



TO: Columbia River Gorge Commission

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DATE: May 26, 2020

SUBJECT: Draft Gorge 2020 Management Plan Climate Change Chapter and Framework for a Climate Change Action Plan—Discussion of Commissioner Priorities

Overview

This document was originally prepared in February 2020 and has been updated to reflect Commissioners' perspectives relating to climate change issues, priorities and policy implications.

The Columbia River Gorge Commission (Commission) and Forest Service are updating the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Management Plan. To begin addressing the urgent issue of climate change, staff convened an expert panel presentation to the Commission in February 2018. The panelists shared local, state, and tribal climate change efforts. Next, staff engaged a consultant to produce a report and presentation describing the observed and predicted impacts affecting protected resources in the National Scenic Area. Following that presentation in October 2019, the Commission began developing a list of options that it could take to address climate change. On May 12, 2020 staff introduced a new draft chapter for the Management Plan that commits the Commission to developing a Climate Change Action Plan. This document provides the Commission's framework for climate change action, incorporating adaption and mitigation strategies.

May 26, 2020 Commission Meeting Objectives

- Summarize the Commissioners' feedback and present an updated draft chapter (Staff)
 - Commissioners submitted individual comments on the draft new climate change chapter, presented on May 12, 2020, and the actions and strategies document, presented on February 11, 2020.
 - Staff have reviewed and compiled a summary of input and propose changes to the new draft chapter in response.
- Determine any additional changes to the Climate Change chapter needed before the public comment period begins on June 1, 2020 (**Commission discussion and decision**)
 - One area for discussion: Does the chapter, supported by this action plan framework, provide a clear enough path forward and commitment to action planning? Are there

changes needed for more detailed actions to be documented (inside or outside the Plan)?

- Staff can provide additional information about the top Commissioner interests (currently listed in Policy 1 of the draft chapter).
- Discuss how this exercise of reviewing the draft Climate Change Chapter and the Action Plan Framework document informs next steps for developing the Climate Change Action Plan (Staff suggestions and facilitated discussion; **Commission discussion and decision**)
 - Staff will present a conceptual process for action planning.
 - **Commission decision** on whether any further action is needed (and feasible) for Plan Revision.

Summary of May 2020 Commissioner Feedback on the Draft Action Plan Framework for Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation

Overview of the assignment and purpose of gathering feedback

Commission staff presented a new draft Climate Change Chapter to be included in the revised Gorge 2020 Management Plan on May 12, 2020. Commissioners discussed the chapter and raised questions about what level of detail is appropriate to include in a list of priority issue areas. To expedite the conversation, staff requested that the Commissioners review the draft strategies and actions document (originally presented in February 2020) and provide individual input on adaptation and mitigation issues of particular interest for climate change action planning, and what kinds of information would be needed to support future discussion. The following summarizes input received from the 8 of 13 Commission members who responded.

General themes

- There is general agreement that the Climate Change Action Plan should be a priority next step, and that it should rely on an assessment of vulnerability as well as data and information from the Vital Sign Indicators program. Some Commissioners urged staff to rely on existing vulnerability assessment information.
- Some comments referred to desired changes in the new draft Climate Change Chapter. Staff made these changes in response:
 - Added introductory text to highlight the urgency of action and the unique assets and vulnerabilities of the National Scenic Area relating to climate change.
 - Reorganized language and added to the provisions section a description of the role the Commission desires to take.
 - Updated the list of climate change issues and approaches under Policy 1: Develop and Adopt a Climate Change Action Plan to reflect the information gathered since May 12th.
 - Wrote the policies to be more proactive about the Commission's role and commitments.
- **Commissioners' top interests.** Commissioners ranked their top actions to include in the climate change action plan framework. Results include:
 - Review and include a Vulnerability Assessment as part of the Action Plan
 - Develop Vital Sign Indicators for climate change
 - Develop a Climate Change Action Plan with a target date for completion
 - Review the latest data and develop more protective standards for stream buffers

- Address forest land development and conversion
- Develop measures to address wildfire risk reduction and adaptation
- **Full list of key issues.** Each climate action planning topic below was a primary interest for at least one Commissioner who responded:

Natural Resources

- Evaluate and expand buffers for fish-bearing tributary streams in the GMA as needed
- Consider climate change impacts to groundwater
- Ensure culvert guidelines account for predicted stream changes
- Support bio-dynamic farming principles and pollinators
- Promote habitat restoration projects; remove “unnecessary hurdles” in planning

