

Columbia River Gorge Commission

Meeting Minutes
March 11, 2025
via Zoom Webinar

COMMISSION MEMBERS PRESENT

Elaine Albrich
Valerie Fowler
Alex H. Johnson
Nicolas Granum – USDA Forest Service
Robert Liberty
Jerry Meninick ~ 8:44 a.m.
Michael Mills
Nathan Reynolds
Dr. Ashley Thompson
Amy Weissfeld

COMMISSIONER MEMBERS ABSENT

Laura Brennan Bissell
Carina Miller
Pah-tu Pitt

STAFF PRESENT

Mackenzie Aamodt, Land Use Planner
Connie Acker, Finance & Administration Manager
Lisa Naas Cook, Climate Program Manager
Sage Ebel, VSI & Natural Resources Planner
Kelly Foster, Public Records & Administrative Analyst
Bryce Guske, Senior Planner
Colin Jarvis, Climate Corps Fellow
Joanna Kaiserman, Senior Planner
Jeff Litwak, Legal Counsel
Mike Schrankel, GIS Manager
Krystyna U. Wolniakowski, Executive Director

AUDIENCE PRESENT

Tylee Blowers – Washington Department of Natural Resources
Angie Brewer – Oregon Department of Land Conservation & Development
Lynn Burditt – USDA Forest Service
Keith Cleveland – Hood River County
Kaylee Crosby
Dr. Kelly Howsley-Glover – Wasco County
Madison Kenney – Friends of the Columbia Gorge

Ilene Le Vee
Terra Lingley – Oregon Department of Transportation
Mary Repar
Renee Tkach – Friends of the Columbia Gorge
Holly Williams – Washington State Parks

Others were present during the meeting.

Call to Order and Roll (8:32 a.m.) Chair Michael Mills called the meeting to order, and Connie Acker called roll.

Approval of February 11, 2025, Commission Meeting Minutes (8:34 a.m.)

Commissioner Fowler noted that the minutes omitted Commissioner Weissfeld's request to have a second motion on the floor and asking for clarification on Robert's Rules from counsel Jeff Litwak. Connie Acker agreed to review the recording and make necessary changes to the minutes.

Commissioner Reynolds moved to adopt the February 11, 2025, meeting minutes incorporating any necessary changes by Acker, and Commissioner Johnson seconded. The February 11, 2025, Commission Meeting Minutes were approved by a voice vote. Commissioner Alex H. Johnson abstained as he was not in attendance at the February 11, 2025, meeting.

Land Acknowledgment (8:38 a.m.) Krystyna U. Wolniakowski read the Land Acknowledgment.

New Commissioner Introduction (8.40 a.m.) Chair Mills asked Commissioner Alex H. Johnson to introduce himself. Commissioner Johnson shared his connections to the area, his background in agribusiness management, and his current role at a startup focused on water resiliency. (Attachment A)

Opportunity for Treaty Tribe Nations to Address Commission (8:45 a.m.) As part of the Government-to-Government consultation process, the Commission welcomes input from Treaty Tribe Nations on any issue on the agenda and other matters. The Treaty Tribe Nations did not offer testimony.

Treaty Tribe Word of the Day (8:45 a.m.) Commissioner Meninick shared that the First Foods season has started. First Foods are traditional foods, plants, and animals that Indigenous peoples rely on for sustenance and cultural connections. First Foods include salmon, roots, berries, and animals. Commissioner Meninick added that the second half of the First Foods season will begin in several weeks, which will include the harvest of fish and roots.

Tribes have different interpretations, but his tribe calls the feast of First Foods káʔuyit.

Public comment on items related to the National Scenic Area (NSA) not on the agenda (8:48 a.m.)

- Mary Repar:
 - Requested the Commission investigate plans to build nuclear power plants at the Hanford site on the Columbia River.
 - Commended Mitch Patton’s efforts at informing the Commission on the Bradford Island site cleanup.
 - Urged the Commission to proactively protect the Gorge given the current federal administration.
 - Stated that the Stevenson City Council has public comment at the beginning and end of meetings to improve transparency and suggested the Commission consider adopting this practice.
 - Expressed sorrow that 64 families in Skamania County have lost jobs with the Forest Service.

- Commissioner Liberty: Asked who does testing on salmon safety in the Columbia River.
 - Repar:
 - Stated she has asked Columbia Riverkeeper about testing.
 - Stated that other fish are tested but not salmon, with the explanation that salmon are migratory and do not accumulate toxins.
 - Suggested posting signs on the riverbank cautioning pregnant women not to eat fish and others to limit their intake.

