



FRIENDS OF THE COLUMBIA GORGE

Testimony on House Bill 2039

Before the House Committee on Rural Communities, Land Use and Water

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The Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area is a natural scenic treasure and home to nearly 70,000 people in Oregon and Washington. It is protected by the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Act. The primary purpose of the Scenic Area Act is to protect and enhance the scenic, natural, cultural and recreation resources of the Columbia River Gorge. The second purpose is to support the economy by encouraging economic growth to occur in existing urban areas and to take place in a manner consistent with resource protection.

Friends of the Columbia Gorge (Friends) supports: the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Act; the corresponding Columbia River Gorge Compact between Oregon and Washington (ORS 196.150 and RCW 43.97.015, respectively); and also adequate funding for the Columbia River Gorge Commission.

HB 2039 seeks to form a task force of Gorge area legislators and a governor's appointee to develop recommendations for changes to the federal National Scenic Area Act and the Columbia River Gorge Commission.

Reason why Friends opposes the bill in its current form:

The makeup of the task force is too narrow: The Columbia River Gorge is a national scenic treasure and an icon of the Northwest. There is a national, regional, statewide and local interest involved to carry out the two purposes of the National Scenic Area Act, which are to protect and enhance the scenic, natural, cultural and recreation resources of the Gorge and to encourage economic growth consistent with resource protection. The task force would consist of two members of the House and two members of the Senate from districts that include or are adjacent to the boundary of the National Scenic Area. As drafted, the task force would result in one-party representation from only the local area, plus the governor's appointee. Considering the broad interests at stake, the task force should include a broader range of stakeholders, including state, regional, national, tribal and other public interests.

The focus should be on how to better implement existing laws: The Columbia River Gorge Compact establishes the Columbia River Gorge Commission and requires the states of Oregon and Washington to provide funding necessary for the Commission to fulfill its duties under the National Scenic Area Act. It

requires all state agencies to carry out their respective functions in accordance with the National Scenic Area Act. An interstate dialogue focusing on the implementation of existing law and any performance improvements should proceed before any recommendations for legislative changes are developed.

Amendments to the National Scenic Area Act are not necessary to improve the performance of the Gorge Commission: The National Scenic Area Act gave advanced consent to the states of Oregon and Washington to enter into an interstate compact, called the Columbia River Gorge Compact, which creates the Commission, provides funding, provides authority to appoint members and establish regulatory authority on nonfederal lands in the Gorge. As drafted, this bill directs the task force to recommend changes to the National Scenic Area Act, but does not address the Columbia Gorge Compact. If the Compact or existing state laws are impeding the implementation of the Scenic Area Act, then the focus should be on improving the Columbia River Gorge Compact and other state statutes and not on changes to federal law.

Why have a task force created when there is already a commission? Isn't that what the Gorge Commission is for? The Gorge Commission was created to resolve the issues underlying this bill. The Gorge Commission consists of 13 members. One commissioner is appointed by each of the six counties with lands within the National Scenic Area. The governors of Oregon and Washington each appoint three members to the Commission, with one member required to reside within the Scenic Area. The Secretary of Agriculture appoints an ex officio, nonvoting member to the Commission. Oregon reserves one seat for a tribal representative. These 13 members represent the local, state and federal interests in the Columbia River Gorge. This is an existing interstate compact agency charged with implementing that Scenic Area Act. An alternative to HB 2039 would be to direct and fund the Gorge Commission to develop recommendations to the Oregon and Washington legislatures on ways to improve implementation of the National Scenic Area Act and the interstate compact, and also improve bistrate cooperation in protecting the Columbia River Gorge.