



FRIENDS OF THE COLUMBIA GORGE

Testimony in support of Senate Bill 5510

Before the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Natural Resources

By Michael Lang, Conservation Director, Friends of the Columbia Gorge

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Good morning co-chairs and members of the subcommittee. My name is Michael Lang and I'm the conservation director of Friends of the Columbia Gorge ("Friends"). Friends is a nonprofit group with 6,000 members dedicated to protecting the scenic beauty and natural and cultural heritage of the Columbia River Gorge for our children and future generations. Our members live, work and recreate within the Columbia River Gorge.

The Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area is a natural scenic treasure and also 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 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 full funding for the Columbia River Gorge Commission, including funding for an additional planner.

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. Two of the six Governor's appointees must reside within the National Scenic Area. This ensures a strong local voice in the administration of the National Scenic Area Act. 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 SB 5510, the proposed 2017-2019 budget for the Gorge Commission, which would provide funding for critical conservation programs in the Columbia River Gorge. In particular, it will fund the Gorge Commission's review and revision of the National Scenic Area Management Plan, improve consultation with the Columbia River Basin treaty tribes, ensure that increased recreation and tourism helps the Gorge economy and does not harm sensitive Gorge resources and protect the economy of the Gorge by encouraging growth in existing urban areas.

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 Gorge provides habitat to many sensitive fish and wildlife species, including 12 salmonids listed under the federal Endangered Species Act. The Columbia River Gorge has been home to Native Americans for more than

10,000 years, is rich in cultural resources and is subject to tribal treaty rights. As a tourism and recreation mecca, millions of visitors flock to the Gorge every year to enjoy its natural scenic beauty, abundant recreation opportunities, wineries and distinct communities. The primary role of the Gorge Commission is to protect and enhance the scenic, natural, cultural and recreation resources consistent with the requirements of the National Scenic Area Act.

Support adequate funding for the Gorge Commission

Friends of the Columbia Gorge supports increasing funding for the Gorge Commission by returning funding and staff levels to pre-recession levels, accounting for inflation. SB 5510 falls short of providing necessary funding for the Commission to fulfill all of its required functions. As introduced, it would appropriate \$1,106,478 for Oregon's share of the Commission's operating expenses. This represents a minor increase in funding compared to the current service level and would allow the Commission to hire one additional planner. This is a step in the right direction, but the Commission is in dire need of additional planners and administrative staff.

The mandatory functions of the Gorge Commission:

- 1) Protect and enhance the scenic, natural, cultural and recreation resources of the Columbia River Gorge.
- 2) Protect and support the economy of the Gorge in manner consistent with resource protection.
- 3) Update its inventories for sensitive, threatened and endangered fish, wildlife and plants.
- 4) Improve water resource protection for salmon and steelhead habitat.
- 5) Develop a cumulative effects monitoring system, which the Commission does not currently have.
- 6) Provide ongoing technical assistance to the counties to ensure accurate implementation of the scenic area development standards and fair treatment for landowners.
- 7) Increase enforcement to better achieve compliance with the National Scenic Area Act and the Columbia River Gorge Compact.
- 8) Consult with treaty tribes and protect of treaty rights.
- 9) Support efforts to link communities in the Gorge to recreation sites through a series trails.

- 10) Support transportation solutions that reduce the amount of vehicles traveling to the Gorge, particularly during high use periods.
- 11) Review and possible revision of the Management Plan at least every ten years. The National Scenic Area Act requires review of the Management Plan every ten years. This review is three years behind schedule due to insufficient funding. The Management Plan was adopted in 1991 and has been reviewed once in 26 years. Many of the resource protection and land use planning provisions are based on resource inventories, science and policies that are more than 26 years old and out of date.

Thank you very much for your interest in protecting the Columbia River Gorge and for providing funding to the Gorge Commission so it may carry out these important functions.