

TO: Columbia River Gorge Commission

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DATE: December 12, 2023

RE: **Action Item*:** Recommended Vital Sign Indicators List

Request

Staff requests the Commission’s approval to move forward with the Vital Sign Indicator list and implementation sequence approach described in this report.

Purpose

This report provides an overview of staff’s recommended list of indicators for the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Vital Sign Indicators (VSI) monitoring program. At the December 12th Commission meeting, staff welcomes questions and feedback on the indicators and suggested implementation sequence approach described in this report.

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I. Summary of Vital Sign Indicators Update Process

The Vital Sign Indicators (VSI) program evaluates the long-term health of scenic, natural, cultural, and recreation resources, and local economies, of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. Vital Sign Indicators are measures of trends and conditions that assess how well we are meeting

Management Plan resource protection goals. Building on the original 2009 VSI effort, the Commission and USDA Forest Service initiated work on a comprehensive VSI update in 2021.

Below are key phases in this update process:

- Establishing Framework for Updating Vital Sign Indicators:** In February 2021, staff presented the VSI Assessment to the Commission, a comprehensive summary of key themes from informational interviews with Forest Service and Commission staff involved in the original VSI effort, as well as various agencies, organizations, and other specialists involved in monitoring across the region. See the [VSI Assessment](#) for details on this framework.
- Identifying Vital Signs and Developing Draft Indicators:** During the period from March 2021 through May 2022, Gorge Commission and USDA Forest Service staff held joint work sessions and partner work group meetings for all key VSI topic areas: climate change, natural resources, scenic resources, recreation, cultural resources, and economic vitality. The main factors considered for prioritizing Vital Sign topics for indicator development include connection to Management Plan, Forest Service and Gorge Commission opportunity to affect resource condition, equity outcomes, and stressors to protected resources. Staff presented draft indicators to the Commission in phases, according to topic area. The timeline below highlights the main VSI Commission work sessions for each topic.
- Finalizing Full Indicator List:** Based on input from Commission work sessions, VSI work groups, and meetings with various partners, staff has focused in 2023 on refining indicator methodologies and confirming data availability to prepare the strategic set of indicators described in this report.

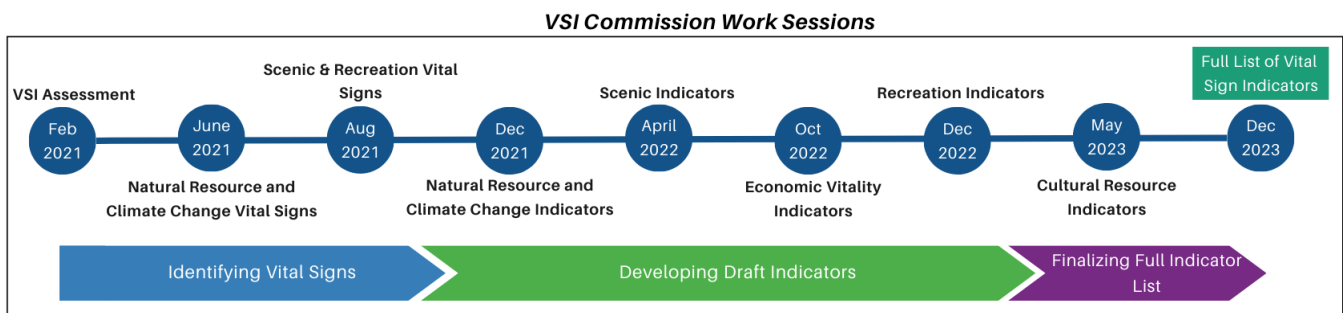


Figure 1. VSI update process timeline featuring Commission work sessions by topic.

Staff reports throughout the VSI update process included appendices with tables describing how the 2023 Vital Sign Indicators build upon the 2009 Vital Sign Indicators. These past staff reports are available on the Gorge Commission website: <https://www.gorgecommission.org/initiatives/vital-sign-indicators/>.

