

## **Columbia River Gorge Commission**

Meeting Minutes  
June 10, 2025  
via Zoom Webinar

### ***COMMISSION MEMBERS PRESENT***

Laura Brennan Bissell ~ 8:38 a.m.  
Valerie Fowler  
Alex H. Johnson ~ 8:35 a.m.  
Robert Liberty  
Lach Litwer  
Donna Mickley  
Jerry Meninick  
Michael Mills  
Rodger Nichols  
Pah-tu Pitt  
Nathan Reynolds  
Amy Weissfeld ~ 8:33 a.m.

### ***COMMISSIONER MEMBERS ABSENT***

Carina Miller

### ***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 – OR Department of Land Conservation and Development  
Lynn Burditt – USDA Forest Service  
Aulena Carl – Yakama Nation  
Cianna Carrillo Walker-Flom – The Avarna Group  
Keith Cleveland – Hood River County  
Sheila Dooley  
Karen Heinemann

Dr. Kelly Howsley-Glover – Wasco County  
Larry Keister  
Madison Kenney – Friends of the Columbia Gorge  
Ilene Le Vee  
Terra Lingley – Oregon Department of Transportation  
Steve McCoy – Friends of the Columbia Gorge  
Aparna Rajagopal-Durbin – The Avarna Group  
Mary Repar  
Michael Sallis – Clark County  
Tyler Stone – Wasco County  
Troy Watlamet – Yakama Nation

Others were present during the meeting.

**Call to Order and Roll** (8:30 a.m.) Chair Michael Mills called the meeting to order, and Connie Acker called roll.

Chair Mills thanked former Commissioner Elaine Albrich and welcomed interim Commissioner Rodger Nichols from Wasco County. Several Commissioners expressed gratitude for Albrich’s contributions to the Commission.

**Approval of May 13, 2025, Commission Meeting Minutes** (8:39 a.m.) Commissioner Liberty moved to adopt the May 13, 2025, meeting minutes, and Commissioner Weissfeld seconded. The May 13, 2025, Commission Meeting Minutes were approved by a voice vote. Rodger Nichols abstained as he was not a Commissioner at the May 13, 2025, meeting. Pah-tu Pitt abstained as she was absent from the May 13, 2025, meeting.

**Land Acknowledgment** (8:41 a.m.) Chair Mills read the Land Acknowledgment.

**Treaty Tribe Word of the Day** (8:43 a.m.) Vice Chair Jerry Meninick shared his memory of testimonies in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, justifying managerial duties in relation to salmon in *United States v. Washington*. He noted that both coastal and interior tribes learned their identity with the ocean, atáchiish. He explained that elders testified to the pastorage of salmon in the ocean for most of their lifespan.

- Commissioner Brennan Bissel: Asked if there was a word for where the ocean meets the rivers.
  - Vice Chair Meninick: Stated that he would follow up.

**Opportunity for Treaty Tribe Nations to Address Commission** (8:46 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 (8:46 a.m.)**

- Mary Repar:
  - Thanked all for their service to the community.
  - Expressed distress about the decrease in funding.
  - Stated that she tried to find out why a Republican representative in the 36th district made the amendment and called the representative twice, but did not receive a response.
  - Expressed interest in the stress on economics and stated the economic portion of the Act is secondary to the first part of the Act that protects scenic, natural, cultural, and recreation resources.
  - Stated there were 44,000 people in the NSA when the Act was passed and noted there are many more now. She stated that if we take care of the environment, it will take care of us and expressed that pressures to develop will increase as the population increases. She quoted Dan Harkenrider, who said "Death by 1,000 cuts is still death" and urged the Commission to go back to basics, protect the environment, and let the economy take care of itself. She stated it's not the Gorge Commission's job, and many other organizations do that work.
    - Commissioner Nichols: Shared that only members of the Budget Committee can make budget amendments in Washington and that the Representative who made the amendment said he received the request from another member and couldn't remember who made the request.
    - Commissioner Brennan Bissel: Shared that she had also investigated and found that it was a bipartisan decision to make the amendment.
  
- Mark & Theresa Mugerditchian - Written public comment - (Attachment A)

## **The Avarna Group's Commissioner Workshop Part 2 (8:52 a.m.)**

Executive Director Wolniakowski: Shared an introduction and suggested using the July meeting to discuss findings from the summarized confidential interviews and workshop session.

- Commissioner Fowler: Urged using the July in-person meeting to discuss various issues among Commissioners and delay any and all presentations until the September meeting.
  - Wolniakowski: Confirmed that the goal will be Commission discussion on how to move forward with the Avarna Group's findings, and not a presentation.

