alerts:** Travel alert bulletins or rider alerts are sent to customers who have subscribed for this service. Customer service web agents are on staff from 4:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. to send out alerts. In the overnight hours, WSF operations staff can send out limited rider alerts if needed.
- **Customer contact center:** Customer Service is open daily from 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and can be reached by calling 206-464-6400 or 888-808-7977. Agents are also available to respond to emails at wsfinfo@wsdot.wa.gov.
- **WSDOT app and online travel tools:** The WSDOT app includes ferry schedules, real-time maps and service bulletins. WSF also provides several trip planning tools which customers find particularly useful during periods of reduced service including:
    - Sailing schedules by route
    - A real-time map showing the position and status of every vessel in the fleet
    - Terminal, wait time and camera information
- **Social and traditional media:** Rider alerts automatically post on the WSF website, and on WSF's X (formerly known as Twitter) and Bluesky accounts. Additionally, WSF's communications team monitors social media accounts Monday through Friday from 8 a.m.to 5 p.m. and answer customer questions about service delays and disruptions. They staff a 24/7 media hotline and contact media outlets as needed to share details on breaking news.
- **Emails to elected officials and interested parties:** For major service impacts, WSF sends emails to affected legislators, local elected officials and Ferry Advisory Committee members so they can share information with their constituents and fellow community members.
- **Highway signs and information:** Customer service staff work with WSDOT highway operations to update messages on the Highway Advisory Radio System and the Variable Message Systems that are accessible from state routes leading to ferry terminals.
- **WSF Weekly Update newsletter:** WSF sends out a weekly newsletter that often provides more in-depth information about vessel and crew availability constraints, past and future service disruptions and sailing schedule changes. Customers can view each newsletter and subscribe to the Weekly Update online.

With operations spanning the Salish Sea from Tacoma to the San Juan Islands, WSF customer service staff prioritizes sending out information on the highest-impact situations in a fast-moving marine operating environment.

CONCLUSION

WSF is on the way to more reliable service but still face challenges. WSF's prioritizes maximum service. The focus is the safety of customers and crew first, and then the health of publicly owned assets.

While service disruptions are an inevitable reality of most mass transit systems today, WSF hopes this Service Contingency Plan offers passengers insight into the many trade-offs WSF must make and how these difficult decisions are made, while also providing clarity into what service customers can expect.

APPENDIX A: VESSEL AVAILABILITY

Vessel availability is a major constraint. In 2015, WSF had 24 vessels; since then, WSF has retired five vessels and added two. WSF's fleet now consists of 21 vessels ranging from seven to 66 years old. WSF's 2040 Long Range Plan, delivered to the Legislature in 2019, says 26 vessels are necessary to provide reliable service on every route as well as out-of-service time for necessary vessel inspection, maintenance and preservation work. WSF presently has funding for up to five new ferries. In 2023, the Legislature changed state law to allow WSF to expand its new vessel build program out of state, which provides additional opportunity to build new vessels more quickly. Even with these changes, the first new vessel likely won't enter service until 2029. Bid opening for new vessels is anticipated on May 12, 2025.

Operating full service on every route requires 19 vessels in the summer, 18 in the spring and fall "shoulder" seasons (generally Mother's Day to Indigenous Peoples' Day) and 17 in the late fall/winter/early spring. Throughout 2023, WSF operated with 14-16 vessels in service for extended periods of time, and in 2024 operated with 15-16 vessels in service the entire year. Due to the increasing age of the fleet and a long history of deferred vessel maintenance, WSF believes planning for a baseline of 17 vessels in service, with up to 18 available during the peak season , is the most reasonable projection for the next four years. With limited vessel availability, WSF will be unable to operate full service on every route until new vessels are constructed and delivered.

APPENDIX B: CREW AVAILABILITY

WSF is affected by the global shortage of mariners, competition with other maritime companies to hire, and currently lacks the necessary crew to operate full service. WSF faces severe staff shortages that are unprecedented in its 74-year history. In 2019, the 2040 Long Range Plan recommended that WSF's workforce must be further strengthened with more active recruitment, development and retention to ensure reliable service. Since then, the effects of an international shortage of mariners, attrition due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other factors, and retirement due to the aging demographics of the workforce have combined to reduce staffing below levels necessary to reliably operate the system.

As part of the "generational transformation" that the Washington State Department of Transportation has been discussing since at least 2016, 50% of WSF's most credentialed deck and engine room employees are retirement eligible in the next five years. Recognizing the need, the state has provided robust funding recently for recruiting, hiring and training new employees. The new funding has allowed WSF to also create new programs to move non-licensed employees to licensed, but, due to USCG requirements around the amount of training and days at sea for each position, takes time.

With an estimated shortfall of 21,000 mariners worldwide, this is not just a WSF issue. BC Ferries, the Alaska Marine Highway System and the Massachusetts Steamship Authority are all canceling sailings due to crewing. And importantly, BC Ferries and other international ferry systems can hire crew from other nations, something U.S. ferry systems are precluded from doing by the 1920 Jones Act.

In 2024, WSF saw crewing-related cancellations steadily subside thanks to increasing number of available crew and efforts by WSF with support from the state funding. By early 2025, WSF experienced several weeks with zero crewing-related sailing cancellations.

APPENDIX C: PREVIOUS SERVICE PLANS

WSF released its COVID-19 Service Restoration Plan (PDF 794KB) in March 2022 and an update (PDF 1MB) in February 2023. The plan described the process by which WSF would increase its service to meet increasing demand as the ferry system recovered from the immediate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as ridership rebounded and responded to ongoing crew and vessel availability challenges exacerbated by the pandemic. Now, as more years separate us from the pandemic and WSF better understands some of the systemic challenges related to crew and vessel availability, it's clear it will take longer to restore all routes to full service. In 2024, a Service Contingency Plan (PDF 832KB) replaced the COVID-19 Service Restoration Plan and provides a framework for service decisions over the next several years. This document is an update to the 2024 Service Contingency Plan.