



MEMORANDUM

TO: Columbia River Gorge Commission

FROM: Jessica Gist, Sr. Natural Resources and Land Use Planner
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DATE: June 12, 2018

SUBJECT: **Information Item:** Gorge2020 – Natural Resources Technical Team Update

Action Requested

At this time, staff is not requesting any action by the Commission. We welcome questions and feedback about the technical team's direction, and specific team input that would be most helpful for the Commission going forward. We will provide approximately 20 minutes for discussion of this information item.

Background

As part of Gorge2020, the Commission and the Forest Service have organized technical teams to review the National Scenic Area Management Plan's Scenic Resources protections and the Natural Resources protections, respectively.

In addition to specific natural resources topics, the Commission directed staff to consider climate change trends and ensure that the revised plan addresses climate change as an important influence on the National Scenic Area, its scenic, natural, cultural, and recreation resources (SNCRs).

On May 3rd the Commission and the Forest Service staffs convened the Natural Resources Technical Team. The team has met two additional times by conference call. Future meetings will be a mix of in-person and phone-in meetings.

The Role of the Natural Resources Technical Team

The Technical Team participants are agency experts with authorities to conserve and manage natural resources in Oregon and/or Washington, as well as the six county planning departments

with implementation responsibilities. The goals of the Technical Team are *to provide input to the Commission and the US Forest Service:*

- 1) *To ensure current information and resource protection needs are reflected in the Commission's policies; and*
- 2) *To improve clarity and consistency in the process for GMA and SMA natural resources review with appropriate agencies.*

Summary of First Full Day Meeting

The first workshop included an orientation to the Management Plan and Gorge 2020, extensive discussion about the content and review process in the Plan, as well as a review of the public and agency scoping comments we gathered in 2017. We reviewed comments from the public and organizations related to natural resources as well as the CRGC and USFS staff list of revision topics. Some points of discussion are described below.

Cumulative effects: The group briefly discussed development trends including vineyards and residential development on agricultural lands. There is interest in addressing cumulative effects on systems including Oregon white oak and big game winter range; there were also questions about how appropriate it is to tie specific protections to winter range, rather than other habitat types.

Inter-connectedness: The group discussed the relationships between natural resources and other resources. First Foods are cultural resources that also contribute to economic vitality; recreation is a potential driver of natural resources change; forests and agriculture are economic sectors. We recognize that it is somewhat artificial to separate out the groups, however there is value in rigorously reviewing our natural resources provisions as a way of maintaining the natural resources that are necessary for nature-based recreation, agricultural production, scenic views, and resilient livable communities for residents. Recommendations from the Natural Resources Technical Team can be shared and discussed among the other Gorge 2020 focus topic work groups, and vice versa.

Landscape and habitats perspective: The field of natural resources management is increasingly supporting planning for functional and resilient landscapes, in addition to species-by-species approaches. These ideas of conserving habitats and natural processes are not very well reflected in the current Management Plan text. However, the state agencies responsible for maintaining our inventory datasets *are* relying on these concepts to update their data, addressing climate change, land use change, and connectivity, for example. In the Team's tasks, described below, we will be learning from these other agencies how our data reflect concern for both rare species locations and in-tact natural communities, and reviewing if the Plan adequately protects both rare species and natural systems.

Sideboards and team responsibility: We are asking for input from the Team that we can present to the Commission and consider in our Management Plan revisions.

Specific Tasks Identified

In July of 2017, the Commission reviewed a high-level summary of the various datasets that are referred to in the resource protection policies of the Management Plan. We identified the current sources that serve as our “living” data inventories. We also began coordinating with the agencies responsible for maintaining those data. Since then, we have been discussing the datasets in our Quarterly Planners Meetings with county planning staff members to better understand how the data are obtained, updated, and used for project evaluation purposes. As recently as our May 15th meeting, we received questions about natural heritage data and how best to coordinate with state agency experts when reviewing a county application.

Task One. Review in detail these planning efforts that produce our “living inventories” datasets for Natural Resources. Capture and report back how these efforts consider climate change impacts and resiliency. Gather input on what protections may be lacking or redundant.

- Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife’s Conservation Strategy (2016) and map data:
 - Identifies threats and stressors, sensitive species and habitats, and conservation priorities.
- Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife’s State Wildlife Action Plan (2015) and Priority Species & Habitat data:
 - Identifies habitats for conservation based on threats, stressors, and population status. Provides map data for decision-making. Many of the priority species and habitats have associated Management Recommendations.
- Oregon Biodiversity Information Center/Institute for Natural Resources data and maps; Natural Areas Plan (2015):
 - Provides science-based information to decision-makers and public. Includes rare species location and status info, wildlife habitats, vegetation and ecosystems, wetlands, historical vegetation.
- Washington Department of Natural Resources, Washington Natural Heritage Programs data and maps; State of Washington Natural Heritage Plan (2018):
 - Provides science-based information to decision-makers and public. Includes rare species location and status information; location and ecological integrity information on rare and high quality ecological communities; Natural Heritage Plan defines priorities for conservation action in the state.