- Director Wolniakowski: Noted salmon management is complex in the area due to the many agencies involved and that staff will follow up.

Executive Director’s Report (8:56 a.m.) Krystyna U. Wolniakowski, Executive Director, and staff provided brief updates:

- **Access Database Replacement – Phase 2** – Mike Schrankel, GIS Manager and Access Database Replacement Project Coordinator, reported:
 - Attachments stored on in-house servers are being attached to database cases.
 - Staff are finalizing Civic Access, the public-facing side of the Enterprise Planning & Licensing (EP&L) platform. Configuration is in progress, with a goal to go live by the end of March. Staff are planning a soft rollout by contacting selected applicants to help test the new system.

- **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion** – Joanna Kaiserman, Senior Planner, reported:
 - Staff are exploring Commissioner workshops with The Avarna Group during meetings to develop an equity foundation and understanding of the historical background on land use planning and local cultures.
 - Staff are partnering with ECOnorthwest to perform an equity audit of the Management Plan.
 - Staff held a Pro-Equity Anti-Racism (PEAR) meeting on March 4, 2025, to discuss community engagement and communications to better understand how to engage on natural hazard risks like fire. The PEAR team will meet again in April to follow up.

Commissioner Comments and Questions

- Commissioner Weissfeld: Offered appreciation to Schrankel for the ADR project and Kaiserman on DEI work. Asked if the PEAR team is having discussions about the future of DEI, assuming there may not be additional funding.
 - Kaiserman: Noted funding is not needed for the PEAR team as it is a volunteer group where participants contribute their time, so that effort will continue past June 30, 2025. Kaiserman added that what will happen after June 30th remains to be seen.
- Commissioner Liberty: Requested clarification on the Management Plan audit and asked if the focus would be on outcomes or the text of the policy and procedural components. Liberty noted that he is interested in outcomes.
 - Kaiserman: Responded that there will be policy recommendations and a report on how they see changes being implemented through our guidelines.
 - Wolniakowski: Noted staff are developing a scope of work for the audit and will discuss an outcome focus as they refine that scope.
- **Legislative Outreach** – Wolniakowski reported:
 - The agency’s 2025-27 Oregon budget presentation is scheduled before the Oregon Joint Committee on Ways and Means on Thursday, March 13, 2025, at 3:00. Acker, Schrankel, and Chair Mills will attend the presentation with Wolniakowski.

USDA Forest Service Report (9:08 a.m.) Nicolas Granum, Deputy Forest Supervisor for the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, provided updates on Forest Service activities in the National Scenic Area:

- In response to Commissioner Brennan Bissel’s question on retardant use during the Top of the World fire, Granum reported that 2.5 loads of retardant (approximately 8,000 gallons) were used.
- Wildflower season is approaching; timed permits for Dog Mountain will be available online beginning March 15, 2025, at [recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov). Granum urged hikers to use the free shuttle from Skamania County Fairgrounds. Permits are required from Saturday, April 26, 2025, through Sunday, June 15, 2025 (weekends only), and Memorial Day, Monday, May 26, 2025. USDA
- Shared plans for a series of events at the Multnomah Falls Lodge to acknowledge its history. Events will be throughout the summer; there may be special menu items and special transit options. Suggested finding less busy times to beat the crowds.
- Timed use permits for the I-84 Multnomah Falls parking lot are required between May 26, 2025, and September 1, 2025, and are available at [recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov) for a \$2.00 administrative fee.
- USFS continues to seek firefighters to support what will be a busy fire season.
- Announced appointment of new [Forest Service Chief Tom Schultz](#).

Commissioner Comments and Questions

- Commissioner Liberty: Asked about statistics on layoffs and what impact those may have on partnering to administer the scenic area.
 - Granum: Stated that impacts are still being determined; they are working as a region to determine where there are gaps that may impact abilities to serve. Stated he will forward the request to spokespeople who can answer the question directly.
- Commissioner Thompson: Asked if USDA staff have been reinstated and what GS level or position they are being reinstated into.
 - Granum: Stated that the question must be routed to the USDA for details.
- Commissioner Liberty: Noted this is a serious issue. Asked the Executive Director and staff to converse with USFS to understand how partnership efforts will progress.
 - Granum: Appreciates the partnership and noted the intention is to continue to serve.
 - Wolniakowski: Explained that staff have had a staff-to-staff meeting to discuss moving forward.

