WASHINGTON ⬤ SECRETARY OF STATE

Elections Division

Risk-limiting Audits: Conducting a Risk-Limiting Audit Pilot
Elections Clearinghouse Notice
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This clearinghouse is issued to reflect rule changes in [WAC 434-261](). This clearinghouse explains the general process to conduct a risk-limiting audit.

Risk-limiting Audit Pilot Overview

A risk-limiting audit (RLA) pilot is an opportunity to practice and refine RLA procedures in a learning environment. To that end, some RLA processes may be adjusted or shortened to serve a goal of learning rather than the verification of election results. Some audit settings, such as the risk limit and target contest, may be restricted in a manner that falls outside of the parameters established in [WACs 434-261-114 through 434-261-119]().

Counties that choose to conduct a risk-limiting audit pilot must also perform an official audit using one of the methods listed in [RCW 29A.60.185]() in order to fulfill statutory auditing requirements.

Selecting the Target Contest

[RCW 29A.60.185(c)(ii)]() and [WAC 434-261-115(8)]() state that the target contest in an RLA shall be selected randomly. This may lead to a sample size that is unreasonably large for the purpose of learning and may take too long to complete. Counties conducting a pilot, in consultation with the Office of the Secretary of State, may choose a contest to suit their timeframe and create the best learning scenario.

Likewise, the timing of target contest selection may be different in an RLA pilot. A target contest may be identified well in advance of the election but, depending on the initial election results, may not be optimal with regard to its margin. For purposes of learning it may be advantageous to select a different contest to audit after initial election results are evaluated.

Preparing for the Risk-limiting Audit

Counties can add batches or precincts to the ballot manifest as soon as they are processed and scanned into the voting system.

Using an RLA tool [approved for use]() in the State of Washington by the Office of the Secretary of State, the Office of the Secretary of State will create the RLA, inputting the audit parameters and establishing credentials for jurisdiction managers who coordinate the audit at the county level.

The jurisdiction manager will sign into the RLA tool, establish the audit boards, and print the necessary RLA documents. Each audit board will be comprised of two people; counties may have multiple audit boards.

Ballot Retrieval

County elections staff will retrieve individual ballots selected for audit. (WAC 434-261-117)

The ballot retrieval list will be divided according to the number of audit boards established by the jurisdiction manager. The RLA tool will divide the ballot retrieval list so that no two audit board teams are accessing the same batches of ballots.
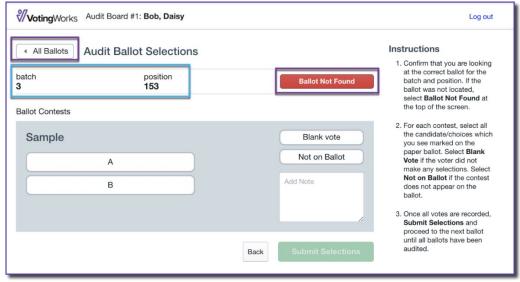
An audit board team will use the ballot retrieval list to locate the correct container, batch, and ballot to be audited. First the team will verify that ballots have been securely stored in accordance with WAC 434-261-045.

The team will then unseal the container, retrieve the designated ballot, replace it with a placeholder sheet, and reseal the container. The placeholder sheet will indicate that the ballot has been audited and can be found in a new container after the RLA is complete.

The team will place a removable label on the ballot that contains the same information as the placeholder sheet, to tie them together.

Data Entry

The audit boards are responsible for entering voter choices on the selected ballots into the RLA software tool. The tool will indicate which ballot to audit and which contest or contests to record:

The two members of the audit board will each examine the voter choices; if they agree, they will select the corresponding choice in the audit software. If they cannot agree on the voter's intent, they will add a note in the software and proceed with the audit. (WAC 434-261-117(2))

Once all ballots have been audited, the audit board members will sign off and the audit round will be complete. The audit software will then indicate that either the risk limit has been met and the audit is complete, or the risk limit has not been met and additional sampling is required.

If the risk limit has not been met in an audit pilot, elections staff should retrace the steps of the audit to determine the cause; likely errors may be an incorrectly pulled ballot or a mistake during data entry. If an error is found and can be corrected, the ballots can be re-audited. Additional sampling may not be necessary in an audit pilot if the learning objective has been met. (WAC 434-261-117(4))

Creating the Audit Report

When the audit is complete, the audit software will produce a report listing the details of each audited ballot. The columns in the report labeled "Audit Result" and "CVR Result" contain information that may reveal a voter's choices; those columns will be deleted before publication to secure voter privacy. (WAC 434-261-117(3))

The audit boards will sign and submit an additional report required by the Office of the Secretary of State, listing any discrepancies found and their causes (if found) within two business days, in accordance with WAC 434-261-117(5).

For questions about RLA pilots, please contact the Results Audit Specialist at the Office of the Secretary of State.