Gorge 2020 is precisely the time to take stock of the Management Plan’s mechanisms for resource protections. These state agency datasets are the triggers for planners to contact resource experts, and those experts are required to provide input. Understandably, the unique multi-jurisdictional nature of the NSA means that the datasets and the individual points-of-contact at each agency and planning department are always shifting. By working through the following set of questions with the Natural Resources Technical Team, we aim to increase understanding and effectiveness of the mechanisms in place, as well as identify any shortcomings or redundancies the Commission may want to consider:

- 1) What are the most accurate and up-to-date spatial datasets that the Commission and county planners should use?
- 2) What do planners need to understand about the data to use them most effectively?
- 3) What kinds of feedback is required or would be most helpful from the state agency experts during development review?
- 4) How well do the CRGC datasets represent the sensitive water, wildlife, habitat, and plant resources in the National Scenic Area? What are they not set up to capture?
- 5) Are there other mechanisms, in other sections of the Plan to protect these resources? If not, what policies might be missing? These might include policies to avoid, minimize, or mitigate negative impacts, development standards, design guidelines, or others.

Task Two. What can we learn from our neighbors? We are in the process of cursory review of more than a dozen plans and supporting materials. Some of these science and planning efforts are not directly relevant to this stage of Gorge 2020 and we have recorded rationale to support that determination. Some have been flagged as resources for VSI. The following plans are currently being evaluated as potentially informative, with input from the team.

- Cold Water Resources Plan for the Columbia River (EPA, in progress)
- Conserving Nature's State: Identifying Resilient Terrestrial Landscapes in the Pacific Northwest (The Nature Conservancy 2013)
- Yakama Nation Climate Adaptation Plan and Vulnerability Assessment (2016), and Action Plan (in progress)
- Climate Change and Indigenous People in the United States: Impacts, Experiences, and Actions. Analysis of Columbia Basin Water and Fish Resources (2014)
- Warm Springs Climate Change vulnerability assessment
- CTUIR Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment and Technical Report (2015)
- Umatilla River Vision (2011) restoration plan
- Data Basin share site for data, maps, and models

Task Three. We have asked members of our technical team to think about examples from their experience working in the National Scenic Area or with the Management Plan. We will devote future meeting time to a discussion of those examples, highlighting where the plan has worked well to achieve natural resources protections and where it has fallen short. By this phase in the process, the Natural Resources Technical Team will have familiarity with the Management Plan and its implementation to be able to provide constructive input.

Task Four. Solicit input on several priority issues identified in meeting one. These include Oregon white oak protection and mitigation, "Firewise" policies and incentives, and cumulative effects of development. This is an opportunity to incorporate Best Management Practices or guidance describing the outcomes we *do* want to promote on the landscape.

Climate Change Trends and Action Plans

The Natural Resources Technical Team's tasks will contribute to our understanding of climate change trends and how well our Management Plan addresses them.

We recognize that climate change, its impacts, and resource vulnerabilities are cross-sectional. They include safety and preparedness, infrastructure, housing, and other community concerns. They also affect each of the SNCRs directly and indirectly.

The Commission has directed staff to incorporate climate change into this phase of Gorge 2020. We have recommended in previous meetings that climate change be context for which our technical revisions and focus topics work should be considered. We are currently investigating the existing frameworks for regional climate change planning. There are excellent local examples of conceptual models of climate change, natural resources plans, community-based plans, and even First Foods focused plans. Fewer examples are available of climate change planning specific to scenic or recreation resources. This may be where we choose to focus our energy. We will not review regional resources related to emissions reduction, carbon offsets, energy efficient planning, or fossil fuel use and transportation, which we have recommended not be a focus topic during the Gorge 2020 process.

Staff has the following recommendations for moving forward with climate change as a topic of interest and a necessary update to the Plan.

- With the Natural Resources Technical Team, evaluate how our existing provisions for locating sensitive sites and consulting with state agencies are working to protect climate sensitive resources. Identify vulnerabilities and adaptation/mitigation strategies that others in this region are employing.
- Evaluate existing regional vulnerability assessments to determine if they are informative for our geography, and/or what investment would be required to conduct one ourselves.
- At a future meeting, staff will present to the Commission more specific options for addressing climate change relative to the Scenic, Natural, Cultural, Recreation, and Economic resources, with the anticipated cost associated with each scenario. These options may include informational presentations, the development of fact sheets and graphics, or more involved vulnerability assessments and action plans. We will welcome direction at that future meeting about how to proceed.

VSI and long-term monitoring

The Natural Resources Technical Team members have expertise and interest in long-term and landscape scale monitoring. In order to maintain the focus of this group on Management Plan updates, we are capturing comments and resources that inform VSI to share with our partners in the Forest Service, US Geological Survey, and Columbia River Intertribal Fish Commission who are working in a very targeted manner on long-term ecological monitoring in the National Scenic Area. The Commission can expect to hear more on the VSI effort in the future.

Next Steps

The Natural Resources Technical Team will meet next in late July 2018. We have tentatively planned to present detailed team findings and recommendations to the Commission in February 2019, with periodic updates before then.