Rules Committee Report (9:17 a.m.) Jeff Litwak, counsel, provided an update on the Rules Committee (Attachment B):

- Noted the Committee met two weeks ago to define its scope. If the Commission feels the scope is appropriate, a motion and voice vote to approve would be appropriate.
- The committee will meet on Friday, March 14, 2025, and plans to review Division 14 regarding conflicts of interest and ex-parte communications. Based on how that conversation goes, the Committee may adjust how the rules are reviewed.

Commissioner Comments and Questions

- Commissioner Liberty: Thanked Litwak for his work on this “deferred maintenance” and was prepared to make a motion but paused to await any discussion before doing so.
- Commissioner Albrich: Prepared to second a motion if one is made.
- The motion passed by voice vote with no abstentions.

Guest Presentation* (9:22 a.m.): Lindsay Cornelius, East Cascades Oak Partnership (ECOP) Manager, presented an overview of the importance of oak habitats and highlighted restoration and monitoring efforts in the Gorge. Lisa Naas Cook provided a brief staff introduction on how oak habitat is a priority in the Commission’s work and teed up future discussion of a staff assessment of oak planning needs and issues to be scheduled for later this spring. (Attachments C, D, and E)

Commissioner Comments and Questions

- Chair Mills: Asked if the presentation was available online and could be shared with others.
 - Naas Cook: Generally speaking, staff intend to have presentations of interest posted on the website. The video was clipped to make this available, and with Cornelius’ permission, staff can also make a PDF available.
- Commissioner Thompson: Praised the presentation and asked if it was available to planning departments, real estate agents, or similar parties to keep citizens educated about oak. Asked how people access citizen science kits and if they have considered working with libraries to make them available.
 - Cornelius: Noted they try to make information and monitoring kits available as much as possible. As far as sharing information, they respond to inquiries for data or perspectives. Cornelius noted that as they work with many different groups with differing mandates, ECOP does not advocate specific policy outcomes.

- Naas Cook: Explained that staff have shared brochures and information from ECOP during inter-agency meetings with planning departments.
- Commissioner Fowler: Suggested embedding the link on the new VSI page that is being developed.
- Commissioner Weissfeld: Echoed Commissioner Fowler’s suggestion and suggested Lyle Cherry Orchard Trail could benefit from this information; suggested requesting budget to have a QR code at the trailhead.
 - Cornelius: Noted Friends installed an interactive display and does have some information on oaks and agreed that it would be interesting to consider locations to have oak information.
- Commissioner Reynolds: Noted there is oak habitat in Clark and Skamania Counties that he did not see in the maps. Noted hundreds of acres have been conserved in Washougal Oaks Preserve and in the Steigerwald National Wildlife Refuge. Stated oak is not limited to the east side of the Gorge.
 - Cornelius: Agreed and noted the Gorge is the conduit connecting westside and eastside oak systems. Stated that many oaks on south-facing slopes are facing conifer encroachment due to increased moisture and absence of fire. Suggested Commissioners consider how to support landowners trying to release oak from conifer encroachment and noted public perception can prioritize preserving large conifers over species like oak that are not commercially valuable.
 - Naas Cook: Noted that ECOP’s map did not include the far western portion of the National Scenic Area, given the geographic scope of the partnership. Mentioned that staff are looking at Critical Areas Ordinance for Clark County which has a lot of language around White Oak.
- Commissioner Liberty: Expressed interest in the relationship between White Oaks on both sides of the Cascades. Suggested discussing with staff how the mapping of risk of habitat fragmentation and loss due to residential development was produced. Stated the ECOP strategic plan did not address land regulation or management plans and asked if that was too politically controversial.
 - Cornelius: Reiterated ECOP’s position of not advocating for regulatory mechanisms or outcomes. ECOP’s mechanism of change is a credible third-party source of information that planners can use to create policy.
- Commissioner Liberty: Suggested maps can be used to show the effects of interventions.

Public comment (10:18 a.m.)

- Mary Repar:
 - Expressed interest in cultural fire; as part of the South Gifford Pinchot Collaborative, called the Toppenish Cultural Center and was told it is no longer practiced due to regulations.
 - Expressed concern whether cultural fire works like we think or know. Asked how fires would be implemented. Noted she is not a fan of prescribed fires and that when the USFS burns, inversions create health issues.
 - Stated zoning must prevent putting houses in areas where oaks will be cut down. Suggested having talks in Stevenson about this regional issue. Stated many oaks were cut down in the Chinidere area to build housing.
 - Suggested sharing the information with schools and environmental groups.
 - Asked about research on green corridors and what policies for putting in green corridors would involve.
 - Cornelius:
 - Explained that cultural fire is practiced by indigenous people and cannot be emulated by non-tribal people. Prescribed burning (controlled fire) is a different practice. Agreed that assessing accomplishment of management goals with fire is a difficult question.
 - Stated tools are available to respond to smoke concerns, including planning and outreach to protect local communities. For example, Columbia Land Trust has helped people with medical needs to find alternative lodging during prescribed burns.
 - Explained that fire can be a tool for ecological health. Noted that mechanical thinning alone is not as effective at reducing wildfire risk compared to thinning and burning. Physiological processes in some plants are triggered by fire.

