



TO: Columbia River Gorge Commission

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SUBJECT: Gorge 2020 – Proposed Revisions to Recreation Chapter of the Management Plan

Goal

Present to the Gorge Commission the proposed revisions to the Recreation Chapter of the Management Plan and request endorsement of the revisions for the public comment period. This memo and our discussion focus on the information requested by the Commission and the chapters redline edits.

Recreation Focus Topic Background

At the March 2019 Gorge Commission meeting, Forest Service and Commission staff led a presentation about the existing protection and enhancement measures for Recreation Resources in the Management Plan. The presentation included a summary of the recreation-based themes that emerged from scoping comments and professional technical review. The staff report from that meeting is available on the Gorge Commission website, [linked here](#).

Forest Service and Commission staff held four meetings with technical recreation experts in spring 2019 to discuss the Recreation chapter, evaluate scoping comments and assess the best available science and recreation management approaches. Staff and technical experts drew on experience with other recreation management models to explore how the Management Plan could be improved to address some of the themes identified during scoping.

In August 2019, staff convened a stakeholder meeting which included public and private land managers, state agencies and county planners. This meeting provided an opportunity to discuss both strengths and limitations within the existing plan. It also included an update on the Gorge 2020 plan review and revision process, and the timeline specific to the Recreation Focus Topic.

In September 2019, Forest Service and Commission staff presented four key questions to get perspective from the Commission in order to move forward with the next round of agency and public meetings and further develop recommendations for plan revisions. The staff report from that meeting is available on the Gorge Commission website, [linked here](#).

Stakeholder and public meetings were held in October 2019. The stakeholder meeting provided land and recreation managers an update on the September CRGC Meeting and further clarified areas for potential revision. The public meeting featured a presentation on the overview of the process and recreation chapter, and asked questions similar to the ones presented to the Commission in September.

A third stakeholder meeting was held February 2020. This work session built on the comments and feedback from the Commission, public and stakeholders on draft revisions. This discussion provided additional clarification and perspectives on the information presented today.

The Commission meeting scheduled for March 10, 2020 was canceled due to the threat of exposure to covid-19. Staff continued to make progress to draft revisions to Recreation Chapter of the Management Plan, including various updates, clarifications, and technical revisions based on previous Commission feedback and technical and stakeholder expertise. The “red-line” version of the chapter is available that shows all proposed revisions.

Topics for Revision

Incorporate Ongoing Use and Experience into RICs

Currently the Management Plan provides clear and objective guidelines on the development and construction of Recreation Facilities. Development is controlled based on the Recreation Intensity Class (RIC) where the development is proposed. This includes factors like parking lot size, sign size and other factors of the site’s physical development.

As recreation sites experience higher volumes of visitors, the recreational use at the site has the potential to affect protected resources. Stakeholder and technical experts have suggested that the RICs should identify user experience standards for recreation managers to consider in the development of new sites and recreation resources. This would help managers consider ongoing use and visitor experience during the development of the recreation site.

Currently in the SMA, there are guidelines to describe recreation opportunities and experiences. These range from semi-primitive recreation in RIC-1 to roaded natural or suburban recreation in RIC-4. These identified that the recreation development *and* the recreation activity were foundational in the user’s experience. By developing settings for each RIC unique for the CRGNSA, recreation managers can provide and manage a more inclusive and consistent experience.

The proposed updates would incorporate social, physical, managerial, and trail considerations into the GMA and clarify those in the SMA.

Social Settings will help managers identify the opportunities for solitude as well as quantity and type of encounters visitors could experience when visiting a site or area. Recreationists visiting sites within lower intensity classes should expect to have fewer encounters, and recreation managers should consider implementing strategies to reduce user interactions. At sites within higher intensity classes, recreationists should expect high degrees of interactions with other visitors.

Physical Settings help define the physical qualities of the landscape and how rustic recreation facilities may appear. Sites within lower intensity classes would have predominately unmodified and naturally evolving landscapes, with nodes of higher development near recreation facilities such as trailheads or parking lots. Sites within the higher intensity classes would have more developed facilities and trails constructed for ease of movement and travel.

Managerial Settings help identify on site controls (signs, regulations or other regimentation) and types of facilities recreationists could expect when visiting sites. These would range from minimal controls in lower intensity classes, hardly noticeable and harmonizing with the natural environment, to more noticeable controls in higher intensity classes that still harmonize with the site and the expected recreation experience.

