



House Interim Committee on Natural Resource
Lisa Sumption, Director
May 28, 2020

Chair Witt and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity today to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on Oregon Parks and Recreation Department. While COVID-19 continues to disrupt lives, work and well-being of people all around the world, our agency has remained committed to prioritizing the health and safety of our staff, volunteers and visitors. Thankfully, as of today, the virus has not directly touched our staff or volunteers. However, the impact has created an existential crisis for the agency and the park experience that is enjoyed by over 52 million visitors per year. The park experience that you may remember from last year has changed, perhaps for a generation.

A reminder the State Park system consists of over 226 properties including fifty-three overnight campgrounds, the Willamette River Greenway, the Oregon Coast from Astoria to Brookings. At full staff OPRD employs just over 600 FTE and our Legislative Adopted Budget was \$260 million for the biennium. The agency provides world-class state parks, manages the entire ocean shore from border to border, administers the state scenic waterway and ocean shores permit programs, awards tens of millions in grants to local communities, and delivers heritage services to Oregon communities through the State Historic Preservation Office and a wide range of grant and consulting services.

To say that everything changed in mid-march is an understatement. The combination of a surge of spring break visitors overwhelming many sites across the state and the stay home stay safe order necessitated the closure of the entire system on March 23. The weekend prior to our closure, a crush of visitors overwhelmed parking areas, stripped local supplies in smaller communities like Warrenton and Astoria, Lincoln City, and created concerns about virus spread in communities that were not reporting cases. This shut down was unprecedented in our 100-year history and was one of the most challenging decisions for myself and staff who strive to serve outdoor experiences to the general public. Thankfully, day use sites across the state are now mostly open to limited service, and we are preparing to re-establish overnight use beginning June 9. I want to spend a moment to address this point. As Director, I fully understand that access to outdoor experiences is not only part of the fabric of the Oregon Way, and that at this time being outdoors is essential not only to personal health, but also the economy of many parts of Oregon. I wish that it were as easy as opening a gate. We have to consider – most parks have access points that are designed to funnel people to trails, overlooks, and restroom buildings. Anyone who has been to Smith Rock, or the Columbia Gorge can attest to the pack train of people. Maintaining these sites and the basic features of bathrooms, trash, some visitor security – requires staff that can

physically distance, and have access to PPE that is in short supply. We strive to be good neighbors to the communities or properties we serve. After the concerns of Spring Break we are working closely with those communities to ensure that they are willing and ready to accept visitors. This slow and thoughtful process is essential for staff safety and community health – but also for the very existence of the park system.

Oregon Parks and Recreation Department is nearing the centennial mark of service to Oregonians. Three months ago, we were focused on a future that is no longer possible. COVID-19, and the financial impact that has come with it, have altered the course of Oregon, the nation, and the world, and our agency along with it. I had hoped that the disaster would be both short term and only a minor deviation, but it is now clear that is not the case. Currently the majority of the funding stream for the agency is gone. Lottery and user fees are at a trickle – and have been largely shut down and the timeframe on return is uncertain at best. Fortunately, because of previous legislative guidance and rapid action we have a small operating fund that can provide service for the upcoming summer – depending on the health situation.

But, I need to be very clear, without that operational fund OPRD is looking at a 50% reduction in available cash to operate the system. We have taken immediate actions in the following ways

- A hiring freeze – including not returning 70% of our seasonal workforce and 15-20 other full-time vacancies
- Halting nearly all facility improvement projects – only focusing on projects funded with outside money (federal grants that are still available, or critical system repairs)
- We are currently evaluating the need for additional program cuts including staff reductions.

While the day use opening and future camping opening will help – we anticipate long term service reductions. This summer will be very different. Most of our parks are operating at bare minimum staffing levels. Visitors should be prepared for a very different park experience, where we are not able to consistently provide manicured areas, conduct trail maintenance, respond to all but the most significant facility needs. We will be focusing on maintaining a bare minimum cleaning standard for restrooms, trash removal where we can, and providing staff presence to respond to critical needs. Anything else would completely exhaust our financial resources well before the end of the calendar year.

It is my hope that I can report to you later this year about additional ways that OPRD can begin to build back those service levels, but also ways to continue to preserve and protect the park resources for present and future generations.