



TO: Columbia River Gorge Commission

FROM: Stan Hinatsu, Recreation Program Manager USFS
Casey Gatz, Land Management Planner USFS
Aiden Forsi, Land Use Planner, CRGC

DATE: September 10, 2019

SUBJECT: **Information Item:** Gorge2020 – Recreation Focus Topic Discussion Questions

Executive Summary

The purpose of this memo and presentation is to update the Gorge Commission on progress made for the Recreation Focus Topic as part of the Gorge2020 Management Plan Review process. Commissioners heard a presentation at the March 12, 2019 Commission meeting regarding the Recreation Focus Topic, including information on the Recreation Intensity Classes (RICs) and Recreation land use designations. The staff report from that meeting is attached to this memo. Since that time, Forest Service staff as the lead agency for this topic, in coordination with Commission staff, have met with technical experts and stakeholders regarding the Gorge2020 Recreation Focus Topic. These meetings informed key themes that Forest Service and Commission staff will discuss with the Commission today.

Perspectives and Insight Requested

Discuss four key questions and provide perspectives to Forest Service and Commission staff at the September 10, 2019 Gorge Commission meeting in order to move forward with the next round of agency and public meetings to further develop recommendations for plan revisions.

Background

The Gorge Commission and Forest Service are using the term Gorge2020 to identify the current Management Plan review and revision process. Gorge2020 public scoping sessions held from October 2016 through April 2017 generated a list of potential issues for the Gorge Commission and Forest Service to consider. A full summary of the scoping comments is available on the Gorge Commission website: <http://www.gorgecommission.org/management-plan/gorge2020/>. The Commission directed staff at the October 10, 2017 Commission meeting to conduct technical

reviews on the Scenic Resources and Natural Resources chapters of the Management Plan, and to direct attention to four focus topics where policy changes may be needed– Urban Area Boundary policy, Economic Vitality, Land Use and Development Reviews, and Recreation.

Recreation Focus Topic

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.

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 at other federal and state recreation areas to explore how the Management Plan could be improved to address some of the concerns identified during scoping. These experts included Eric White, Research Social Scientist, USFS; Zachary Jarrett, Trails and Dispersed Recreation Program Manager, USFS; and Jaime English, formerly Integrated Park Services Manager, Oregon Parks and Recreation Department – Columbia Gorge Management Unit.

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. This meeting included an update on the Gorge2020 plan review and revision process, and the timeline specific to the Recreation Focus Topic.

During the technical team and stakeholder meetings, staff used two criteria to identify recreation issues that should be the focus for potential revisions:

- 1) The issue received substantial interest from the public during scoping; and
- 2) Staff, based on conversations with the technical and stakeholder teams, determined the issue could be addressed within the framework of the Management Plan.

Recreation Intensity Classes emerged as a clear focal point for discussion. Recreation Intensity Class (RIC) guidelines are the primary tool for managing recreation development in the National Scenic Area. As discussed during the March presentation to the Gorge Commission on Recreation, the RICs guide levels of development primarily by prescribing the size and spacing of parking lots, density of camp sites, appropriate facilities (boat ramp size, concession stands, etc.) and other recreation facility features.

Recreation Goals and Objectives

Management Plan Goals and Objectives provide the overarching guidance that directs the Policies and Guidelines – such as the RICs – in the Management Plan. The Guidelines are then integrated into the land use ordinances in each of the six NSA counties. An example in the current Management Plan of this Goal to Policy/Guideline correlation is the Recreation GMA Transportation Goal to “promote alternative modes of transportation to improve safety and enjoyment of the traveling public and to help alleviate future traffic demand.” An implementing policy for this goal in the Management Plan is that all new Recreation Intensity Class 4 sites shall have facilities for mass transportation.

We are posing four questions to the Commission that are drawn from existing Recreation Goal and Objective statements in the Management Plan, which provide the foundation for the RICs. The Commission's responses will be shared with the Stakeholder and Technical groups to consider and discuss, to help Forest Service and Gorge Commission staff develop proposed revisions to the Management Plan.

This staff report and your discussion at the September Commission meeting will inform future policy discussions as well as staff review and revision of the Management Plan.

Discussion Model

To help identify and discuss appropriate policies and guidelines, staff needs your perspective on the existing Management Plan framework. Your conversation will be helpful because the staff and participants in stakeholder and public workshops need to know the different perspectives held by the Commission to craft and draft revised policy and guideline statements.

At the Commission meeting, staff recommends you use the **PRES model** for your discussion. This model was used during the Urban Area Boundary Revision discussions at the May 8 and June 12, 2018 Gorge Commission meetings. PRES stands for Point, Reason, Example, and Summary. Please see the attached document for a more thorough overview of the PRES model.

Staff recommends the following process for each foundational question:

1. Staff will present a question and background information.
2. You will get 2 minutes to write down your thoughts and then you will give a 45–60 second statement to share your thoughts in the PRES format. Commissioners will present their statements one at a time, allowing only for clarifying questions until everyone has spoken.
3. After each Commissioner presents their PRES statement, there will be an opportunity for facilitated discussion on the question and how the topic could be addressed within the framework of the Gorge 2020 plan review and revision process.
4. Staff will record Commissioners' perspectives on flip charts.

1. The Plan's current approach is to meet recreation demand with more supply; constructing more recreation sites. Are there other considerations that could be added to the RIC Guidelines to respond to demand without necessarily building more?

