

TO: Columbia River Gorge Commission
FROM: Jessica Olson, Senior Natural Resources Planner
DATE: March 9, 2021
SUBJECT: Commission Work Session*: Climate Change Action Planning

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this staff report is to provide an update to the Commission and the public on progress that staff are making in developing the Climate Change Action Plan as one of the Commission's top priority initiatives for 2021. Staff seeks input and guidance from the Commission.

BACKGROUND

The National Scenic Area (NSA) is unique and treasured for its biodiversity, intact natural areas, dramatic landscapes, cultures, ways of life, and quality of life. In 2020 the Columbia River Gorge Commission, together with the Forest Service, completed a four-year review and revision of its Management Plan, the document that sets goals and policies for resource protection in the NSA.

During that "Gorge 2020" Management Plan Review and Update process, the Commission recognized the need to address climate change in the revised plan. In order to assess the threats, the Commission convened a panel of Oregon and Washington experts to provide policy and science perspectives. In addition, the Commission contracted with a consultant to prepare a report that identified and examined many of the impacts that climate change will have in the NSA, climate change resiliency for the NSA, and exploring its role in greenhouse gas reduction in the region (Wozniak 2019). The revised National Scenic Area Management Plan includes a new climate change chapter that commits the Gorge Commission to develop a Climate Change Action Plan (CCAP). This CCAP will address mitigation and adaptation to the most pressing impacts climate change has on the natural, scenic, cultural, and recreation resources and to the economic vitality of NSA communities. The Commission's climate change vision:

The National Scenic Area is made up of a diversity of intact landscapes, living cultures, and communities that, while vulnerable to climate change impacts, also provide a vital foundation for climate resilience. The Gorge Commission is committed to leading and working with others to reduce the greatest drivers of climate change and adapt to changing conditions with the goal of sustaining a thriving, resilient National Scenic Area for future generations.

PLANNING CONTEXT

The Columbia River Gorge Commission (Commission) is a bi-state agency employing 8 full-time equivalent staff positions and governed by a 13-member Commission. Together with the US Forest Service National Scenic Area Office, the Commission manages land use and resource protection in the NSA. The agencies use regulation (the Management Plan and approved county ordinances), education and landowner outreach, and strategic partnerships to protect and enhance the scenic, natural, cultural, and recreation resources in the NSA. The Forest Service also has direct land management responsibility for National Forest System lands, allowing them to lead proactive resource enhancement strategies such as habitat restoration. To address climate change, the Commission endeavors to build resiliency, to respond and adapt to the impacts of climate change, and to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change.

The Commission has set a goal of completing the Climate Change Action Plan in 2021. Its current available resources for this effort include a .5 FTE position, and staff support from Vital Sign Indicators (VSI), GIS, Planning, and Executive Leadership. Commissioners will provide support with regular meeting discussions, and written feedback on interim products. Staff will convene an expert Review Committee to assist with analysis and interpretation of materials, and to inform our process. Commissioners are invited to participate in topical Review Committee meetings.

APPROACH

The Commission's Climate Change Action Plan (CCAP) effort is unique for several reasons:

- The Commission's mandate and mission are unique among agencies.
- The NSA is made up of multiple jurisdictions and surrounds several independent Urban Areas.
- The Commission is launching this effort with the benefit of public input and staff work through the Gorge 2020 Management Plan Revision effort.
- The Forest Service has just completed a climate change vulnerability assessment that considers many of the resources the Gorge Commission protects and enhances.

Staff will use, and adapt as needed, successful models for similar efforts, most notably the U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit, launched in 2014. The Toolkit is a product of multi-agency collaboration led by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and intended to guide agencies in their work to address climate change. The **Climate Resilience planning approach follows these general steps: (1) explore resource impacts, (2) assess vulnerability and risks, (3) investigate options, (4) prioritize and plan, and (5) take action.** In each of these steps, we will build upon the Commission's Summary of Climate Change Effects report (Wozniak 2019) and list of strategies and actions it drafted in February 2020 and reviewed in May of 2020.