BREAK – 10:25 -10:40 a.m.

Information Item: Vital Sign Indicators Overview – Sage Ebel, VSI Planner, presented a historical overview of the development of the Vital Signs and Indicators, detailing their evolution and the key considerations that guided their selection. The discussion provided essential context in preparation for the upcoming first annual report. (Attachments F and G)

Commissioner Comments and Questions

- Chair Mills commended Ebel and staff for the work.
- Commissioner Albrich: Asked where the triggers and thresholds are in development and specifically asked about triggers related to the economic health element.
 - Ebel: Explained that these have been back of mind since the beginning of the program; the intention is to be able to act, but it is complicated, and she cannot personally speak to economic health thresholds/triggers. In general, staff plan to consult partners and experts for what thresholds and triggers might be to integrate them eventually.
 - Naas Cook: Explained that staff initially included this as they know it is an important part of a monitoring program but have not done the work to identify those triggers and thresholds yet, as the first goal is to begin gathering data. Noted that some indicators might have clear scientific limits (such as lethal water temperature for fish), while other thresholds may depend on understanding the data first and discussing management objectives with technical experts.
 - Wolniakowski: Stated that economic vitality is important, and staff hope to work with partners to explore economic thresholds that connect with our Management Plan goals.
- Commissioner Johnson: Stated the importance of economic vitality in the National Scenic Area and expressed hope for additional monitoring going forward, including tourism, agricultural production, and fisheries. Asked about partnerships and how CRGC has been received by partners as a data aggregator.
 - Ebel: Explained that many partners are excited to have their data used for something. Noted that some partners are uncomfortable sharing some datasets publicly or can only present summarized data for confidentiality reasons.
 - Naas Cook: Explained that staff are interested in working with partners like Mid-Columbia Economic Development District (MCEDD) to present additional economic data to the Commission. Cited the USFS air quality lichen data as an example of a thirty-year dataset that will now be shared by a regional body and excitement around sharing that data.
- Commissioner Johnson:
 - Noted getting a data-sharing platform live will help demonstrate value to partners and communities.

- Raised flag that some datasets in Africa have disappeared due to lack of federal funding and suggested staff consider availability gaps for data paid for by federal funds.
 - Ebel: Noted that staff have not checked on the long term availability to data sources in light of the current situation yet but that many data sets are currently from federal sources.
- Naas Cook: Noted that some previously available federal environmental justice data has been removed, and some groups have backed up this data.
- Commissioner Fowler:
 - Expressed that she is heartened by the emphasis on economic vitality and the focus on the economic mandate of the Act. Suggested developing monitoring of economic activity that is not currently captured with a focus on inclusivity.
- Commissioner Thompson:
 - Highlighted that staff and Commission are using SMART goals that can be done functionally. Noted that many research institutions have no idea what will happen with federal funding.
- Commissioner Liberty:
 - Stated that most economic activity occurs in urban areas where CRGC does not have jurisdiction and noted that there can be a reaction when asking about those areas.
 - Noted economic activity measures should consider distributional effects and focus on quality, not just quantity.
- Commissioner Thompson:
 - Noted that agriculture is a huge piece of economic vitality in the region, and the Gorge is the third-largest producer of cherries and the second-largest producer of pears in the country. Stated it relates to equity as many migrant farmworkers in the Gorge are predominantly Latino.
 - Naas Cook: Noted agriculture was considered for an economic indicator and decided to first focus on acquiring spatial data to understand distribution and type of agriculture across the National Scenic Area. The next phase would be to look at condition indicators that measure economic benefits of agriculture.
- Commissioner Fowler:
 - Expressed appreciation for the distinction between economic growth and development. Stated that growth is not constrained by urban area boundaries. Noted that the Columbia Gorge Wine

Association has statistics on the \$100 million dollar business in American Viticultural Area (AVA) in the Gorge and that most are small farmers and not heritage businesses. Agreed that conversations will be complex, and many would like to be involved.

