

Columbia River Gorge Commission

Meeting Minutes
May 13, 2025
via Zoom Webinar

COMMISSION MEMBERS PRESENT

Laura Brennan Bissell
Valerie Fowler
Alex H. Johnson
Donna Mickley
Robert Liberty
Lach Litwer
Jerry Meninick
Carina Miller
Michael Mills
Nathan Reynolds
Amy Weissfeld

COMMISSIONER MEMBERS ABSENT

Elaine Albrich
Pah-tu Pitt

STAFF PRESENT

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

AUDIENCE PRESENT

Angie Brewer – Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development
Lynn Burditt – USDA Forest Service
Kaylee Crosby
Scott Edelman – Klickitat County
Melissa Fahrni – Skamania County
Karen Heinemann
Dr. Kelly Howsley-Glover – Wasco County

Madison Kenney – Friends of the Columbia Gorge
Ilene Le Vee
Terra Lingley – Oregon Department of Transportation
Steve McCoy – Friends of the Columbia Gorge
Rodger Nichols
Aparna Rajagopal-Durbin – The Avarna Group
Nina Sackett Kronberg
Tyler Stone
Renee Tkach – Friends of the Columbia Gorge
Cianna Carrillo Walker-Flom – The Avarna Group
Troy Watlamet – Yakama Nation

Others were present during the meeting.

Call to Order and Roll (8:31 a.m.) Chair Michael Mills called the meeting to order, and Connie Acker called roll.

Approval of April 2, 2025, and April 8, 2025, Commission Meeting Minutes (8:33 a.m.) Commissioner Carina Miller moved to adopt the April 2, 2025, and April 8, 2025, meeting minutes, and Commissioner Valerie Fowler seconded. The April 2, 2025, and April 8, 2025, Commission Meeting Minutes were approved by a voice vote. Commissioner Miller abstained as she was absent from the meetings on April 2, 2025, and April 8, 2025.

Land Acknowledgment (8:34 a.m.) Kelly Foster read the Land Acknowledgment.

Treaty Tribe Word of the Day (8:36 a.m.) Commissioner Jerry Meninick shared that after the land acknowledgment reading, sharing a word that is appropriate in what that land acknowledgment describes is essential. Meninick shared that those of us with a history along the Columbia River, and fortunately, all the tribes have that history, one thing that has maintained our existence is associating body, mind, and spirit with the river and what it provides. Pena-shook'd is the shared Treaty Tribe Word of the Day, recognizing that we are part of the land, river, and resources, and not the other way around, where it belongs to us.

Opportunity for Treaty Tribe Nations to Address Commission (8:38 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.

Public comment on items related to the National Scenic Area (NSA) not on the agenda (8:39 a.m.)

- Ilene Le Vee: Wished everyone for whom it applies a happy Mother's Day.

Welcome, New Oregon Governor Appointed Commissioner, Lach Litwer (8:40 a.m.) Chair Mills asked Lach Litwer to introduce himself to the Commission.

- Commissioner Litwer shared that he lives in Hood River and expressed gratitude for living in the Scenic Area and enjoying its benefits.
(Attachment A)

Commissioner Brennan Bissel requested that, in addition to commissioners, members of the USFS and agency staff communicate respectfully.

The Avarna Group Commissioner Workshop (8:43 a.m.) The Avarna Group facilitated a discussion with Commissioners on how to incorporate equity values, such as concepts of justice, belonging, fairness, access, and more, as they relate to conservation, and to build a shared approach to reframing the Commission's DEI Strategic Plan.

Public comment on items related to the National Scenic Area (NSA) not on the agenda was reopened for a participant who missed the original comment opportunity (10:55 a.m.)

- Nina Sackett Kronberg:
 - Commented on the intersection between the economic vitality of the scenic area and the support for working families within it.
 - Stated she runs a farm business in Multnomah County.
 - Expressed concern about the lack of preschools in the Gorge, especially east of the Sandy River, and frustration that she cannot open a childcare center on her property.
 - Urged the Commission to support childcare businesses in support of economic vitality.
- Commissioner Brennan Bissell:
 - Suggested Sackett Kronberg contact her, as she has also faced challenges in finding schooling and has contacts who have experienced similar challenges in Multnomah County.
 - Also suggested reaching out to Robert Liberty as the Multnomah County appointee.

Break – 11:01 – 11:15 A.M.

Executive Director's Report (11:16 a.m.) Krystyna U. Wolniakowski, Executive Director, and staff provided brief updates:

- **Summer Interns** – Sage Ebel, Vital Sign Indicators (VSI) & Natural Resources Planner, reported:
 - Commission staff are hosting two undergraduate research interns for ten weeks through Heritage University in Toppenish, Washington, to work on VSI.