Climate Change Action Planning: Timeline

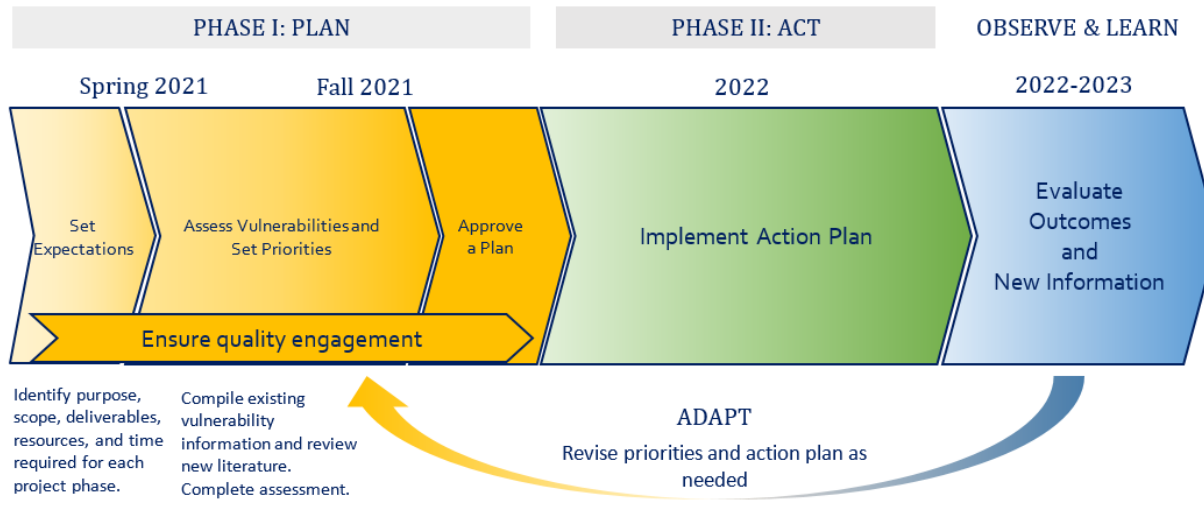


Figure 1. General planning process and timeline for Gorge Commission CCAP, presented to the Commission December 2020

Guiding Principles for our Work: *efficiency, emphasis on the resources* (scenic, natural, cultural, recreation) and economies, and *partnership* with others taking on climate change resiliency, adaptation, and mitigation.

- This effort will focus on actions that are adaptive to a changing climate, building the capacity for the agencies and protected resources to be resilient into the future. In addition, we intend to specify some targeted actions to limit and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Many will be in support of other entities (See MITIGATION below).
- This effort will focus on the scenic, natural, cultural, and recreation resources (SNCRs) for which the NSA was designated. The Commission encourages and will work to complement the plans that cities, counties, and others are developing to address public health, safety, and other important aspects of community sustainability.

ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

The Commission’s climate change action planning process involves three components to stakeholder engagement: public information and opportunities to comment; an expert Review Committee; and coordination with additional stakeholders. Appendix A describes a more detailed timeline of engagement.

- Staff will provide public information and updates through our website, monthly Commission meetings, and select media. At each Commission meeting, the public are welcome to provide comment on the effort. Periodically, staff will provide more in-depth work sessions with the Commission to encourage discussion and request guidance. In late summer, staff plans to host a virtual workshop for the public to share feedback on the plan. The draft plan can be available for public comment before it is finalized.

- A multi-party Climate Change Action Plan Review Committee will assist Commission staff with the process of action planning and the content of the CCAP. Members of the committee will bring expertise from their work on climate change adaptation and mitigation in the region; the jurisdictions, agencies, and organizations they represent can be key partners in implementing the completed plan in 2022 and beyond.
- Staff has identified a number of stakeholders for additional outreach. These include, but are not limited to, the four Columbia River Treaty Tribes, the six gorge county planning departments, and historically underrepresented groups in the region.