II. Recommended Vital Sign Indicators

The recommended indicators in this report reflect several fundamental considerations:

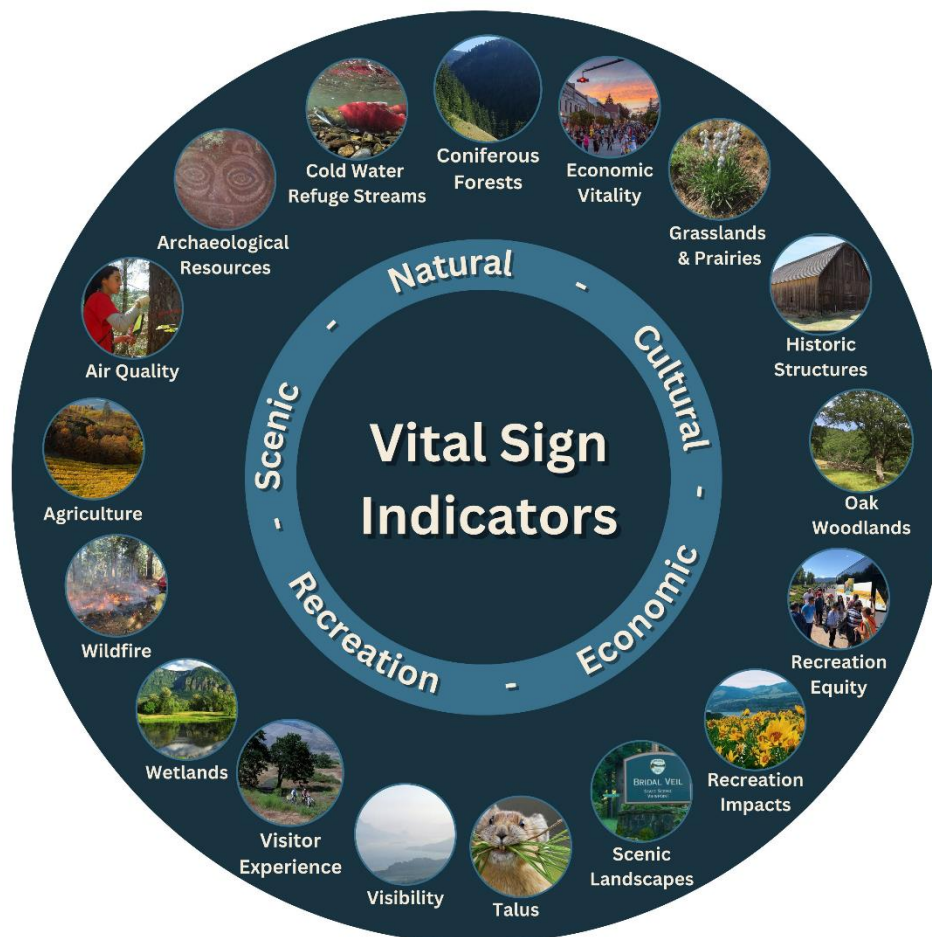
- The Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area is a complex, interconnected ecological and human system within a larger regional landscape. Vital Sign Indicators represent critical

components of this system based on their connection to the Management Plan, however they do not capture all key attributes that could be monitored at various spatial and temporal scales.

- Vital Sign Indicators are interconnected and span multiple protected resources within the Management Plan. For example, cultural resources can include water and native plants and wildlife used for food, medicine, and ceremony, called First Foods by some Tribes. While the habitats that support these species may be described as natural resources in the Management Plan, we continue to learn from Tribal partners about the importance of holistic management approaches based on traditional knowledges that natural and cultural resources are connected. The approach described in this report seeks to honor this understanding through an integrated organization of Vital Signs that highlights relationships among resources and connections to specific Management Plan provisions as well.
- The VSI monitoring effort identifies the establishment of the CRGNSA in 1986 as a baseline year where possible, based on data availability for each topic. Historic data are available for some indicators.

Vital Signs At-a-Glance

The graphic below highlights staff’s recommended Vital Signs for monitoring in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. Vital Signs represent important components of the National Scenic Area



that help us assess how well we are meeting goals in the Management Plan. Each Vital Sign has one or more indicators that describe what is being measured. The full set of Vital Sign Indicators for Commission consideration is included in [Appendix A: Vital Sign Indicator List](#).

Summary of Changes to Draft Indicators Described in Past Staff Reports

The recommended Vital Sign Indicators in this report reflect input from Commission work sessions with public comment, VSI work groups, and meetings with potential data providers from 2021-2023. Many of the draft indicators discussed in past Commission work sessions are included in this report. After additional review of methodologies and data availability to finalize this set of indicators, staff propose several modifications to draft indicators, described below.