- **Climate Stewards** – Colin Jarvis, Climate Corps Fellow, reported:
 - Reminded the Commission of the 2023 pilot Climate Stewards program in partnership with the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources (UC ANR) and Oregon State University (OSU) Extension Services.
 - Building upon the previous work, Commission staff have partnered with OSU Extension Service to:
 - Focus on building community resilience to climate change through adaptation and mitigation throughout the community.
 - Engage with local experts on communication, interpretation, and engagement in trauma-informed ways, and how to inspire and empower in the community.
 - The Climate Stewards took a field trip with Elaine Harvey from the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (CRITFC) and Bill Sharp from Yakama Nation Fisheries. Two additional field trips are scheduled: one will tour water facilities and irrigation districts, while the other will include a visit to learn about farmworker housing and a local cherry and pear orchard to examine integrated pest management practices. The final field trip will focus on learning about fire-adapted communities.

- **Partnership with Nch’i Wana Housing** – Lisa Naas Cook, Climate Program Manager, reported:
 - The Gorge Commission was one of many partners involved in a grant application submitted by the Yakama Nation for an Environmental Protection Agency Environmental Justice Government-to-Government Grant. Late in 2024, the grant was awarded, but early in 2025, the federal funding was frozen.
 - The grant included cold water refuge work, first foods outreach, and knowledge sharing. Although the grant did not progress due to a funding freeze, conversations continued with the individuals who had developed the grant.
 - With a small amount of remaining climate funds, the Gorge Commission was able to fund one project originally included in the grant. The award will fund a Nch’i Wana first foods project focused on Camas gathering and preparation education by elders.

- **Vital Sign Indicators** – Sage Ebel reported:

- Work continues on getting all the data and language into the data portal, which will be presented to the Commission at the July meeting.
- **July Commission Meeting** – Connie Acker, Finance and Administration Manager, reported:
 - July’s meeting will be held in Cascade Locks at The Gorge Pavilion; lodging has been arranged for Commissioners traveling from long distances.
- **Legislative Outreach and Budget Reduction** – Krystyna Wolniakowski, Executive Director, reported:
 - The full Oregon Ways & Means Committee confirmed the budget matching Washington’s budget, which is \$1,561,000.
 - Looking forward to the discussion on the draft work plan that will be presented at the June Commission meeting regarding the impact of the budget reduction on staff work plans and capacity.
 - Planning on submitting budget requests during the upcoming supplemental budget sessions to attempt to restore some of the reduced funding.
 - The Access Database Replacement Project Phase 3 funding was cut from the budget. The requested funding included migration of information into the database, funds to go live with Klickitat County online applications, and licenses to operate the Enterprise Permitting and Licensing (EP&L) system. All this work is on hold until additional funding becomes available.
 - The Klickitat County funding was also eliminated. Staff are working to find funding to support this work.

Commissioner Comments and Questions

- Commissioner Liberty:
 - Asked what other agencies received a 25% cut.
 - Wolniakowski: Not aware specifically of other agencies with the same cut. Some agencies were eliminated, and others faced significant reductions.
 - Liberty: Asked about average reduction.
 - Wolniakowski: Unsure.
 - Liberty: Asked if Oregon Legislators offered to reach out to their counterparts in Washington.
 - Wolniakowski: Confirmed that Co-Chair Levy from the Oregon Committee on Natural Resources intends to write a letter to the Washington legislature, essentially reprimanding them for the reduction and asking for more cooperation and coordination in the future.
 - Liberty: Asked if Governor Kotek spoke with Governor Ferguson.

- Wolniakowski: Unsure if the Governors spoke directly; knows that their offices were discussing the budget extensively.
- Chair Mills:
 - Thanked staff for their work and acknowledged the difficult times ahead in figuring out the workload with the reduced budget.
- Wolniakowski:
 - Solicited Commissioner input on potential topics for upcoming meetings beyond the work plan update.
 - Shared that she is hoping to have updates on fish tissue sampling and Bradford Island at the July in-person Commission meeting, as requested by the Commission.
- Chair Mills: Requested a brief report on the Oregon Investment Board (OIB) and Washington Investment Board (WIB) accomplishments on economic development through the revolving loan fund program.
 - Wolniakowski: Noted that the Mid-Columbia Economic Development District (MCEDD) traditionally gives an update on economic development once a year that covers that topic, but agreed additional discussion would be useful.
- Commissioner Johnson: Mentioned that, considering staff capacity reductions, lighter Commission meeting schedules or fewer meetings could be appropriate; noted that although it is crucial to keep the Commission informed, preparing and debriefing meetings must have a decent impact on staff time, taking away time from perhaps more critical work.
 - Wolniakowski: Noted that the August meeting has been cancelled due to the volume of family vacations in that month. Noted that there is no mandate for monthly meetings, but that past suggestions for reduced meetings have met with concern about keeping the Commission and the public informed about the Commission's work.
- Commissioner Weissfeld:
 - Noted personally that monthly meetings are essential. Suggested monthly committee meetings could be an opportunity to reduce staff workload.
 - Asked for an update on the next Management Plan review. Suggested devoting time during an upcoming meeting to discuss that timeline. Added that, along those lines, what are the things that the Commission can do to apply some of the recent work on values as a lens for moving forward during the Management Plan review process?