As the Commission endeavors to learn about and improve outcomes for **diversity, equity, and inclusion** (DEI) in 2021, the staff anticipates this first CCAP will identify ideas and goals related to DEI. Our approach will be to highlight climate resiliency strategies and actions that can benefit underrepresented communities by engaging those who can identify with these underrepresented groups. When the plan is complete, and after our first year of DEI planning, staff and Commissioners will be more equipped to engage new stakeholders in implementation.

Building upon Gorge 2020

As a result of the four-year “Gorge 2020” National Scenic Area Management Plan review and revision process, and the extensive public and technical input we received during that process, the Commission has set a strong foundation for this climate change action planning effort.

Through a series of public engagement meetings, Commission discussions, and public comment, Commissioners determined that water, particularly salmon habitat, and forest resources are both high priority topics for climate resiliency planning. Staff collected detailed input from Commissioners about the kinds of information that would be helpful in further refining the list of climate change priorities. This input will help staff focus in on key topics for discussions with the Review Committee and other stakeholders.

ADAPTIVE FRAMEWORK

During the process of benchmarking other efforts, we have reviewed a wide range of climate change work by other jurisdictions and managers. Many of these plans incorporate additional action guides, emissions reduction plans, and topical assessments, nesting them within a more comprehensive strategic plan. Plans are regularly revisited and updated to provide decision-makers with information they are needing at the time.

The Commission has the added benefit of its Vital Sign Indicators monitoring program, with specific climate change related metrics currently in the works, to ensure the constant flow of new information. Commissioners have expressed a desire to regularly check in on the information we are gathering, take stock of how we are doing as an agency, and act in response to correct course toward our goals. This is reflected in our cyclical, adaptive approach to climate change action planning. By the end of 2022, and perhaps sooner, staff expects to revisit and refine portions of the plan as needed, based on new information.

Steps in the Commission’s CCAP process:

(Note: See Appendix A for a detailed schedule of expected Commission meeting work sessions)

1. Assess vulnerability for scenic, natural, cultural, and recreation resources, as well as livability measures (March - May)
 - **Deliverable:** Vulnerability snapshots and brief report
- 2a. Work with Review Committee and the public to refine Strategies and Actions for *adaptation* (June – September)
 - Topical work sessions
 - Virtual public meeting
- 2b. Work with Review Committee and additional stakeholders to refine Strategies and Actions for *mitigation* (June – September)
 - Topical work sessions
3. Draft the plan (October – November)
 - **Deliverable:** Draft CCAP incorporating vulnerability snapshots, updated strategies, and refined actions
4. Work with Review Committee and public to gain feedback on the draft plan, and how best to implement it (December)
5. Finalize the plan and implement! (January 2022)
 - **Deliverable:** Final plan for Commission adoption
6. Continue to fill knowledge gaps, implement, and evaluate (2022)
7. Review and revise the action plan as needed (2023)

Assessing vulnerability

We are following a widely used process, defined in the U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit (US Federal Government 2014), adapting it as needed to assess the vulnerability of a number of NSA resources. For each resource of interest, staff is incorporating information from its Summary of Climate Change Effects report (Wozniak 2019), the USFS Vulnerability Assessment (Halofsky et al. *in press*), and other relevant documents, to describe the ways in which climate change is expected to impact the resource. Then, considering what we know about how the resource is likely to respond, we assign a sensitivity ranking for each. Next, based on the ability of the resource itself to adapt (i.e., drier vegetation types may be able to handle increased temperatures better than cooler, moist vegetation types), and how human interventions might be able to facilitate adaptation, we can assign an adaptive capacity. As part of the process, we are considering and documenting how the resources are impacted by non-climate related threats and stressors (e.g., land development and habitat fragmentation), and how climate change may exacerbate those stressors. **Figure 2** describes the vulnerability assessment.

The result of this process, which we began earlier this month, will be a series of “vulnerability snapshots” and a written summary of our findings. Staff will provide an example during the March 9th presentation. These snapshots will provide a basis for prioritizing resources the Commission

might focus its action plan to address first and will inform what actions might have the greatest benefit.

