

## **Assessment Committee Meeting**

1:00 to 4:00pm, October 29, 2008

Hood River County Administration Building, Hood River, Oregon

### **Meeting Notes**

#### Assessment Committee members present:

Chair, Dan Harkenrider, Walt Loehrke and Carl McNew\* by telephone.

#### Commission and Forest Service staff present:

Jill Arens, Brian Litt, Angie Kenney, Tom Ascher, Jessica Metta, Jennifer Kaden, Michele Dailey and indicators consultant, Jeff Tryens.

#### Former Community (CAT) and Technical (TAT) Advisory Team members present:

North Cheatham\*, Chair of the CAT; Mary Repar, CAT; Jamie Tolfree, CAT; Carol York, CAT; Don Morby, CAT; Jeanette Burkhardt, natural and cultural resource sub-group TAT member; and Greg Griffith, cultural resource expert for the TAT, by telephone.

#### Others present:

None.

*\* Participant was not able to stay the duration of the meeting and left early*

---

Chair Harkenrider welcomed meeting participants to the Assessment Committee meeting. He explained that at the last Committee meeting staff had been advised to continue research, development and refinement of data for the indicators selected for the first report. The purpose of this meeting was to receive an update from staff about the progress that has been made to date.

Commission executive director Jill Arens provided a summary. She explained that, as the Commission's highest priority project, staff have been devoting a large amount of time to the indicators project, and have been making excellent progress. She noted that through the process of data collection, the agency has been able to deepen relationships with existing partner agencies as well as reach out to others. She said that the Commission staff greatly value community input and will continue to work in a transparent manner.

#### **Project Overview**

Angie Kenney, lead planner for the project, provided additional information regarding the process. She explained that a higher level of rigor and organization has been put in place to ensure efficiency and efficacy of the work that's being done. She presented examples of the work plan templates, timelines, bibliography and ongoing glossary being created and used by staff to aide in the transparency and consistency of the process.

Angie also described some of the difficulties staff have encountered. She explained that there have been problems with finding Gorge specific data, as well as data that is able to address the specific questions posed by the indicators. She explained the content of the indicator spreadsheets (handed out at the meeting) and noted that they only contain the indicators selected for the first report. The rows highlighted in light yellow contain indicators that may need a language revision to clarify what it is trying to measure or a status change based on

the actual availability of data. She asked the Committee to make a note of the proposed changes highlighted in red text, and to possibly make a decision to accept or reject them by the end of the meeting.

Indicators consultant Jeff Tryens provided a status update for the first report. He said that, after meeting with staff the day before, he estimated that the Commission only had data in hand for six of the 31 indicators prioritized for the first report. Of the remaining 25 indicators, 17 require additional work and might be available and the remaining eight will not be available. Jeff commented that this project requires more data collection and development than any other indicators project he has ever worked on. He explained that due to differences between state and local agencies, none of the data that appeared to be available is ready to use without some kind of methodology development and analysis. He concluded by saying that staff has made tremendous progress, but given the limitations of the data and staff, the Assessment Committee will need to make some decisions about what is needed to write the first report. Chair Harkenrider commented that it was far more important to have some information rich data than to have a large amount of information poor data. He explained that we should not move forward with a report using information poor data – just to get something out.

#### **Update on Each Resource Area**

Michele Dailey, spatial analyst for the project, provided an update for indicators 1.1.b and c. She explained that these indicators had been labeled as “data expected” but will most likely be “progress expected” due to data limitations and the time needed to conduct the analysis. Following up on a suggestion made at the last Assessment Committee, Michele provided a quick update about working with ITT, the Marine Corps, and BLM to obtain additional information that will ensure a consistent and accurate methodology. She discussed the proposed language changes including replacing the phrase “highly contrasting” with “noticeably contrasting”.

Michele explained that the change was discussed by the scenic sub-group team leaders at a recent meeting while revisiting the proposed methodology. It was determined that as written, we should only be reporting numbers of highly contrasting development – which might not address the concerns of the CAT, who were also concerned with the cumulative impacts of all visible development. There are shades of visibility and by limiting yourself to only looking at “highly contrasting” development, we may not be addressing the original concerns expressed by the CAT. After discussing the intent of the word “highly”, it was determined that “noticeably” might better encompass the intent of the measure and methodology. The existing methodology will allow the computer to detect development that does not blend with the landscape and is therefore not visually subordinate. The Management Plan defines visually subordinate as “a description of the relative visibility of a structure or use where that structure or use does not noticeable contrast with the surrounding landscape...” If the use or structure does not meet this definition, it is visible – and will be picked up by the computer as “highly contrasting”. Changing the word from highly to noticeably is more consistent with the Management Plan and is a more accurate description of the existing methodology.