Land Uses and Permitting Process Improvements

- Engage on OR and WA Forest Practices updates
- Consider energy efficient building requirements
- Limit or prohibit forest land conversion in the GMA
- Limit forest practices in the GMA
- Update fire protection policies; consider applying to other LUDs

Recreation

- Help lead transportation/transit alternatives discussion and actions
- Establish strategies to reduce tourism in high-traffic areas and reduce congestion
- Remove illegal trails
- Enforce trail closures

Cultural Resources

- Protect First Foods

Other suggested actions not included in draft list presented by staff:

- Consider potential climate change impacts of Urban Area Boundary (UAB) revisions on forest, agriculture, or open space lands and whether changing boundaries might exacerbate the effects of climate change.
- Explore possibility of working with Counties and UAs to develop a climate change planning approach that could serve as a nation-wide model for addressing climate change. May involve issues that affect UAs (e.g., transportation, LEED-oriented building codes, carbon neutrality in general, trailheads that start in UAs, etc.).
- Explore Commission authority to address railroad-caused fires.
- Integrate other high priority climate adaptation and mitigation actions into rolling process and schedule for Management Plan update/amendments.
- In order to focus the topics of interest for action planning, some Commissioners noted a desire to prioritize the Commission’s direct lead role. Actions to support and partner in efforts are not as important to emphasize in the Climate Change Action Plan, though they may be fruitful areas of staff work that can be ongoing. A common theme in the comments was to consider *staff capacity and best use of time* to assure that limited staff capacity is focused on actions that will be most effective. A more in-depth prioritization of topics and time will be part of the action planning process.

Additional comments and differing viewpoints

- The Commission’s role in groundwater issues and water quantity regulation elicited several comments. Some Commissioners stated deference to the authority and expertise of other agencies and the agriculture industry. Others noted the significance of water as a critical resource influencing everything and influenced by climate change, urging Commission action to protect groundwater in addition to surface water resources.
- There are several forest land issues included in this list of potential actions. Commissioners raised foundational questions about their authorities and what the appropriate role in state forest practices rules might be. There is disagreement about whether to engage in a carbon credit system.
- Commissioners expressed different views on the need for improved grazing management practices. While some commented that requirements, not voluntary actions, are needed, others suggested that the small number of current grazing operations makes this a lower priority for the Commission at this time.

Summary of information and discussion needs for action planning

Commissioners were asked to share what additional information or discussion, if any, is needed for each climate mitigation or adaptation action in the **DRAFT Action Plan Framework: Strategies and Actions for Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation**. Commissioners identified needs around a variety of issues. These are noted in blue bullet format in the tables that follow.

Note: For further explanation of each action, how it relates to the Management Plan, and status updates, please reference the full descriptions in the full Draft Action Plan Framework document initially presented in February and shared with Commissioners in updated form following the May 12th meeting.

GENERAL STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS

General Strategy: Plan for climate change; direct future actions

Actions:

- Assess climate change vulnerability in the NSA, in order to set priority climate change actions
 - Consider impacts on drinking water supplies and availability of water for fire suppression in Urban Areas and rural areas (e.g., Burdoin Mountain).
 - Consider relationship between railroad traffic and fire ignition sources. Explore Commission’s authority to act on this issue.
 - Need to prioritize which Vital Signs to implement first to provide necessary data.
- Create a climate change adaptation and mitigation strategic action plan
 - Need to consider that NSA is uniquely vulnerable to climate change, and especially wildfire, given high winds and topography.
- Update and implement indicators for the VSI program and implement VSI for scenic, natural, cultural, recreation, and economic resources

- Need to identify appropriate metrics that partners will be using for a shared understanding of tracked changes.
- Learn more about groundwater in the NSA
 - More information on the impacts on drinking water supplies and availability of water for fire suppression.
 - Recommendations from the Water Resources Board on whether they are the best agency to deal with this subject and what actions Commission might consider.
- Consider methods to address water use, conservation, and management
 - More information on staff time and effort required and how this might affect capacity to work on other climate change priorities.
- Map and model risks to protected resources
- Partner to produce an Integrated Water Resources Management Plan
 - More information on Yakima Basin IWRM effort and how a CRGC effort might impact other climate change work.
 - Evaluation from other agencies on whether this would be an applicable concept or efficient use of resources.

General Strategy: Articulate vision, goals, agency positions on climate change

Action: Develop a resolution or vision statement

- Vision should call attention to the NSA's unique: 1) vulnerability to climate change and 2) ability to serve as an effective model to address climate change.