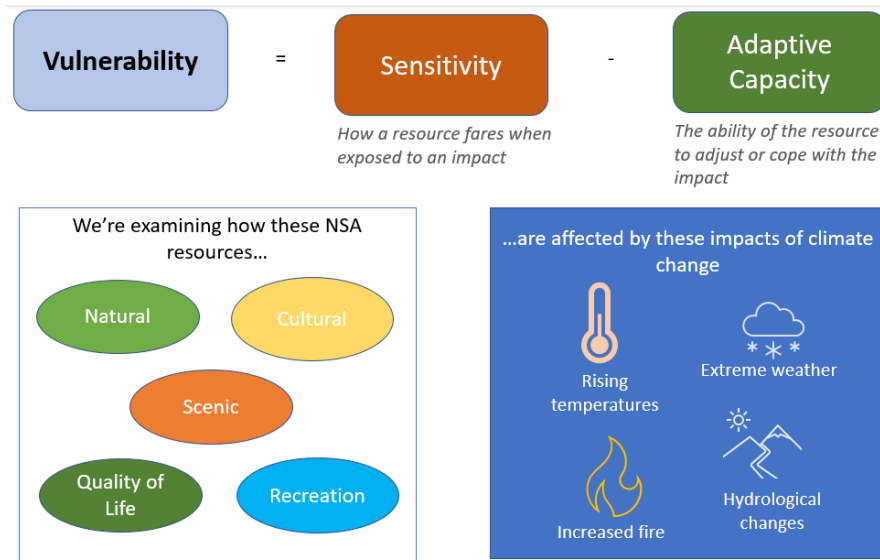


Figure 2. Graphic representation of the vulnerability assessment process. Adapted from City of Flagstaff Climate Action and Adaptation Plan.

Defining and refining opportunities for mitigation

The Commission has identified, in both its draft strategies and actions report and in the Management Plan climate change chapter, an interest in taking direct action to limit and reduce greenhouse gas emissions through mitigation. To date, it has identified some general approaches that it would support. For example, the Commission updated the Management Plan to eliminate unintended barriers to landowners wanting to install solar panels for residential or agricultural uses. Another area of interest for Commission mitigation action is in supporting regional transportation planning that considers bicycle/pedestrian paths, transit, and electric vehicle infrastructure. The steps we outline above provide for additional discussions with planners, state and federal agencies, and other experts to assist staff in prioritizing and defining potential mitigation actions in greater detail.

For many jurisdictions undertaking climate change action planning, such as municipalities, a first step can be to inventory greenhouse gas emissions. This is particularly useful for those who intend to set targets for emissions reduction and to focus on mitigation

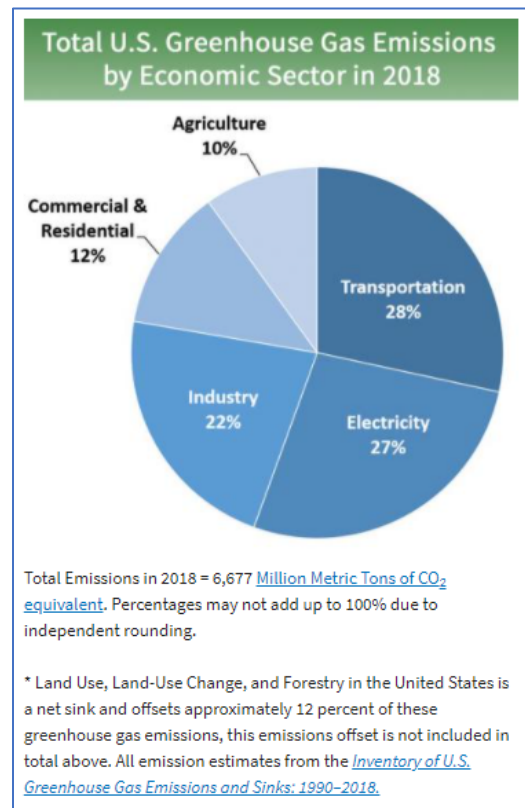


Figure 3. From EPA's website, accessed Feb 2021.

actions. Given the Commission's role and responsibility to protect and enhance the SNCRs, staff suggests we rely on existing studies that estimate relative contributions of various types of emissions. One example is provided in **Figure 3**, produced by the Environmental Protection Agency to describe national averages. We expect to have opportunities to discuss partners' work to quantify emissions in the region and define reduction strategies. If desired, future work could be done to quantify local emissions.