*Later in the meeting, CAT members Carol York, Mary Repar and Jamie Tolfree voiced that they did not agree with the word change. By that time Commissioner McNew had left the meeting and the Committee did not have a quorum. Thus, no decision was made about the proposed change.*

Michele also described the definition of *developed areas* that will be used for methodology of indicator 1.1.c. She read from definition on the spreadsheet: *developed area is defined as a cluster of highly contrasting pixels derived through spectral analysis and/or manual extraction that is visually perceived by a human to be structures or human caused disturbance that are close enough together to each other to be considered part of one complex.* Commissioner Loehrke asked how historic structures would be considered. Michele said that if it is human development or disturbance, it would be counted. Chair Harkenrider asked whether the computer model was more sensitive than the human eye. Michele explained that the human brain has a way of filling in gaps between images and can lead to a biased measure. The computer will not have the same kind of bias, thus resulting in a more objective measure. Chair Harkenrider stated that he worries about a bias in either direction. Michele explained that the computer's analysis is repeatable, is based on math and that no methodology will ever be completely free of bias because they are based on human perception. Jeff reminded the group that the most important part of the methodology that Michele has developed is that it can be reliably repeated over time and can give us an accurate picture of change.

In response to questions about which photos would be used, Michele explained that the scenic sub-group team would be selecting their top ten in the very near future. The existing photographs are somewhat limiting but plans for a more current set are in the works. She explained that the winter photographs would be used (to show as much development as possible) and that steps would be taken to ensure the exact location, height, weather conditions of future photographs.

Chair Harkenrider suggested that staff prepare an outline of the intent of the first report. He said that we need to clarify whether the first report will describe the baseline for each indicator or whether it will include analysis and results.

Angie discussed the use of the 1990 Corridor Visual Inventory for indicator 1.1.d: Vantage Point Quality. She explained that the agency's summer intern had compiled the prioritized vantage points in Google Earth and flagged the individual "street views" for each view. Angie explained that the baseline for this indicator would be the 1990 verbal description of the site, but that the list would be refined further by looking at the photographs in Google Earth Street View.

Angie briefly described the methodology selected by the scenic sub-group for indicator 1.1.f: Night Sky. She explained the use of an existing project called the Great World Wide Star Count hosted twice annually by the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research (UCAR). The project is a citizen science event and aims to get everyone involved. The process consists of citizens' star gazing from within their communities and recording the magnitude of visibility of a specific constellation – at a specific time each year. She explained that depending on how many participants we have, we may be able to report something on this in the first report. The level of outreach for this first event was limited by time constraints, but staff should be able to make much larger strides next spring by getting schools involved. Chair Harkenrider mentioned a related article in the November National Geographic magazine. Jeff Tryens commented that we had not yet worked out the exact measure for this indicator and that it still needed some work before we could start measuring anything.

Tom Ascher reviewed the progress made on the natural resource indicators. He explained that data for indicators 2.1.c and d will not be available from the Department of Natural Heritage until the end of the year.

Because of this, they will be discussed as “maybes” for the first report. He also explained that because this is the first collection of data in this way, it would only be available as a baseline (that could be built upon in the future).

Michele explained that the US Forest Service staff has prioritized 13 habitats for indicators 2.1.a and b. Jeanette Burkhardt suggested adding the word “loss” to indicator 2.1.b. Carol added to Jeanette’s suggestion and added the word “gained”. Commissioner Loehrke questioned the historic impacts of past tribal communities on habitat. Chair Harkenrider reminded everyone that the Assessment Committee had previously approved using 1986 as a baseline for tracking change. Tom explained that using 1986 as a baseline for change makes sense, but does not allow them to determine what is “good” (1986 may not be a date at which the habitat was in a healthier or less fragmented state).

The information being collected for indicators 2.1.c and d is new and would only be able to provide baseline data points. It should be available for future use to show change overtime. It is possible to look at a few individual species to track change – which may be less time consuming. Carol suggested contacting county weed control boards to obtain information about invasive species.

Chair Harkenrider suggested measuring the positive changes in habitat as well as the negatives. He explained that the Act has enabled increased management for habitat by federal and state agencies and that he would expect to see an improvement over time in many areas. Mary Repar commented that she did not want to see the indicators altered that were created through the advisory team process. Jeff Tryens suggested that if any changes were desired, they should be brought back to the members of the Technical Advisory Team Sub-groups and be discussed in a process that enabled former CAT members to be involved.

Tom discussed the aquatic indicators and the limitations of the existing data. Jeff suggested making a map of all the streams in the Gorge and flagging each one with the data available. The map would enable us to step back, view the larger picture and identify what we’ll be able to do or what we might need to move forward. Tom also discussed the difficulty of defining “quality”. A few of the problems with the word quality include: a) there are many different ways to define it and b) most of the streams originate from outside of the Scenic Area – and only end here. It is hard to tell how the Scenic Area is adding or detracting to the water quality of streams that are primarily located outside of the boundaries.

North Cheatham questioned the status of the DEQ studies on Gorge air quality. Jill explained that DEQ has decided to include the Boardman facility in their report, and will therefore be delayed as they collect more data. Tom explained that there is some existing data collected by the Forest Service, but that the DEQ information would be more comprehensive and should be used when it becomes available.