NATURAL RESOURCES STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS

Natural Resources Strategy: Protect intact, resilient habitats and ecosystem functions

Actions:

- Limit habitat fragmentation in priority habitats
 - More discussion on relationship between development in forest lands and carbon storage. Consider prohibiting development in forest zones, or, at a minimum, instituting a moratorium on development in forest zones until our climate change research policies have been approved. Consider prohibiting (if allowed) or discouraging (if prohibiting is not allowed) the conversion of forest lands and require full mitigation when forest lands are converted to other uses.
- Ensure culvert guidelines account for predicted changes to streams
 - Better understanding of how high a priority culverts are compared to other efforts to protect stream and stream habitat: widening stream buffers, ensuring no further loss of wetlands, etc.
 - Request other agencies to advise/inform us and then decide how and whether we might require improvements or replacements.

- Create prescriptive habitat mitigation requirements for priority habitats
 - More information needed overall, including how climate change affects growing conditions.
- Support local land trusts in prioritizing and protecting priority lands
 - More information on land trusts' challenges and how CRGC can best assist.
 - Rationale for why this should occur outside the Plan.

Natural Resources Strategy: Protect biodiversity, by protecting and enhancing sensitive species and sites

Actions:

- Evaluate buffers for fish-bearing tributary streams in the GMA
 - Identify what evidence the Commissioners would want in order to support increasing the buffers. Hear reports from agencies and researchers (who are not CRGC employees) and others on the basis for and nature of the regulations. Understand what the actual implications would be for property owners, depending on the nature of the proposed changes to the buffers. A field trip would be helpful.
 - Consider policy changes: (1) On fish-bearing streams and rivers that flow through both SMA and GMA lands, we should adopt the widest buffer currently in place for the entire stream (200' apparently); (2) Adopt the SMA standard for wetlands (no loss) for the GMA (no net loss); and (3) Look at other, similar provisions.
 - Need input from all stakeholders if buffer policy changes are proposed.
- Promote habitat restoration projects
- Require and encourage the use of native plant species
- Support efforts to collect and share native seed sources
 - More information on staff time required and whether other high priority climate change efforts would be displaced.
- Support conservation practices and water quality (agriculture and forestry)
 - Explore developing and supporting efforts that “require” mitigation, rather than have them be “voluntary.”
 - More information on staff time required and whether other higher priority climate change efforts would be displaced.
- Develop Best Management Practices and design guidance for applicants
 - More information on the effectiveness of best management practices and design guidance when “required” versus “voluntary.”
 - More information on how much influence the Handbook has had on development practices.
- Require or encourage grazing management practices
 - More information on how much of this topic relates to climate change and how much is part of regular monitoring and updating of Plan.

- Participate in local and regional planning
- Ensure sensitive species and rare plant communities data sets are updated
- Support stream habitat restoration to benefit cold water refugia

Natural Resources Strategy: Anticipate shifting ranges of biomes, plants, insects, pests, and pathogens

Actions:

- Actively engage working lands professionals to promote research and voluntary conservation practices
 - More information on staff time required.
- Support bio-dynamic farming principles and pollinators
 - Discuss how to codify best bio-dynamic farming practices and demonstrate a strong effort to support pollinators.
- Support plant surveys and monitoring, invasives management
 - More information on whether CRGC support has made a significant difference in other agencies' and organizations' surveys and monitoring.
- Ensure landscaping and screening plants include climate adapted species
 - More discussion on applicability of this requirement to all landscaping, i.e., if part of a landscape plan involves irrigation and vegetation is maintained, this requirement should not apply to that portion.

LAND USES AND PERMITTING PROCESS IMPROVEMENTS STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS

Land Uses Strategy: Anticipate increased emergency response needs.

This strategy responds to expected increases in **flooding, landslides, wildfire**, and other events.

Actions:

- Update Emergency Response policies for severe weather events, flood and rock fall, and wildfire
 - More information on impacts of these events, and related emergency response actions, on cultural resources, especially Native American cultural resources.
- Support and participate in county natural hazard mitigation planning
 - More information on wildfire impacts on scenic, natural, cultural, recreation, and economic resources.
- Require and/or encourage building materials and design to minimize fire risk
 - More information on cost/benefits.