Natural Resources and Climate Change (December 2021 VSI Staff Report)

- Include pika presence as an indicator for the Talus Vital Sign. Pika is also an indicator species for climate change. This indicator builds on strong public interest, volunteer engagement, and data availability through Cascade Pika Watch citizen science monitoring program at the Oregon Zoo.
- Removed moss cover as a potential indicator based on feasibility and will explore possibility of temperature monitoring at select sites as capacity and funding allow.

Economic Vitality (October 2022 VSI Staff Report)

- Suggest removing “Economic benefit of agricultural use” and address topic through periodic partner presentations to Commission on Gorge economic trends that includes agriculture and other sectors.
- Allows staff to focus first on finalizing a comprehensive land cover map that will be used in conjunction with the new development review database to better understand changes in distribution and type of agricultural use over time.

Recreation (December 2022 VSI Staff Report)

- Removed Non-National Forest System Public Lands indicators for visitation and visitor satisfaction, based on differences in methodology and data availability for other public lands recreation agencies.
- Address interest in broader recreation trends through summary presentations to the Commission by state parks and other land managers as available.

Cultural Resources (May 2023 VSI Staff Report)

- Include an annual USDA Forest Service progress report on the Priority Heritage Asset (PHA) monitoring program to complement the archeological resources and historic structures indicators included in this report.
- Addresses the Commission’s interest in understanding resource condition along with how many new resources are identified annually. Forest Service Heritage staff regularly monitor 19 PHAs that include precontact and historic archaeological sites, as well as historic buildings located on National Forest System lands within the National Scenic Area. While

PHA sites are not representative of the entire National Scenic Area, an annual monitoring summary to the Commission provides an opportunity to learn about the condition of some sites with regular Forest Service monitoring.

- Continue to work with USDA Forest Service and Treaty Tribes to explore interest in additional monitoring of the cultural resource review process and other monitoring priorities.

III. Sequencing Indicators for Implementation in 2024

Staff recommend focusing first on these Vital Signs for implementation in 2024: Agriculture, Cold Water Refuge Streams, Oregon White Oak Woodlands, Scenic Landscapes, Recreation Impacts on Other Protected Resources, and Wetlands. This sequencing approach is based on several factors:

- These Vital Signs represent a range of protected resources or land uses in the Management Plan, and several support protection of First Foods and Tribal Treaty Rights in the CRGNSA.
- Three of the suggested Vital Signs also serve as Climate Change Action Plan progress measures (Cold Water Refuge Streams, Oregon White Oak Woodlands, and Wetlands).
- Refining a comprehensive land cover map of habitats and land uses is an essential step for VSI implementation. Sequencing implementation of Agriculture, Oregon White Oak Woodlands, and Wetlands first establishes a methodology that will be used for other habitat extent and distribution indicators. Land cover mapping is also important for scenic landscape assessment methodologies that staff are working on with Forest Service landscape architects.
- Cold Water Refuge Streams are a regional priority for Treaty Tribes, several federal and state agencies, and local watershed groups and conservation districts. Monitoring temperature on all 10 primary cold water refuge tributaries located within the CRGNSA is a critical information need that requires coordination among multiple partners to implement.
- USDA Forest Service, Commission, and multiple partners are working on unofficial trails mapping that will support assessment of Recreation Impacts on Other Protected Resources across different habitats and culturally important areas in the CRGNSA. Continued coordination is needed to finish this map in 2024.

IV. Action Requested

Staff requests the Commission's approval to move forward with the Vital Sign Indicator list and implementation sequence approach described in this report.

Appendix A: Vital Sign Indicator List

The table below includes the list of recommended indicators with descriptions, relevant Management Plan provisions, and identification as a Climate Change Action Plan (CCAP) progress measure.