Tom also provided an update for the economic indicators. He explained that the most limiting factor with these measures is the conflict between the Scenic Area boundaries and the county boundaries. He discussed the use of census data. He explained that although it is available at the block level, it would only be available every ten years. He also noted that the counties do not currently stratify their building permits by Scenic Area status or kind of construction.

Commissioner Loehrke suggested asking the counties to note the permit's Scenic Area status in their databases and sending us an annual report. Tom explained that such a request would be asking the counties to change how they currently store data and may not be as simple as it sounds. It was concluded that it could be beneficial to organize a common system for the counties to report their permit information to us in. Tom added that the data exists, but is not stored well and will be labor intensive to obtain.

North commented that two of the indicators created by the advisory teams had been left off of the spreadsheet. He asked about commercial vacancy rates and the enforcement of conditions of approval for the protection of resources. Tom explained that the commercial vacancy rates indicator had not been forgotten or removed but was prioritized for the next phase (second report) and was therefore not shown on the spreadsheet in front of him. He also noted that the enforcement of conditions of approval was an agency performance measure and will be addressed in that process separate from the vital sign indicators.

Tom asked the Committee whether or not it would be sufficient for the first report to use land use decisions (as opposed to building permits). He explained that this information was more readily available to the Commission. Chair Harkenrider commented that he did not think the data would be as useful. He said that the land use decisions won't show us what has actually been built and are therefore information-poor data sources. He would prefer to use the, albeit scarce, information-rich building permit data. Chair Harkenrider suggested hiring a consultant to visit the counties and collect the data.

Michele explained that the word "uses" had been added to indicator 3.2.d to better describe what was being measured. She explained that her current methodologies include the use of remote sensing to track changes in agricultural uses. Because forest uses are not as easy to decipher from photographs, she will be relying on tax deferral records, Department of Natural Resources and Department of Forestry permits.

Jennifer Kaden provided an update for the cultural resource indicators. She explained that indicator (d) for each objective had been incorrectly labeled as "data available" in the past. She explained that because the Forest Service records are not comprehensive (don't include all of the work done by other agencies) that it will take some time and work to try to get it all. Because she is working on accumulating this data, she suggested changing the status of the indicator to "data expected".

Jennifer also explained that all of the indicators listed under Objective 4.3: Protect and enhance significant traditional cultural properties, should be changed to "next phase". This objective will require more time and coordination with treaty tribes before a data source can be identified. She explained that the tribes do not currently share this information with the Commission. Jennifer concluded by noting that she will be meeting with cultural resource experts in the near future to make progress on this objective.

Jessica Metta provided an update for the recreation indicators. She noted that she had been conducting outreach for surveys to obtain data. Jeff suggested defining a standard for the phrase "environmentally degraded". Others suggested adding informal sites to the inventory (this would include such areas as the Syncline Trail) because they are more prone to environmental degradation.

Jeff summarized the progress that has been made and asked everyone not to be discouraged. He noted that a lot of work has been done by staff and that the information may just take a little more time to accumulate and

analyze. He explained that the Committee will have to decide in the very near future whether there is enough information to still write the first report in the spring of 2009. Jeff recommended allowing staff to work through November and reporting back to the Committee in early December. The Committee would then decide what the next steps should be. **The next Assessment Committee meeting was scheduled for December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008 from 8:00am to 9:00am immediately prior to the Gorge Commission meeting.**

Chair Harkenrider reminded everyone that although this was a useful update, no changes had been approved at this meeting. Jeff asked those members of the CAT thought about the update. Mary, Carol and Jaime agreed that changes to the language of the indicators should not be approved by the Committee until enough research has been done to show that they are not viable as written. They also agreed that altering the indicators to more closely reflect the Management Plan is not consistent with what they were asked to do. It was agreed that the Vital Signs Indicators should be within the realm of the Scenic Area Act and that the Agency Performance Measures (which will be created in the near future) would be more closely related to the Management Plan. Chair Harkenrider stated that it is very important to honor the intent of the CAT members.

Jeff asked the CAT members present if they would like to schedule an additional CAT meeting to discuss these issues at length. Mary, Carol and Jaime agreed that a meeting was not necessary if changes could be discussed via email. Angie agreed and noted that an email process would be used to discuss indicator language changes.

Chair Harkenrider suggested preparing an outline of the intent of the first report. He said that it was critical that we be absolutely clear about what it will report: baseline or trends? Or maybe even just a progress report. He explained that clarifying the intent of the report will enable the Committee and staff to better understand what's expected. Jill said that she will be taking a very brief summary of the project to the legislature in the winter. Jeff noted that the legislature will probably be more interested in the Agency Performance Measures than the Vital Signs.

Chair Harkenrider suggested providing materials to the Assessment Committee ahead of time so that the next meeting will be able to move a bit faster (since it is limited to an hour). Jeff offered to provide an update to Commissioner Middaugh prior to the December 9<sup>th</sup> meeting.

Meeting adjourned.