Other Business (11:34 a.m.)

- **Communications Committee** – Commissioner Weissfeld reported:
 - Sage Ebel created a work plan for website copy update.
 - The committee has used Google Analytics to identify the most visited pages on the website, discuss the grade level desired for communication, and discuss fire and other topics of interest to communicate.
 - During the meeting at 2:00 p.m. today, the committee will discuss what landowners may need to know in the Gorge.

Commissioner Comments and Questions

- Chair Mills:
 - Asked Wolniakowski about the Plain Language webinar by The Next Door.
 - Wolniakowski: Confirmed that staff will attend the Plain Language webinar and use those learnings in communications going forward.
 - Noted that Commissioner Miller welcomed a new baby on March 3, 2025, and that Commissioners and staff send their congratulations.
 - Asked about possibly approving the April Commission Meeting Agenda by email rather than live in the Executive Committee meeting on March 25, 2025.
 - Litwak: Asked if the intention was to meet by email or approve the agenda by email.
 - Chair Mills: Responded that the intention was to approve the agenda by email.
 - Commissioner Weissfeld: No objections, but voiced preference for meeting in person when possible.

- Executive Committee members agreed to approve the April Commission Meeting Agenda via email rather than meeting in person on March 25, 2025.

Executive Session: (11:40 a.m. – 12:10 p.m.) The Commission entered executive session pursuant to Commission Rule 350-11-006(1)(g) to consult with counsel concerning the legal rights and duties of the Commission with regard to current litigation or litigation likely to be filed.

Before entering executive session, the Commission announced that it would return to open session at 12:10 p.m. Attendees interested in the agenda item to release comments from the attorneys general on draft rule changes may log back into the Commission meeting at that time. The Gorge Commission announced that it would not take action on the agenda item before the time that was announced.

Return to Open Session (12:10 p.m.) The Commission returned to open session and announced that no decisions were made during executive session.

Action Item* (12:11 p.m.) The Commission did not vote on whether to release comments from the attorneys general on draft rule changes and instead proposed an additional executive session during the April Commission meeting to continue the discussion.

- Commissioner Albrich: Expressed that the conversation was not complete before returning to open session. Stated she would make a motion to release the documents per the request. Noted that as a member of the Rules Committee, she believed it would make the process easier if the Commission waived privilege to release the documents.
- Commissioner Weissfeld: Stated she had not yet heard whether a second motion could be made when the first is awaiting a second.
 - Litwak: Agreed that it had not been discussed and suggested Commissioner Weissfeld proceed as desired. Suggested a vote could be taken on the first motion
- Weissfeld: Suggested the discussion felt cut short and requested an additional executive session to continue the discussion.
- Commissioner Albrich: Withdrew her motion.
- Chair Mills: Expressed that he hoped to move forward today and proposed that the discussion continue outside of executive session.
 - Litwak: Noted the Rules Committee is meeting on Friday, March 14, 2025. Suggested seeing how that process goes before making a decision.
- Weissfeld: Asked for confirmation that the plan would be to put an executive session on the agenda for the next month and whether a motion is needed.
 - Litwak: Confirmed no motion is needed.
- Albrich: Expressed support for a continued executive session.

- Commissioner Fowler: Suggested continuing the conversation in the next meeting would be respectful rather than voting today.
- Commissioner Liberty: Noted this can be considered on the content of the material or on the overall approach and relationship to legal counsel and any precedent set. Expressed that he does not believe the content of the material should be considered.
- Acker: Noted that a member of the public asked via email why the Rules Committee meeting notice for Friday had not been sent.
 - Litwak:
 - Explained that he was waiting to send the notice based on the outcome of today's discussion.
 - Stated that no public comment was needed on this agenda item as no action had been taken.
- Commissioner Albrich: Asked if the plan was to continue the discussion in executive session at the April Commission meeting.
 - Chair Mills: Confirmed, unless a different recommendation arises from the Rules Committee meeting.

Adjourn – (12:20 p.m.)

Meeting Attachments:

- Attachment A – Resume – Alex H. Johnson
- Attachment B – Staff Report – Rules Committee
- Attachment C – Staff Report – Introduction to East Cascades Oak Partnership Presentation
- Attachment D – Staff Presentation – Oak Planning Background for ECOP Presentation
- Attachment E – Guest Presentation – East Cascades Oak Partnership
- Attachment F – Staff Report – Vital Sign Indicators Overview
- Attachment G – Staff Presentation – Vital Sign Indicators Program Overview

Approved – April 8, 2025