Land Uses Strategy: Support energy conservation, greenhouse gas emissions reduction

Actions:

- Consider energy efficient building requirements
 - Consider inviting former CRGC Executive Director Dick Benner, who has expertise on this topic, to present to Commission.
- Support walkable and bikeable transportation improvements

Land Uses Strategy: Support renewable energy

Actions:

- Simplify the permitting process for residential and agricultural solar
 - More information on which aspects of permitting process can be streamlined or eliminated, as well as rationale for focusing on simplification as means to support renewable energy.

Land Uses Strategy: Protect farm and forest lands.

This strategy provides **carbon storage** by retaining forests, and retains open lands with natural functions (**hydrology, temperature regulation**, etc.) while limiting development and hardened surfaces.

Actions:

- Update fire protection policies; consider applying to other LUDs
 - Identify what kind of information, if any, would lead Commissioners who currently oppose applying new fire protection policies to other LUDs to reconsider their position (e.g., experience with similar standards in other places).
 - More information on which of these policies are most easily applied across LUDs to achieve the greatest overall impact.
- Clarify Forest Practices in the GMA
 - More information on what the problems are.
- Limit Forest Practices in the GMA
 - Explore development of forest protection practices for all landowners.
 - Given the requirements of the NSA Act, what are the best pathways that the Commission can take to limit forest practices in the GMA?
- Limit forest land conversion to other uses in the GMA
 - Need review and statistical summary of forest land conversions, including home construction in the Gorge and evaluation of impact on other resources and loss of carbon storage.
 - Are there non-timber producing acreages included in forest zones? Would there be uses in such a case that make sense since they might not “convert” actual forest, or would the other use conflict with forestry practices (which would fall under a different policy)?

- Better understanding of CRGC authority and constraints.
- Update Forest Practices policies in SMA
- Update policies to promote voluntary forest health improvement projects
- Participate in future updates of OR and WA states' Forest Practices policies
 - Update Commission on OR and WA Forest Practices policy updates as they are completed.
 - More information on need for CRGC participation in this effort.
- Create carbon credit system for deferring harvest
 - Consider brief presentation and discussion on cost/benefit (e.g., staff time, funding required, etc.)

RECREATION STRATEGY AND ACTIONS

Recreation Strategy: Support energy conservation, greenhouse gas emissions reduction

This strategy addresses **carbon emissions reduction** and **air quality**.

Actions:

- Update Recreation policies to further support transit, ridesharing, and alternative transportation
- Use policies to direct development and visitor use to protect sensitive resources and during certain times of year
 - Provide periodic updates to Commission on other agencies' visitor use management efforts to protect sensitive species.
 - Overall, more discussion, and information from agency partners, needed on how this can best be accomplished.
- Participate in regional transportation planning

SCENIC STRATEGY AND ACTIONS

Scenic Strategy: Consider future climate implications for vegetation

Actions:

- Ensure topographic screening is used
- Promote vegetation that is climate adapted

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Cultural Resources Strategy: Consult with Columbia River Treaty Tribes to identify actions to protect cultural resources

Through formal consultation and staff-to-staff work, the Commission can continue to improve the protection and enhancement of cultural resources. We reviewed several tribal plans in producing this actions list. Actions that protect water, salmon, big game, and forest resources, for example, are consistent with tribal priorities relating to climate change. Shortcomings that could be improved include protections for roots, berries, and plant gathering places. Some feedback we received is that the locations of culturally important plants and other sensitive cultural resources are not shared. They cannot necessarily be mapped or buffered in the manner we address many other sensitive resources in the Management Plan. These topics deserve more time and attention beyond the Gorge 2020 process.

If the Commission decides to pursue any of the General Strategies and Actions described in this document, we expect they will be framed to be meet the purposes of the National Scenic Area Act, and to consider each of the scenic, natural, cultural, and recreation resources.

ECONOMIC VITALITY STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS

Economic Vitality Strategy: Increase planning efficiencies and responsiveness in the development review process. See Land uses and Forest/Ag Lands for specific actions.

Economic Vitality Strategy: Promote sustainable, resilient economies

These strategies support **social and economic adaptation** to climate change and support economic sectors that contribute to mitigation and adaptation solutions.

Action: Support regional economic development plans' objectives to diversify and strengthen local businesses that promote sustainability and reduce carbon footprints

- [More information from partners on what CRGC's role could be.](#)

AGENCY OPERATIONS STRATEGY AND ACTION

Operations Strategy: Assess and minimize the Gorge Commission's operational carbon footprint. This strategy addresses mitigation by **reducing emissions and energy consumption.**

Action: Assign staff resources to evaluate and reduce CRGC's carbon footprint.