In the Management Plan, GMA Protection of Resources Goal 2 is to protect scenic, natural, cultural and recreation resources when providing new recreation opportunities, as well as Resource Based Recreation Objective 3 which identifies that the Plan should "Protect existing popular recreation sites from overuse by providing opportunities and facilities at new locations with similar recreation attributes."

These two statements are examples of the Plan's current guidance that new recreation should be developed to meet increasing demand. These two goals are implemented through the RIC guidelines prescribed limitations on development of recreation sites. The current guidelines encourage building additional sites rather than allowing existing sites to grow beyond RIC guideline maximums to meet demand.

In some locations in the National Scenic Area demand and use have exceeded the recreation development constraints in the RICs. This can be seen in illegal parking, parking on the edge of roadways, congestion from pedestrians on roadways, parking at other sites in near proximity and traversing user-created trails, etc. This intensive use may also result in negative effects to resources. Stakeholder and public comments have suggested that recreation developments should have more flexibility to meet demand while still protecting resources identified in the Act.

2. How can Recreation Intensity Classes incorporate other factors (Ongoing Use/user experience/seasonality/dispersal/etc.)?

Currently the Management Plan provides clear and objective guidelines on the development and construction of Recreation Facilities. Development is constrained based on the Recreation Intensity Class where the development is proposed. This approach follows directly from the GMA Recreation Intensity Class Goal to “Identify suitable levels of resource-based, public-use facilities to meet the Management Plan recreation goals and objectives while protecting scenic, natural, and cultural resources.”

As recreation developments experience higher volumes of visitors, the use at the site has the potential to adversely affect protected resources. The Stakeholder and Technical teams identified a gap in the current Plan related to the effects of ongoing use. These groups have identified the potential of adaptive guidelines that provide opportunities to implement site design measures to help protect resources from the effects of use, in addition to limits on the design of the recreation facility.

When the Recreation chapter of the Management Plan was originally developed, effects to resources were intended to be mitigated through dispersal of users throughout the National Scenic Area. By providing for more sites, the impacts at any individual site, in theory, would be reduced by directing users to additional sites. Through the collective experience of the land managers in the Stakeholder group, it has been noted that this is often not how users respond to crowding. Often users will continue to visit a site, and will find additional points of entry and parking, or will utilize nearby facilities to reach their intended destination. Also, the number of visitors is not a “zero sum” amount, and more recreational opportunities and national attention have drawn more visitors. Therefore, a fixed number of users are not being dispersed through additional site developments in a way that lessens impacts on original sites. Instead, use has increased at both existing sites and newly developed sites, causing a net increase in impacts to all sites.

3. Should agencies applying for public recreation developments be allowed variances from RICs where fully complying with SNC protection measures?

The current Management Plan is very clear and prescriptive on the design elements of new recreation development and changes to existing recreation developments. The RIC guidelines were developed to ensure the protection of resources consistent with the Act. For example, Facility Design Guideline for All Recreation Projects #5 prescribes scenic resource protections, stating that “Parking areas providing over 50 spaces shall be divided into discrete “islands” separated by unpaved, landscaped buffer areas.”

Each new recreation development or enhancement to an existing recreation sites needs to meet all the guidelines in the appropriate Recreation Intensity Class, and all the applicable protection measures of any other Scenic, Natural or Cultural resources. The Management Plan currently allows

for variances of up to 10 percent to the guidelines of the Recreation Intensity Class 4 for parking and campground units when an applicant can demonstrate that specific conditions exist. This variance is intended to help alleviate some of the stresses at the highest intensity recreation sites.

However, through public scoping and Technical and Stakeholder meetings, it has been identified that these size guidelines can be limiting factors and may inadvertently cause additional resource impacts through unmanaged recreation use. Sites in very low to moderate intensity RICs that are experiencing high use, including sites developed before the establishment of the National Scenic Area, cannot address resource impacts within the currently guidelines in the Management Plan.

4. How could RICs consider higher intensity of use and development at high volume trailheads that would disperse use over the landscape to lower intensity?

Currently the Guidelines for Recreation Intensity Classes were developed to protect the resources within and near existing or proposed recreation developments. Sometimes this use can be extremely concentrated at the trailhead and dissipate relatively quickly as recreationists disperse along the trail system. An example of this might be a trailhead along the waterfall corridor, where there are a lot of vehicles and visitor interactions near the entrance but use and use-associated impacts dissipate proportionally to the distance from the trailhead.

The Technical and Stakeholder teams each identified this concept as a potential way of shifting the existing RIC framework to incorporate patterns of recreation use on site and associated development needs as necessary to provide protection for scenic, cultural, and natural resources. The teams also noted that site attractions such as scenic viewpoints and water features are themselves areas where dispersed recreation systems may concentrate use and impacts to resources.

Next Steps

Forest Service and Commission staff will compile the notes from the discussion of these questions and make them available to Commissioners after the meeting and will post them on our website. This discussion will provide perspectives for the Technical and Stakeholder groups to consider and suggest further revisions to the guidelines in the Recreation chapter of the Management Plan in workshops planned for fall and winter 2019.

At the March 10, 2020 Commission meeting, the Forest Service and Commission staff will provide proposed revisions based on Commission perspective and Technical and Stakeholder expertise. The conversation next March will provide an opportunity for discussion and further clarification. At the May 12, 2020 Commission meeting, staff will provide a draft Recreation Chapter for the Commission to discuss to enable the staff to finalize the revisions into a new chapter.