



FRIENDS OF THE COLUMBIA GORGE

**Testimony on House Bill 5010
Before the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Natural Resources
By Kevin Gorman, Executive Director, Friends of the Columbia Gorge
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Good morning co-chairs and members of the subcommittee. For the record, my name is Kevin Gorman and I'm the executive director of Friends of the Columbia Gorge ("Friends"). Friends is a nonprofit group with 5,500 members dedicated to protecting the scenic beauty and natural and cultural heritage of the Columbia River Gorge for our children and future generations.

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 supports funding for the Columbia River Gorge Commission.

What is the Columbia River Gorge Commission?

The Columbia River Gorge Commission was created by the states of Oregon and Washington with the consent of Congress in 1987. Its primary mission is to protect and enhance the scenic, natural, cultural and recreational resources of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. The National Scenic Area was created in 1986 by an act of Congress and signed into law by President Ronald Reagan.

There are thirteen members on the Commission. Six are appointed by the counties along the Columbia River Gorge, three by the Governor of Oregon and three by the Governor of Washington. In addition, there is one ex-officio, nonvoting member of the Commission from the United State Forest Service.

The Columbia River Gorge Compact (ORS 196.150 and RCW 43.97.015) is the law that joins the states of Oregon and Washington in a partnership to protect the Columbia River Gorge by jointly carrying out their requirements under the National Scenic Area Act. The Compact incorporates the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Act into state law by reference. The state legislatures of Oregon and Washington jointly fund the Gorge Commission pursuant to the Compact, which calls on the state legislatures to provide funding necessary to fulfill the powers and duties imposed upon and entrusted to the Commission. Oregon and Washington must equally fund the Gorge Commission and the lower amount controls.

This year, the Oregon State Legislature will consider House Bill 5010, the proposed 2015-2017 budget for the Gorge Commission, which would provide funding for critical conservation programs in the Columbia River Gorge.

The Columbia River Gorge deserves strong protections

As the only sea-level passage through the Cascade Mountain range, the Gorge contains five distinct ecosystems, 16 species of wildflowers found nowhere else in the world and boasts the largest concentration of waterfalls in North America. The primary role of the Gorge Commission is to protect and enhance this natural scenic treasure in a manner that is consistent with the Scenic Area Act.

Support adequate funding for the Gorge Commission Budget, House Bill 5010

House Bill 5010 would appropriate \$1,689,660 for Oregon's share of the Commission's operating expenses. This represents a 90% increase in funding compared to the current biennium. The Washington Governor's budget recommends \$903,000 for the Commission's 2015-2017 biennial budgets. This represents a 3% increase over the current biennium. The Washington legislature is unlikely to fund the Commission above the level proposed in the Governor's budget and is extremely unlikely to provide funding at the level proposed in HB 5010.

Friends of the Columbia Gorge supports increased funding for the Gorge Commission and increased oversight of the use of its funds. We support a step increase of \$200,000 to \$300,000 per state to the Commission's budget over three biennia to bring the Commission up to full funding, along with build-in accountability measures and oversight to ensure that the funds are being used as intended. Taking a stepwise approach would allow the Commission to build its capacity over time and to establish clear outcomes for the use of its additional funding. The Commission could then establish a record of accomplishments that would help build public support and increase accountability.

The Commission must use its budget to focus on mandatory duties.

These mandatory duties include the following:

- 1) Protecting and enhancing the scenic, natural, cultural and recreation resources of the Columbia River Gorge.
- 2) Updating its inventories for sensitive, threatened and endangered fish, wildlife and plants.
- 3) Improving water resource protection for salmon and steelhead habitat.
- 4) Developing a cumulative effects monitoring system, which the Commission does not currently have.
- 5) Providing ongoing technical assistance to the counties to ensure accurate implementation of the scenic area development standards and fair treatment for landowners.
- 6) Increase enforcement to better achieve compliance with the National Scenic Area Act and the Columbia River Gorge Compact.
- 7) Support efforts to link communities in the Gorge to recreation sites through a series trails. Support transportation solutions that reduce the amount of vehicles traveling to the Gorge, particularly during high use periods.

Thank you very much for your interest in protecting the Columbia River Gorge and for responsibly funding the Gorge Commission.