

**Joint Ways & Means Subcommittee
Testimony of Richard Benner
Monday, March 13, 2023**

I served as the first Executive Director of the Columbia River Gorge Commission, from 1987 to 2001. The new Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area (CRGSNA), shepherded through Congress by Senator Mark Hatfield in 1986, was the nation's first such scenic area (there are now 10 in the U.S.). During my four years at the commission the principal task was adoption of a management plan in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service. The commission and the Forest Service adopted the plan in October, 1991. The states of Oregon and Washington and the federal government approved approved the plan shortly thereafter.

As I reflect on that experience and the state of affairs in the scenic area today, I see it as a remarkable success. There are many measures of that success - protection of areas of endemic plants, the habitat of Western Pond turtles, restoration of the Historic Columbia River Highway - but the one that gratifies me most is the acceptance of the scenic area by early opponents and the benefits it has delivered to the communities in the Gorge. Studies of the economic impacts on towns in the Gorge confirm significant positive effects.

What was once a glimmer in the eye is now a national treasure that draws visitors from around the world. The Gorge Commission and the Forest Service can justifiably take a large share of responsibility for the success of the scenic area.

I visit the scenic area frequently. I see continued improvements to the scenic, natural, cultural and recreational values the CRGSNA aimed to protect and enhance. Trails now give access to many previously inaccessible gems of the Gorge. Existing trails have been improved to reduce impacts on natural resources. Nonprofits are pulling invasive plant species and planting endemics. Derelict buildings visible from public viewing areas have been removed. Improvements to the Historic Highway will soon make it possible to bike from Troutdale to The Dalles. Van shuttles are popping up to reduce traffic on Gorge roads.

Visitation to the scenic area was growing steadily as the Portland-Vancouver area populations rose. But then three events dramatically increased visitation. The Eagle Creek Fire of 2017 closed most of the trails on the Oregon side west of the Cascades. People who had never ventured beyond Hood River discovered the middle and eastern Gorge. Covid sent hundreds of thousands into the Gorge for fear of infection. Perhaps most significant, social media carried views of the Gorge from Catherine Creek, Tom McCall point and other points inspired many more to make the drive to see the splendor, new to them.

This wonderful asset to the region and the two states is now under greater pressure than ever. The Gorge Commission and the Forest Service have their plates full to ensure the scenic area is not overwhelmed.

Please fund the commission fully to equip it to answer these challenges.