FINAL PRODUCT

The CCAP builds upon the list of strategies and actions the Commission drafted in February 2020 and reviewed in May of 2020. This list included more than a dozen strategies and nearly 50 individual actions. We intend to add vulnerability assessment "snapshots" to explain how resources are at risk. Based on these snapshots, work by staff and the Review Committee, and Commission discussion, the resulting plan will achieve the following:

- Greater detail and identification of next steps for several actions
- Prioritization based on resource vulnerability, the Commission's ability to mitigate or support adaptation, and opportunities that exist to leverage other efforts
- Accountability – describing what the Commission will be doing in 2022 to implement the plan
- Categorization of less urgent or less feasible actions as potential future actions
- List of key information needs and how the Commission can contribute to filling those gaps

FOR COMMISSION DISCUSSION

Staff would like general feedback on this approach and encourages discussion about your desired outcomes and products for 2021. Specific discussion question:

- *What input do Commissioners have about the approach or the resulting CCAP to make them most useful to you?*

Staff has been incorporating several human dimensions into our list of resources at risk from climate change. These include livability and workability, infrastructure, agriculture, and forestry. We are also compiling information, though hard data are sparse, about the socioeconomic component of climate change impacts to protected resources. Specific discussion question:

- *How should the staff be incorporating the Commission's responsibility to Urban Area economies in this effort?*

NEXT STEPS

On March 2nd, staff convened a kick-off meeting, inviting both the initial list of Review Committee members and monitoring experts to refine the natural resources indicators and create climate change indicators as part of VSI. The purpose of the meeting was to gain initial feedback on the two efforts (CCAP and VSI) and to share with them our current thinking about the vulnerability of NSA resources to climate change. The participants are providing additional detailed feedback on sensitivity and adaptive capacity to help us refine our descriptions of vulnerability. The Review Committee includes experts who have completed similar efforts, can improve the quality of our analyses and report, and will be partners in implementation once the plan is approved. Commission

staff has drafted a schedule of meetings with the Review Committee, following this general format and is incorporating feedback from the kickoff meeting. Staff will share more detail about the meeting schedule at the March 9th Commission meeting. Generally, we will host meetings in this sequence:

- Assessing Vulnerabilities and Prioritizing Values at Risk (March – May)
- Refining Potential Actions (June – September)
- Reflections on the Effort and Looking Ahead to Implementation (November – December)

We look forward to sharing again in June when we expect to have completed the vulnerability snapshots and report.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

These short videos provide a deeper dive into some of the topics staff are working through.

Salmon and other first foods:

<https://youtu.be/kvxgtzJyDaw?list=PLd4xfJU3qzMWQlcfWZDGEj1rMncXTUeWV>

<http://commonplacemagazine.org/new-pioneers/protecting-first-foods/>

<https://ctuir.org/departments/natural-resources/climate-adaptation/climate-adaptation-plan-webinar-archive/>

Phenology – the timing of seasonal changes: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6Tyiq4zwWQ>

Fire:

https://www.ted.com/talks/paul_hessburg_why_wildfires_have_gotten_worse_and_what_we_can_do_about_it/transcript?language=en

REFERENCES

City of Flagstaff. 2018. Climate Action and Adaptation Plan. [Online]

<https://www.flagstaff.az.gov/DocumentCenter/View/59411/Flagstaff-Climate-Action-and-Adaptation-Plan-Nov-2018> [note: Commission staff has reviewed dozens of similar plans as part of our effort. This citation is included because we adapted their graphic in this staff report]

Columbia River Gorge Commission. 2020. Draft Strategies and Actions Report. Originally presented Feb, 2020: <http://www.gorgecommission.org/meeting/february-2020-monthly-crgc-meeting> and revised and shared in summary form Dec, 2020

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Halofsky, J.E.; Peterson, D.L.; Gravenmier, R.A., eds. 202X. Climate change vulnerability and adaptation in the Columbia River Gorge, Mount Hood National Forest, and Willamette National Forest. Gen. Tech. Rep. PNW-GTR-xxx. Portland, OR: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station. In Press.