Vital Sign	Indicator	Description	Management Plan Provisions	CCAP Progress Measure
Agriculture	Extent, Distribution, and Type of Agricultural Use	These indicators assess the extent, in acres, and spatial distribution of the main agriculture types in the CRGNSA. Based on National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) commodity groups, reported agriculture types may include Field Crops, Fruit & Tree Nuts, Horticulture, and Vegetables.	Agriculture shall be supported and protected by preventing fragmentation of the land base through land use regulations and ensuring that development does not conflict with agricultural practices.	
	Precipitation Chemistry	This indicator measures the amounts of acid, nitrates, and sulfates deposited in the environment in precipitation.	Air quality shall be protected and enhanced, consistent with the purposes of the National Scenic Area Act.	
Air Quality	Terrestrial Effects of Pollution & Climate Change	This indicator measures spatial distributions and levels of 27 pollutants accumulated in sensitive vegetation. Lichen-based air quality and climate scores are used to understand where pollution is above safe thresholds for pollution sensitive vegetation and where climate is driving changes in sensitive vegetation.	Coordinate with federal and state agencies on air quality and visibility in the National Scenic Area and utilize the results of such monitoring in developing and updating the regional air quality protection and enhancement strategy described in SMA Natural Resources Wildlife and Plants Policy 15 (Part I, Chapter 3: Natural Resources).	
	Significant Archeological Resources Identified Annually	This indicator tracks the number of new significant archeological resources identified in the CRGNSA each year. A significant archeological resource is one that has been evaluated for the National Register and found to be eligible or has been nominated and listed on the National Register. Tracking will include the National Register of Historic Places status: unevaluated (most common), not eligible, eligible, and listed (least common).	Protect and enhance cultural resources.	
Cold Water Refuge Streams	Stream Temperature	This indicator measures stream temperature on 10 CWR tributaries in CRGNSA included in EPA Columbia River Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) Temperature Plan. Requires installation of additional monitoring sites.	Protect water quality, natural drainage, and fish and wildlife habitat of streams, ponds, lakes, and riparian areas.	X
	Stream Flow	This indicator measures stream flow on 10 CWR tributaries in CRGNSA included in EPA Columbia River TMDL Temperature Plan. Requires installation of additional monitoring sites.	As part of long-term National Scenic Area monitoring, encourage federal and state agencies and others to undertake a comprehensive water quality monitoring	X

Vital Sign	Indicator	Description	Management Plan Provisions	CCAP Progress Measure
			program on the Columbia River and its major tributaries.	
Coniferous Forests	Extent and Distribution	This indicator measures the total acreage and spatial distribution of coniferous forests in the CRGNSA.	Ensure that new uses do not adversely affect Priority Habitats or sensitive wildlife sites.	
	Land Cover Change	This indicator tracks the spatial distribution and percent change in coniferous forest cover at a specified interval corresponding with currently available land cover database updates.		
Economic Vitality	Distribution and Type of Oregon and Washington Investment Board Loan Projects	These indicators track location (by Urban Area and County) and type (by sector) of Oregon Investment Board (OIB) and Washington Investment Board (WIB) loan projects across the CRGNSA. These loan programs were authorized through the CRGNSA Act to support economic development within and outside of Urban Areas across the National Scenic Area. Anticipated sector type categories include Industrial, Hospitality, Manufacturing, Technology, Governmental Service, Value-Added Agriculture, Retail, Restaurant, Tourism, Commercial, and Housing.	The Oregon Investment Board (OIB) and the Washington Investment Board (WIB) review economic development proposals for loans and grants in the National Scenic Area and recommend the projects for federal funding appropriated for this purpose. The Gorge Commission certifies that the proposals are consistent with the Act, Management Plan, and land use ordinances.	
	Economic Benefit of Oregon and Washington Investment Board Loans	This indicator tracks the economic benefit of OIB and WIB loans through number of jobs created and maintained (FTEs). Reporting will include number of minority, women, veteran, and first-time business owners as percentage of total loan applicants.		
Grasslands & Prairies	Extent and Distribution	This indicator measures the total acreage and spatial distribution of grasslands in the CRGNSA.	Ensure that new uses do not adversely affect Priority Habitats or sensitive wildlife sites.	
	Land Cover Change	This indicator tracks the spatial distribution and percent change in grassland cover at a specified interval corresponding with currently available land cover database updates.		
Historic Structures	Significant Historic Structures Identified Annually	This indicator tracks the number of new significant Historic Structures identified in the CRGNSA each year. A significant historic structure is one that has been evaluated for the National Register and found to be eligible or has been nominated and listed on the National Register. Tracking will include National Register of Historic Places status:	Protect and enhance cultural resources.	