- Stated it would also be helpful to review the roles and responsibilities of the Commissioners and the Executive Director.
- Commissioner Fowler: Stated that, as transparency is a value, believes discussion of roles and responsibilities for Commissioners and key staff would be useful.

USDA Forest Service Report (11:44 a.m.) Donna Mickley, Forest Supervisor for the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, provided updates on Forest Service activities in the National Scenic Area:

- Shared an introduction page for the new Chief of the Forest Service, Tom Schultz - <https://www.fs.usda.gov/inside-fs/leadership/meet-tom-schultz-21st-chief-forest-service>
 - Shared Schultz’s message that the Forest Service will look different by the end of the fiscal year (September 30th) and spoke about the difference between change and transformation.
 - Fundamentally focusing on health and productivity of forests, active forest management, energy, minerals, and geology.
 - Also focusing on providing customer service to visitors while maintaining safe, reliable access to national forests.
- The outdoor recreation economy continues to boom; the National Scenic Area had roughly three million visitors last year. Mickley anticipates that number to remain steady despite workforce sizing.
- Noted that 25% of the non-fire organization opted into the deferred resignation program; lost about 1,000 fire-qualified employees.
- Heartening to know that the Chief is committed to safety, including wildfire suppression efforts.
- Recap of Oregon’s 2024 fire season: Regardless of jurisdiction, it was a record-breaking year with 1,956 fires burning more than 1.9 million acres.
- The 2025 forecast is for an increasingly dry spring with above-normal fire danger in Washington from Cascade Crest eastward; by June and July, all of the Pacific Northwest will have an elevated risk level above normal.
- Regarding the commitment to discuss the prescribed burn program with community members, Mickley shared that the lessons learned report from the Catherine Creek prescribed burn should be available soon. She stated that she is still waiting to receive the report and will need time to review it before its release.
- Pursuant to a recent request, Forest Service staff are working on creating a map displaying where prescribed fire burns are located.

Committee Reports (11:49 a.m.) The Communications and Rules Committees provided updates to the Commission.

- **Communications Committee** – Commissioner Weissfeld, Committee Chair, reported:
 - The next meeting is scheduled for May 28, 2025.
 - The committee provided feedback on press releases that were required relating to the Washington budget defund issue.
 - The committee discussed how to communicate effectively and efficiently with the press.
 - Discussed the Commission’s brand and how the Commission presents itself, including being confused with other organizations in the Gorge.
 - Discussed moving forward with a strategic communications plan.
 - Working on website language updates and edits. Commissioner Weissfeld invited Sage Ebel to provide an update.
 - Ebel:
 - Staff shared draft language for the five most visited website pages with the committee and received verbal feedback during the meeting, and in-line feedback that is being integrated now.
 - Invited Commissioners and staff to review their website bios for potential updates.

- Chair Mills: Thanked the committee for their work and emphasized the importance of communication.

- Weissfeld: Added that next steps will include reviewing appropriate channels for communication with the public, partners, and stakeholders, including social media, and the associated legal questions and potential burden.

- **Rules Committee** – Jeff Litwak reported:
 - Sent a note to the Rules Committee asking to wait until midsummer to meet again, at the end of the Washington Legislative Session and approaching Oregon’s session end, so that he will have time to review updated state laws.
 - Noted that Washington updated Conflict of Interest rules, so he will need to review drafts for any necessary updates.

- **Economic Vitality Committee** – Wolniakowski reported:
 - Commissioners Litwer, Fowler, Brennan Bissell, Albrich, and Liberty expressed interest in the Economic Vitality Committee. Commissioner Johnson also volunteered.
 - Thanked committee volunteers and noted the importance of defining committee plans.
 - Reminded the Executive and Communications Committee members of the upcoming meetings on Wednesday, May 28, 2025.

Executive Session (12:00 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. Prior to entering executive session, the Gorge Commission announced that it would return to open session at 12:15 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 it announced.

Return to Open Session (12:14 p.m.) The Commission returned to open session, but waited one minute until 12:15 p.m. to take action. It was announced that no decisions were made during executive session.

Action Item* (12:15 p.m.) The Gorge Commission took no action and no motions were proposed.

Adjourn – 12:15 p.m.

Meeting Attachments:

- Attachment A – Lach Litwer Resume

Approved – June 10, 2025