Trail characteristics provide tools to describe the types of trail conditions that recreationists should expect when visiting a recreation resource. Generally, trails within lower intensity classes will have native surfaces and are developed for lower quantities of use and users with higher skills. Trails within higher intensity classes are highly developed, can be paved, and provide conveniences to accommodate heavy and intensive use by a wide range of users.

Additionally, to support congestion efforts and reduce effects from increasing use, mass transportation facilities are now required for RICs 3 and 4 and are encouraged in RIC 1 and 2 where they are consistent with the desired social, physical and managerial settings of the site.

Revisions to RICs

Another topic identified through stakeholder and technical review was the consideration that the existing RIC designations were based on the original resource inventories, anticipated future recreation development and existing recreation development. The conditions that provided this foundation have changed with the CRGNSA becoming a recreation destination, drawing visitors from across the globe and visitor numbers increasing yearly.

Because of the increase in demand at existing recreation sites, there have been requests from recreation agencies for tools for managing these changes. Through the conversations with recreation managers and stakeholders, it was originally identified that a variance process would be the most beneficial approach. However, after additional dialog in March 2020, the technical and stakeholder groups suggested that the re-designation of RICs may provide a more inclusive and transparent process when considering recreation at the scale of the entire National Scenic Area.

Currently in the Plan there is an identified process for both the GMA and the SMA for proposals to revise the RIC of an area. This is identified in the Recreation Chapter and directs applicants to follow the policies in “Amendment of the Management Plan” (Part IV, Chapter 1: Gorge Commission Role). Congress gave the Gorge Commission the authority to amend the Management Plan, after adoption, if it determined that the conditions within the Scenic Area have changed significantly. There are policy statements outlining a process, requirements for consistency with the National Scenic Area Act, consultation, and final approval.

The other process to change RIC designation is during a plan review and revision. After the in-person stakeholder meeting where this was suggested, we reached out to the entire group to solicit proposals on where potential RIC revisions could occur. The goal was to gather a sensing of the scope and scale of proposed spatial revisions. This request occurred as the covid-19 pandemic was unfolding.

The complicated process of developing proposed spatial revisions to existing RICs was intended to include closely coordinated efforts between agencies and partners. This is to ensure that the interconnectedness of recreation at the scale of the entire National Scenic Area was recognized and all coordinating agencies had the ability to provide input.

The staff recommends using the collected information as a starting point for a coordinated effort involving all of the recreation managers, counties and partner organization to conduct a RIC revision process after Gorge 2020. This will allow in-person meetings to determine the entirety of the scope and scale of the RIC revision proposals across the entirety of the National Scenic Area.

Provide policy guidance restricting recreation use using permits or other tools where ongoing use is harming SNCRs, affecting people’s safety, during high risk fire days, or undermining SNCRs.

At the January CRGC meeting, the Commission requested more information on seasonal use restrictions and permitting during time of the year when use may be harming SNCRs, affecting human safety, during high risk fire days, or undermining SNCRs.

Currently the Management Plan provides direction on the development of sites to implement the two purposes of the Act. Ongoing maintenance and administration of sites is not a use regulated by the Management Plan. Recreation throughout the CRGNSA is managed by a suite of federal, state, county, city and private entities, each with their own missions, sets of policies, regulations, and guidance.

Currently there are high levels of coordination between the recreation managers throughout the CRGNSA. Examples include the Interagency Recreation Team (IRT) which meets monthly, as well as more informal communication between agencies. The Recreation chapter also includes policies that describe coordinated and regional approaches to ongoing operation and management problems.

Public recreation managers have received varying degrees of support in their decisions to temporarily close or restrict access to sites in the National Scenic Area for public safety or resource considerations. The Commission has the opportunity to develop a policy to support public recreation managers choosing to temporarily restrict use and access to sites during periods of high risk to protected resources. This would allow public recreation managers to link temporary closures and restrictions to policies in the Management Plan and provide flexibility for agencies and organizations to manage use during critical periods to protect resources. The draft revisions include a new policy that provides this support.

Other Revision Topics

In addition to the topics the Commission requested more information on, the following revisions are included in the redline;

- Update recreation goals to meet Commission and FS direction
- Update and revise policies to reflect best management practices
- Address existing non-conforming uses
- Consider equitable and accessible recreation development
- Make needed technical updates and revisions

Outside the Plan Topics

During the scoping, technical and stakeholder review, other topics were identified that are outside of the role of the Management Plan. These included items such as vehicle congestion and identifying trail development at specific sites. These topics have been tracked and are being considered through other agency processes.

Next Steps

After endorsing the proposed revisions, the chapter will be combined with other chapters of the Management Plan and released for public review and comment.