Vital Sign	Indicator	Description	Management Plan Provisions	CCAP Progress Measure
		unevaluated (most common), not eligible, eligible, and listed (least common).		
Oregon White Oak Woodlands	Extent and Distribution	This indicator measures the total acreage and spatial distribution of oak woodlands in the CRGNSA.	Ensure that new uses do not adversely affect Priority Habitats or sensitive wildlife sites. Develop a comprehensive program to inventory existing oak woodlands and propose methods for their protection, including incentives for property owner cooperation and support, acquisition of sensitive stands, and easements to preserve the oaks on large parcels.	X
	Land Cover Change	This indicator tracks the spatial distribution and percent change in oak woodland cover at a specified interval corresponding with currently available land cover database updates.		X
Recreation Equity	Percentage of Recreation Sites and Trailheads in the CRGNSA Accessible via Public Transportation	This indicator tracks the percentage of recreation sites and trailheads in the NSA that are accessible via public transportation.	Provide equitable and accessible (regardless of income level, ethnicity, gender, ability, or age) resource-based recreation opportunities.	
	Percentage of Recreation Sites and Trailheads on public lands in the CRGNSA Requiring Access Fees	This indicator tracks the percentage of recreation sites and trailheads in the NSA that require an access fee. These are generally day use or annual parking passes issued by each agency, though some specific recreation sites may have per-visit fees.		
Recreation Impacts on Other Protected Resources	Extent and Distribution of Unofficial Trails (Public Lands in CRGNSA)	This indicator measures the total miles and spatial distribution of unofficial trails on public lands within the CRGNSA. Unofficial trails data will be overlaid with natural and cultural resource data and sensitive location information will be maintained by Forest Service. The final dataset will inform trails management and future sustainable trails planning and development.	Protect scenic, natural, cultural, and recreation resources when providing new recreation opportunities. Collaborate with partner agencies and stakeholders to develop management strategies and actions to protect and enhance natural,	

Vital Sign	Indicator	Description	Management Plan Provisions	CCAP Progress Measure
	Extent and Distribution of Official System Trails (Public Lands in NSA)	This indicator measures the total miles and spatial distribution of official system trails on public lands in the CRGNSA. This dataset will be integrated with the unofficial trails data and natural and cultural resource layers to inform trails management and future sustainable trails planning and development.	scenic, and cultural resources from overuse at popular recreation sites and trails.	
Scenic Landscapes	Intactness of Landscape Setting as seen from Key Viewing Areas	This indicator assesses the defining characteristics of Landscape Settings and whether they are intact or noticeably degraded as seen from KVAs. An intact Landscape Setting retains the overall character of the landscape setting as described in the Management Plan.	Emphasize protection and enhancement of National Scenic Area landscapes visible from key viewing areas (KVAs).	
	Intactness of Landscape Setting	This indicator assesses the defining characteristics of Landscape Settings and whether they are intact or degrading. An intact Landscape Setting retains the overall character of the landscape setting as described in the Management Plan.	Maintain the diversity of Gorge landscapes to protect and enhance the Gorge's scenic beauty.	
Talus	Pika Presence	This indicator assesses pika presence in select talus habitat sites across the CRGNSA. Data provided from Cascade Pika Watch, a program of the Oregon Zoo with science advisor Johanna Varner, PhD.	Ensure that new uses do not adversely affect Priority Habitats or sensitive wildlife sites.	
Visibility	Haze	This indicator measures the number of days per year with visibility impairment. Also measures chemical composition of fine particulates (<2.5 um diameter).	Air quality shall be protected and enhanced, consistent with the purposes of the National Scenic Area Act. Coordinate with federal and state agencies on air quality and visibility in the National Scenic Area and utilize the results of such monitoring in developing and updating the regional air quality protection and enhancement strategy described in SMA Natural Resources Wildlife and Plants Policy 15 (Part I, Chapter 3: Natural Resources).	

