



TO: Columbia River Gorge Commission

FROM: Jessica Olson, Senior Natural Resources Planner, and Lisa Naas Cook, Vital Sign Indicators Planner, Gorge Commission

DATE: November 8, 2022

SUBJECT: **Action Item*:** Request to approve National Scenic Area Climate Change Action Plan

Purpose

The Columbia River Gorge Commission staff is presenting the National Scenic Area Climate Change Action Plan for the Commission's consideration and adoption. The final Climate Change Action Plan reflects input from members of the public, partners, and Commissioners during the public comment period from May 5 to August 9, 2022. Staff welcomes questions, discussion, and any final changes needed. We request the Commission's approval during the November 8th Commission meeting.

Staff Recommendation

Staff recommends that the Commission approve the Climate Change Action Plan as presented. Staff will finalize any changes requested and will immediately complete a thorough formatting and grammar review of the approved Action Plan, post it to our website, and share it widely.

Background

Beginning in March 2021, the Commission set out to develop an ambitious and comprehensive Climate Change Action Plan for the National Scenic Area, identifying priorities for action to address climate change impacts and to reduce the sources of greenhouse gas emissions. This action plan is called for in the recently revised National Scenic Area Management Plan.

The Climate Change Action Plan provides priorities and direction to the Gorge Commission and is intended to support partner efforts as well. It is a non-regulatory, living document that will be revisited and revised periodically. As illustrated in the introduction of the Action Plan, both the National Scenic Area Management Plan and the Climate Change Action Plan work together to protect NSA resources in a changing climate. As staff and Commissioners implement the Action Plan, we will develop policy options that can become part of the Management Plan during the next public revision or amendment process. A few important points to note:

- The Action Plan identifies priority topics for policy development; however, any new policies supported by the Action Plan will require a public process, concurrence by the Secretary of Agriculture, and dissemination to Gorge counties in order to take effect.
- The Action Plan provides a framework for regional partners to contribute to Gorge-wide climate change goals and identifies the Commission’s policy interests so that landowners, agencies, organizations, and community groups can engage with us early in the process of policy development.
- The Action Plan includes many actions that build and leverage strategic partnerships or improve the ways in which the Gorge Commission and counties implement the existing Management Plan.
- The Action Plan emphasizes incentives to the degree we are able to support these approaches.

Before, during, and after the public comment period, Commission staff engaged with many individuals and organizations who contributed to the content of the Action Plan. At the September 13, 2022 Commission meeting, staff summarized the feedback we heard and shared our recommendations for revisions to the draft Action Plan. Today, we are presenting the results of those revisions and request the Commission decide whether to approve the Climate Change Action Plan.

Examples of Revisions to the Draft Action Plan

- General
 - Added emphasis on supporting and promoting incentives
 - Clarified with new graphics and text that potential policy development will include public processes and additional opportunities to hear from landowners, counties, and others as we consider whether policy updates are desired to address climate change priorities
- Oregon white oak woodlands
 - Updated the vulnerability snapshots describing Oregon white oak woodlands and winter range for deer and elk
 - Revised Oregon white oak woodlands priority to differentiate it from winter range; revised the goals for oaks
 - Updated wording in the priority actions to reflect our interest in protecting oak woodlands from conversion and fragmentation
- Feedback from the Columbia River Treaty Tribes
 - Treaty Rights priority emphasizes native plants and wildlife, and ecosystem functions
 - Largely incorporated detailed comments from Yakama Nation Fisheries: Added to the potential future actions that we would like to explore the Commission’s role in supporting beaver-based wetland and stream restoration

- Fire risk
 - Added consideration of Small Woodland policy options to reduce ignitions
- Recreation
 - Added more on adaptation to cope with the increased pressures that recreation puts on other resources
 - Increased focus on EV and transit to benefit local residents, not just recreation
- Agriculture
 - Added emphasis on incentives and clarified that not all conservation practices are applicable to every crop or operation
 - Removed language about limiting new cultivation
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
 - Added specific actions and partnerships to the Inclusive Climate Change Action priority
- High Climate Resilient Areas
 - Added an appendix describing High Climate Resilient Areas
- Measuring progress and leveraging Vital Sign Indicators
 - Revised Part IV to better integrate and explain how specific Vital Sign Indicators help us track progress toward Action Plan goals
- Executive summary and terminology throughout Action Plan
 - Simplified text by deleting “desired conditions,” which were redundant with “goal” statements; listing example actions rather than “action outcomes”; and clearly describing where Vital Sign Indicators will track progress toward specific climate change action goals (also described in Part IV)

Next Steps

Several climate change action priorities are already underway and supporting other Commission priorities. Our work on these will continue through the winter:

- Vital Sign Indicators – This program will advance several of the priority actions in the Climate Change Action Plan by establishing baseline data and tracking change. For example, we will build a comprehensive land cover map for Oregon white oak woodlands, wetlands, coniferous woodlands, grasslands, and agriculture. We will also continue work with the Columbia River Treaty Tribes and USDA Forest Service Heritage Program staff to develop cultural resources indicators. Stream temperature and flow monitoring actions will be advanced in summer 2023 through coordination with EPA, Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, Washington Department of Ecology, US Geological Service, and others.
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion – The Commission is actively working on components of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion that support the Climate Change Action Plan. Notably, we are establishing a diverse team of individuals who can help the Commission identify and rectify areas of our work that create or perpetuate

inequities. Climate change justice will be a topic for this team to explore. We are also developing relationships with local community groups who would like to partner with us on community engagement and events described in the Action Plan.

- Climate Stewards Program – Commission staff are beginning to develop the curriculum for this pilot program in collaboration with Oregon State University Extension. This pilot will adapt the Climate Stewards curriculum created by the University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources with a focus on climate action here in the Gorge. The purpose of the Climate Stewards Program is to prepare community members to communicate and engage in local transformative efforts to advance community and ecosystem resilience in a changing climate. For this pilot focused on our region, we are exploring a program design that includes workforce development, capstone projects, and volunteer opportunities that directly support implementation of the Climate Change Action Plan. We will be working with OSU Extension and other partners on program design over the next several months for a pilot course in summer or fall 2023.
- Jessica Olson will be on parental leave December through February 2023. Upon her return, staff will begin implementing additional priority actions listed in the Action Plan. As a reminder, the agency has requested a budget increase to hire a full-time Program Manager position to implement the Climate Change Action Plan and collaborate with the Vital Sign Indicators Planner, Lisa Naas Cook. However, funding for that budget request will not be known until June 2023. Until then, we will be working with available staff as resources allow.