TO:　　　　Columbia River Gorge Commission

FROM:　　　Jessica Gist, Natural Resources and Land Use Planner

DATE:　　　July 10, 2017

SUBJECT:　　Discussion item: "Gorge 2020" Data Audit

Background: The Columbia River Gorge Commission (Commission) is responsible for maintaining a number of datasets and for regulating land use in the National Scenic Area's General Management Area. The National Scenic Area Management Plan, last updated in 2004, must be reviewed every ten years. The original Management Plan was informed in part by resource inventories and assessments. Spatially explicit datasets that were gathered or developed for those inventories have been maintained and updated over time by the Commission and agency partners. This report reviews the status of those datasets, briefly explains how they relate to the current Plan, and provides a basis for improved coordination with the USFS, counties, and the "data-keepers" working in the Gorge. The last page of this report contains a reference list of additional survey and study reports that we believe can inform revisions to the Plan.

Need for data review:
The National Scenic Area Act directed the Commission to create and keep certain data inventories in developing the original Management Plan. These datasets informed Land Use Designations and Special Management Area decisions.

The current Plan and ordinances require planners to use certain datasets to determine the level of review, the type of engagement they have with experts, and some standards for development (buffers, etc). The Management Plan provides for the protection of specific resources, whether they are mapped or discovered upon inspection and compels planners to consider what may not be mapped. Still, a strict interpretation of the current policies relies heavily on spatial data.

The NSA is a multi-jurisdictional landscape; just as we coordinate other information we need to coordinate spatial data to ensure consistent and up-to-date implementation of the Plan.

Status and trends information is critical to informed decision making. We surveyed the types of information that are currently available to us through partners and "data keeper" agencies. The Commission may request further discussion of these information resources.

Results of review:
Audit of inventory data and project evaluation datasets

The information that was used to inform early decision-making for the National Scenic Area provided a snapshot in time based on the available data and expertise. Since that time, we have created additional inventories like the road survey of buildings with potential historical significance, described in the attached report. The Commission also maintains some spatial models that alert us to areas of potential resource sensitivities.

The inventory datasets that are explicitly addressed by policies in the Plan have been regularly updated to provide the most comprehensive data available. This is particularly true for wildlife and plant occurrence data. Through the process of auditing these updated datasets we identified a few questions that we are working through with the appropriate data stewards. We also discovered new datasets that we weren't aware of. Partner agencies provide excellent resources for keeping our data current and continuing to improve accuracy and coverage across all land ownership types. We look forward to further coordination on this topic.

In a few instances, the original NSA inventory data documented features or species that are no longer tracked by state agencies because their status has changed. The Management Plan could be more clear when it refers to specific datasets or defers to specific agency priorities about how delisted or down-listed plant and wildlife species are to be treated. The attached report identifies a few similar instances where clarifications to the Plan could be helpful.

Data organization and consistency
The Commission serves an important role in disseminating appropriate datasets to the counties to ensure they are also using the current information to inform their reviews of proposed development. We have the unique challenge of bringing together datasets from multiple agencies and jurisdictions, at times weeding out irrelevant information, and sharing the data back to our planning partners. We also have an opportunity to better coordinate and communicate with resource managers, land owners, and NSA implementers, sharing what we learn along the way about the reliability and applicability of these datasets here in the Gorge.

We recognize – and believe it is important to stress – that data do not substitute for careful review of the area potentially affected by a development or thoughtful consideration of impacts. Sensitive plant and wildlife location data are one good example to illustrate this point. Data for plant and wildlife locations are available and regularly obtained by our office. We use the data to alert us to potential concerns and to inform siting and mitigation. However, the absence of a point on the map does not necessarily indicate that no resources are present.

Next Steps:
- Follow up on a couple of identified questions
- Establish a spatial data directory that is shared with USFS and Counties to identify the source(s) and update schedule for each dataset we expect planners to use in project evaluation
- Consider the need for convening a data coordination team to maintain and share the most current datasets across all ownerships in the NSA
- Continue to provide trainings to county planners to share data and software tools to support consistent and robust development review staff reports
- Use this data and gray literature review as a starting point for Plan revisions where it is relevant to Commission priorities

Attachment A: 2017 Resource Data Audit Summary