Vital Sign	Indicator	Description	Management Plan Provisions	CCAP Progress Measure
	Light Pollution	This indicator measures how bright the night sky is directly overhead at strategic locations throughout the CRGNSA. By measuring artificial light at night, this indicator helps establish a baseline of current night sky quality as a foundation from which to evaluate change in nighttime visibility at specific Key Viewing Areas.	SMA and GMA guidelines requiring exterior lighting to be “sited, limited in intensity, shielded, or hooded in a manner that prevents light from being highly visible from key viewing areas and from noticeably contrasting with the surrounding landscape setting, except for road lighting necessary for safety purposes.”	
Visitor Experience	Visitation (National Forest System Lands in CRGNSA)	This indicator tracks visitation estimates for different types of Forest Service recreation sites within the CRGNSA (e.g., day use, overnight, wilderness, etc.). Includes demographic analysis (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, age, and income).	Provide a diversity of resource-based recreation opportunities that are accessible to all segments of the public that emphasize the quality of the recreation experience meeting present and future needs by protecting and enhance the natural, scenic, and cultural resources and support economies of local communities.	
	Visitor Satisfaction (National Forest System Lands in CRGNSA)	This indicator measures how satisfied visitors are overall with their visits to Forest Service sites within the CRGNSA.		
Wetlands	Extent and Distribution	This indicator measures the total acreage and spatial distribution of wetland habitat in the CRGNSA.	Achieve no loss of wetlands acreage and functions.	X
	Land Cover Change	This indicator tracks the spatial distribution and percent change in wetland cover at a specified interval corresponding with currently available land cover database updates.	Improve the quality of wetlands.	X
Wildfire	Wildfire Extent	This indicator tracks the acres burned per year by wildfire in the CRGNSA. Spatial distribution of wildfire can be examined across Land Use Designations, Priority Habitats, and other protected resources.	Encourage the use of forest management and fire, as appropriate, to restore and perpetuate natural ecosystems.	
	Fuels Reduction (National Forest System Lands)	This indicator reports the acres of fuels reduction completed per year on National Forest System lands in CRGNSA. Includes both thinning and prescribed fire.		X

Appendix B: VSI Update Contributors

Thanks to all who contributed to the VSI update process from 2021-2023. Many of those below served on VSI work groups, shared technical expertise, and offered input during this period. We offer this list in gratitude for *all* who have shared their knowledge and feedback with us and acknowledge this list is not exhaustive of the network of people with whom we work. Thank you all for your support.

- Cascade Pika Watch Program, Oregon Zoo (Johanna Varner and Shervin Hess)
- Columbia Land Trust/East Cascades Oak Partnership (Mary Bushman, Lindsay Cornelius, Kat Shepard, and Stacy Simanonok)
- Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (Elaine Harvey, Buck Jones, and Seth White)
- Columbia Gorge Tourism Alliance (Emily Reed)
- Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (Audie Huber, Joe Pitt, Colleen Sanders, and Kristen Tiede)
- Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs (Bobby Brunoe, Brad Houslet, Lyman Jim, Christian Nauer, Max Oates, and Austin Smith)
- Gorge Grown Food Network (Sarah Sullivan)
- Gorge Stewardship Network (includes many recreation partners)
- International Dark-Sky Association of Oregon (Michael McKeag)
- Mid-Columbia Economic Development District (Jessica Metta)
- National Ecological Observatory Network Program (Ben Vierra)
- Orchard View Farms (Ken Bailey)
- Oregon and Washington Investment Boards (Gil Kelley, OIB Chair)
- Oregon Department of Ecology (Smita Mehta)
- Oregon Department of Forestry (Kristen Dodd)
- Oregon Employment Department (Dallas Fridley)
- Oregon Governor's Office, Regional Solutions (Nate Stice)
- Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (Clay Courtright and David Spangler)
- Oregon State University Extension Service, Tree Fruit Horticulture (Ashley Thompson)
- Oregon Wheat Commission (Amanda Hoey)
- Skamania County Economic Development Council (Kevin Waters)
- Skamania County Planning Department (Alan Peters)
- Thrive Hood River (Heather Staten)
- Trailkeepers of Oregon (Steven Kruger)
- Underwood Conservation District (Carly Lemon and Tova Tillinghast)
- USDA Forest Service, Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area (Nathaniel Brodie, Sarah Callaghan, Brett Carre, Chris Donnermeyer, Stephen Elgart, Aiden Forsi, Casey Gatz, Lorelei Haukness, Morai Helfen, Stan Hinatsu, Diane Hopster, Luciano Legnini, Donna Mickley, Brance Morefield, Roland Rose, Katie Santini, Jodi Schoenen, Tessa Smith, Christine Stillman, and Rashawn Tama)
- USDA Forest Service, National Air Resource Management and Lichen Monitoring Programs (Linda Geiser and Amanda Hardman)

