

Wi-Fi Pilot Program - Ferry Customer Digital Experience

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December 2025



**Washington State
Department of Transportation**

Executive Summary

Washington State Ferries is exploring the feasibility of providing public Wi-Fi service at ferry terminals and aboard vessels, as directed by [Chapter 416, Legislative Law 2025, ESSB 5161, Section 222\(5\)](#).

(5) Within existing resources, the department must deploy a pilot program for offering customers wifi on vessels and in terminals. By January 1, 2026, the department must report on the viability of the program to the transportation committees of the legislature, including implementation recommendations and cost estimates. The department must prioritize routes or terminals with wifi coverage issues and consider fee-for-service options.

WSF currently provides no public internet service, and a previous private-sector attempt in the late-2000s was unable to sustain operations due to low revenue and high infrastructure costs.

The Legislature has asked WSF to evaluate the viability, cost, operational implications, and funding models for a modern public Wi-Fi program. To meet this requirement, WSF proposes a limited pilot focused on a single terminal, Bremerton, and one vessel, the M/V Chimacum, to validate key assumptions including coverage, customer adoption, bandwidth demand, vendor capabilities, support requirements, and overall system performance.

As prescribed in the legislative language, the pilot program must be completed within existing agency resources. Early estimates suggest that any future system-wide deployment would likely require multi-million-dollar capital investment and ongoing operational costs in the seven-figure range, depending on the chosen service model.

The pilot will provide data needed to determine feasibility, develop accurate cost projections, assess staffing impacts, and identify options such as free service, fee-based service, or hybrid models.

This report outlines the pilot plan, evaluation criteria, early cost considerations, technical constraints, project risks, and anticipated next steps required to support a future decision.

Pilot Overview

WSF proposes a focused pilot that will evaluate public Wi-Fi service at one terminal, Bremerton, and on one vessel, the M/V Chimacum. This pilot structure allows WSF to test a full end-to-end environment, including terminal and vessel connectivity. Bremerton is strategically selected because it represents one of the system's longest sailings, where customer demand for internet connectivity is likely higher, and where the physical layout of the terminal provides a manageable platform for initial installation.

The M/V Chimacum is identified as the vessel pilot candidate due to its route profile, operational predictability, and its planned 2026 layup, which can potentially support installation work with minimal disruption. The combined terminal and vessel configuration will allow the pilot to test core service elements including network availability, signal coverage, roaming between shore and vessel networks, bandwidth performance, and vendor support responsiveness.

Scope and Objectives

The pilot is intentionally limited in scope. It is intended to answer foundational questions regarding cost, feasibility, and customer usage, rather than to introduce advanced or future phase features. Data from the pilot will support development of a long-term business case, help determine whether a larger deployment is practical, and inform decisions on service models such as free, subscription based, or hybrid offerings.

ID	Area	Objective	Key Metrics
1	Technical Feasibility	Assess the ability to provide reliable Wi-Fi service	Signal coverage, bandwidth capacity, reliability, support for web browsing, productivity, and light streaming, vendor equipment performance, network compatibility
2	Customer Usage	Measure passenger usage and gather feedback	Connection rates, peak usage, concurrent users, customer satisfaction, service expectations
3	Operational Support	Understand staffing, vendor performance, and operational requirements	IT and vendor resource requirements, monitoring and maintenance needs
4	Cost & Funding Analysis	Estimate installation, operational, and maintenance costs	Capital costs, O&M projections, potential funding models, cost per passenger, feasibility of free, fee-based, or hybrid models
5	Risk & Constraints	Identify potential obstacles to deployment and performance	Installation limitations, cybersecurity and privacy considerations, terms of service, service reliability, impact on vessel operations, terminal infrastructure limitations

Pilot Design and Implementation Considerations

The WSF pilot is designed to provide a controlled evaluation of public Wi-Fi service at one terminal, Bremerton, and one vessel, the M/V Chimacum. The pilot will allow WSF to test coverage, customer adoption, bandwidth demand, vendor capabilities, and overall service performance, while keeping scope manageable and risks limited.

Pilot Approach

The pilot will be implemented in coordination with a turnkey vendor, who will provide and support the necessary equipment and services. WSF staff will oversee performance, ensure compliance with cybersecurity and accessibility requirements, and coordinate data collection. The pilot is intentionally limited in scope to validate assumptions before considering broader deployment.

Timeline and Key Milestones

The pilot is scheduled to run through August 2026, with major milestones including vendor selection, equipment delivery, installation at Bremerton terminal and the M/V Chimacum, initial testing, and the operational pilot period. Data collected during this period will be analyzed to provide recommendations on feasibility, costs, and potential service models.