U.S. Federal Government. 2014. U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit. [Online] <http://toolkit.climate.gov>. Accessed 2020-2021.

Wozniak, O. 2019. Summary of Climate Change Effects in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. Presented to the Commission October 8, 2019.

Climate Change Action Planning Goals:

- Identify and prioritize actions (new policies, staff initiatives, etc) to implement that incorporate a broad array of resource expertise, values, concerns, and interests while keeping strategic focus on the Commission’s role and responsibilities in the NSA.
- Build upon what’s been done during Gorge 2020 to engage stakeholders in climate change action planning for the National Scenic Area.
- Leverage efforts in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) to engage new groups and individuals, particularly those who have been historically underrepresented and marginalized.
- Ensure that stakeholders are informed of the effort and find meaningful, convenient opportunities to contribute their perspectives.

CLIMATE ACTION PLANNING STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT CALENDAR		
See below for descriptions of activities		
Month	Primary Activities – Committees and Commission	Additional Outreach activities
December 2020	Work planning with Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public comment opportunity at Commission meeting
January 2021		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commission meeting update
February	Define planning approach and outreach plan Identify stakeholders for review committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quarterly Planners Meeting • Executive Director outreach to OR and WA Climate Programs • Commission meeting update
March	Review Committee kick off Commission work session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website materials on climate change impacts and action planning • Public comment opportunity at Commission meeting
April	Review Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commission meeting update
May	Review Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quarterly Planners Meeting • Press Release #1 with VSI (May or June) • Commission meeting update
June	Commission work session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public comment opportunity at Commission meeting
July	Review Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commission meeting update
August	Review Committee with additional stakeholder component	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quarterly Planners Meeting • Public VSI indicators workshop • Commission meeting update
September	Commission work session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commission meeting update
October	Review Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Govt-to-Govt Tribal Summit • Public comment opportunity at Commission meeting
November	Review Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quarterly Planners Meeting • Commission meeting update
December	Commission work session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Press Release #2 • Public comment opportunity at Commission meeting • Written public comment period (45 day)

Engagement Activities Descriptions:

Review committee – Commission staff plans to convene a review committee, to provide feedback on staff updates throughout our climate change action planning process. In the summer we plan to include a broader stakeholder engagement element, particularly gearing to include interested members of the public and historically underrepresented groups in the process.

Commission work sessions and updates – Commission staff or the Executive Director will provide updates at each Commission meeting in 2021. Approximately quarterly, staff will organize a work session to gain Commissioners’ feedback on interim work products and guidance.

Quarterly Planners Meetings – Regular staff-to-staff meetings for gorge planners to discuss issues and improve Management Plan implementation. Commission staff will update county planners and request their feedback.

Outreach to Oregon and Washington climate programs – the Executive Director has reached out to each state’s program for climate change, and requested they assign a staff person to serve on the review committee or on an as-needed basis.

Web materials – Commission staff are developing online outreach tools to explain our work in planning, Vital Sign Indicators, and climate change.

Press releases – Commission staff will prepare and widely distribute press releases to announce the effort and the draft plan.

Public comment opportunity – Commission staff will include public comment for all work sessions. As is always the case, every Commission meeting provides at least one opportunity for members of the public to give testimony to the Commission. Meetings are typically held the second Tuesday of every month.

Public VSI workshop(s) – At present, the 2021 effort to revamp the Vital Sign Indicators program includes public workshops. An important consideration for that monitoring work is to track and understand climate change impacts in the National Scenic Area.

Government to Government Tribal Summit – In past years, the four Columbia River Treaty Tribes have met with the Forest Service Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Office and the Commission in an annual summit. If this meeting occurs in 2021, the Commission will request a discussion of climate change action planning.

Additional engagement opportunities may arise during the planning process