- USDA Forest Service, Northwest Oregon Area Ecology Program (Doug Glavich and Upekala Wijayratne)
- USDA Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station (Eric White)
- USDA Forest Service, Region 6 Air Quality Program (Rick Graw)
- USDA National Agriculture Statistics Service (Dave Losh)
- US Environmental Protection Agency (John Palmer and Mary Lou Soscia)
- US Geological Survey (Erik Beever, Tim Counihan, and Steve Waste)
- Washington Department of Natural Resources (Jennifer Watkins)
- Washington Department of Ecology (Ben Rau)
- Washington Employment Security Department (Scott Bailey)
- Washington Natural Heritage Program (Walter Fertig)
- Washington State Parks (Heath Yeats and Jill Sprance-Carr)
- Washington Trails Association (Ryan Ojerio)
- West Virginia University (Robert Burns)
- Yakama Nation (Casey Barney, Adrienne Grimm, Greg Kiona, Jessica Lally, and Noah Oliver)

Appendix C: VSI Monitoring Definitions

Management Plan Goal: A goal included in the text of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Management Plan.

Desired Condition: *To be developed.* (Example: Often a statement of aspiration that describes resource conditions the USDA Forest Service and Gorge Commission strive to achieve and maintain to meet Management Plan goals.)

Management Question: A priority question or information need identified by the Gorge Commission and USDA Forest Service to support implementing the Management Plan.

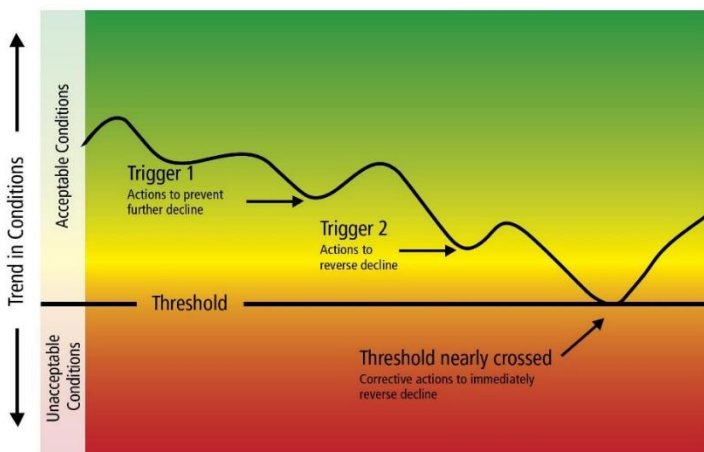
Vital Sign: The topic for a high-level indicator. Represents important attributes or components of protected resources that guide assessment of progress toward Management Plan goals and desired conditions (e.g., Wetlands). Each Vital Sign is represented by one or more indicators.

Indicator: A brief description of what is being measured (e.g., extent and distribution).

Metric: The specific measurement method or unit of measurement for an indicator.

Threshold: *To be developed.*
(Example: A minimally acceptable condition associated with each indicator, typically based on physical, biological, or social conditions.)

Trigger: *To be developed.* (Example: A condition of concern for an indicator that is enough to prompt a management response to ensure that desired conditions continue to be maintained before the threshold is crossed.)



Appendix D: Indicator Selection Criteria

In February 2021, the Commission approved the following criteria to guide selection of updated indicators across all VSI topic areas including climate change, natural resources, scenic resources, cultural resources, recreation, and economic vitality.

1. **Measurable:** Indicators should be directly measurable through repeatable quantitative or qualitative methods.
2. **Relevant to management actions:** Indicators should provide information on the condition of protected resources related to specific Management Plan provisions.
3. **Clear:** Indicators should be understandable by the public and policymakers.
4. **Consistently available:** Indicator data should be reliably available over time to track long-term status and trends.
5. **Obtainable:** Indicator data should be available through existing monitoring programs whenever possible.
6. **Cost-effective:** Indicator data acquisition, analysis, and reporting should make efficient use of limited financial and staff resources.
7. **Additional Consideration:** While criteria 1-6 should be the primary criteria for selecting indicators, the ability of indicators to tell a *compelling story* that calls attention to the status of scenic, natural, cultural, and recreation resources, and economies, of the National Scenic Area, should also be considered.