Pilot Timeline and Key Milestones

Milestone	Target Date
Vendor Selection	January 2026
Equipment Delivery	February 2026
Terminal Installation	March 2026
Vessel Installation	March 2026
Testing & Commissioning	April 2026
Pilot Operational Period	May – August 2026
Data Analysis & Reporting	September 2026

Customer Experience Considerations

The pilot will focus on delivering a reliable, simple Wi-Fi connection for passengers. Feedback will be collected to understand user satisfaction, usage patterns, and expectations. Lessons learned will inform future considerations for service accessibility, equity, and potential expansion.

Cost Estimates and Funding Considerations

The proposed pilot is unfunded and must be completed using existing WSF resources. Early estimates for a two terminal pilot suggest capital costs could range between \$50,000 and \$60,000 if limited to passenger areas. However, a revised estimate for a single-terminal, single-vessel pilot suggest capital costs could range between \$100,000 and \$150,000. This estimate includes deployment to both the passenger waiting areas and vehicle holding lanes at the Bremerton terminal, as well as Wi-Fi coverage aboard the M/V Chimacum, which could be limited to one half of the passenger cabin or expanded to cover the full cabin depending on final cost and feasibility. These estimates cover equipment acquisition, installation, and minimal vendor support required for the pilot period.

Full system-wide deployment would likely require a multi-million-dollar capital investment and ongoing operational costs in the seven-figure range, depending on the chosen service model. Factors that influence total cost include the number of terminals and vessels served, the scale of passenger areas covered, network backhaul requirements, and the level of service provided to passengers (for example, free versus subscription-based or hybrid models).

Potential funding approaches include:

- **State-Funded Deployment:** Fully supported by future legislative appropriations.
- **Vendor-Funded or Public-Private Partnership:** Leveraging vendor resources to offset capital or operational costs, potentially through advertising or subscription revenue.
- **Hybrid Model:** A combination of free service for all passengers and premium service tiers to generate revenue for ongoing operations.

The pilot will provide critical data to refine these estimates, validate cost assumptions, and determine which funding approach would be viable and sustainable for broader deployment.

Risks and Constraints

Risk/Constraint	Description	Mitigation/Notes
Funding Limitations	Pilot must be completed with existing resources; full deployment would require multi-million-dollar investment	Conduct a limited pilot to gather data before seeking additional funding
Customer Expectations	Passengers may expect reliable, high-speed service during pilot; temporary nature may lead to complaints if service is discontinued	Communicate pilot scope and timeline clearly, set expectations that this is a test program
Infrastructure Constraints	Terminal and vessel layouts may limit coverage or complicate installation	Pilot limited to Bremerton terminal and M/V Chimacum, assess data for broader feasibility
Operational / Staffing Impacts	WSF staff will oversee monitoring and customer inquiries; resources are limited	Leverage vendor solution, monitor workload impact
Security and Compliance	Network must be segmented from operational systems, comply with state IT policies and accessibility requirements	Ensure vendor adherence to cybersecurity and privacy standards
Data Collection Limitations	Pilot is limited in scope; results may not fully generalize to all routes or vessels	Use pilot data to refine assumptions and guide future phases

Progress to Date

Starting in the Spring of 2025, the Technology Services Division has been conducting preliminary work to prepare for the public Wi-Fi pilot. This includes engaging multiple vendors, such as T-Mobile, RCN Technologies, Ericsson Enterprise Wireless Solutions (formerly CardlePoint), and GlobalReach Technology, among others to discuss system requirements, hardware options, estimated costs, and potential service models. Initial discussions have also explored options for a customer portal and end-user experience; however, these aspects are outside the scope of the pilot and would be considered as part of a future enhancement phase if the program moves forward.

Next Steps

The pilot is planned to proceed with deployment at the Bremerton terminal and the M/V Chimacum, focusing on validating technical feasibility, customer adoption, and operational impacts. Key next steps include:

1. Finalizing vendor selection and agreements.
2. Delivering and installing hardware at the terminal and vessel.
3. Conducting initial testing and commissioning to ensure coverage and network functionality.
4. Operating the pilot from May through August 2026, collecting usage data, customer feedback, and operational observations.
5. Analyzing pilot results to inform legislative reporting, including feasibility, cost estimates, staffing implications, and potential service models.

Conclusion

The proposed public Wi-Fi pilot at the Bremerton terminal and aboard the M/V Chimacum represents a practical, data-driven approach to evaluating the feasibility of a modern Wi-Fi service for ferry passengers. The pilot is designed to gather critical information on technical performance, customer adoption, operational impacts, and costs, while limiting risk and resource demands.

Data collected during the pilot will inform WSF on the viability of broader deployment, including potential service models, funding approaches, and phased enhancements such as expanded coverage or customer-facing portals. Clear communication with passengers, careful monitoring, and structured evaluation will ensure the pilot produces actionable insights, allowing WSF to provide a thorough report to the Legislature and support future decisions on public Wi-Fi service.

WSF will continue to keep the Legislature informed of our progress throughout the duration of the pilot.

If you have questions on the attached material or need additional information, please contact Hillary Badger at (360) 915-4860 or hillary.badger@wsdot.wa.gov.