The Avarna Group reviewed and reflected on Part 1 of the Avarna Workshop on May 13, 2025.

Part 2: Reckoning with histories of land use and reimagining it in service of land and people. This two-hour session focused on land use history and its intersections with equity, exploring how these histories intersect with histories of injustice and the ongoing impacts on some communities. Avarna facilitated a conversation amongst Commissioners on how this history influences current land management and land use approaches and discussed ideas of how the Commission can reimagine its work in a way that considers this history.

**BREAK** – 10:58 a.m. – 11:15 a.m.

**Executive Director’s Report** (11:15 a.m.) Krystyna U. Wolniakowski, Executive Director, and staff provided brief updates:

- **Recent Meetings and Planned Meetings** – Wolniakowski reported:
  - In Skamania County, Commissioner Brennan Bissel provides quarterly updates to the County Commissioners.
  - In Multnomah County, she and Robert Liberty meet on a quarterly basis with the County Planning Director and other county officials over coffee.
  - In Hood River County, she and Chair Mills provide updates approximately twice yearly, depending on topics of interest.
  - In Klickitat County, she attended a County Commission meeting last fall, and Commissioner Fowler is looking into another update.
  - In Clark County, she offered to provide an update at a convenient time and asked Commissioner Reynolds to help coordinate.
  - She is also looking for opportunities to visit Wasco County; the Gorge Commission heard from Chief Administrative Officer Tyler Stone that the County is interested in hearing more from the Commission and discussing issues. She hopes to establish a regular meeting.
  - There is an in-person County Planning Director’s meeting at the end of this month to hear about issues of interest for the next Management Plan update and to update them on the assessment of oak habitat health.
  
- Lisa Naas-Cook shared several upcoming community events:
  - East Cascades Oak Partnership (ECOP): The New website is now live. Visit <https://eastcascadesoakpartnership.org>.
  - Smoke Ready Gorge: Website highlights smoke preparedness information, including air quality monitoring for the Gorge. Visit <https://smokereadygorge.org>.

- Spanish Language Wildfire Preparedness Community Forum: June 18, 5-8 p.m. at Rockford Grange in Hood River. Family-friendly event with taco dinner provided. See attached flyer. (Attachment B)
  - Upper Hood River Valley Wildfire Preparedness Night: August 14, 5-8 p.m. at Solera Brewery in Parkdale. The flyer will be available soon.
- **Vital Sign Indicators (VSI) Web Portal** – Sage Ebel, VSI Planner, reported:
    - Introduced A Hunter, the Natural Resource Intern from Heritage University, who will be working with Ebel on VSI work.
    - A described his background and his plan of work for the summer.

### **Commissioner Comments and Questions**

- Commissioner Fowler: Asked if Commissioners could attend the Planning Director's meeting.
- Commissioner Litwer: Also expressed interest in attending.
- Commissioner Litwer asked about periodic updates to the state legislatures and the Governor's offices. He offered his assistance in outreach efforts.
  - Wolniakowski: Explained that in Oregon, she attends Natural Resources Cabinet meetings every two weeks, where every other meeting is in person. She attends those meetings to develop relationships with the Governor's office and other Natural Resource agency directors. She noted there is no similar cabinet in Washington, but that she had regular contact John Sneider, Natural Resources Director, in Governor Inslee's office during the prior administration. She noted the Commission also has frequent contact with Owen Rowe, who is the Natural Resources Director for Governor Ferguson. She explained that the Communications Committee will be working on identifying goals and strategies for legislative outreach.

**USDA Forest Service Report** (11:37 a.m.) Donna Mickley, Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Forest Supervisor, and Nicolas Granum, Deputy Forest Supervisor, provided updates on Forest Service activities in the National Scenic Area:

- The Forest Service is focused on fire preparedness and fire response; they are anticipating a busy fire season.
- The Scenic Area has moved to 7-day staffing and responded to 18 fires so far, which is slightly above normal.

- Staffing levels are at roughly 2,000 firefighting staff for the Pacific Northwest, similar to last year. She noted that last year was a record-breaking fire season, and there were resource shortages for Complex Incident Management teams. Last year, there were 44 teams nationwide, and this year, there are 37; once the national teams are all occupied, management falls to local resources, so she expects to be busy in that role.
- They anticipate shifts and organizational restructuring, but no details are available yet about when that will roll out.
- There have been conversations about moving fire management to the Department of Interior, but those conversations will not happen until after fire season; the current focus is on being prepared and responding to this fire season.
- Shared that there is a meeting next Wednesday from 6-8 p.m., with the wine growing community about concerns about prescribed fire programs and smoke.
- Noted they are working hard to keep up with recreation needs in the Gorge despite not having temporary staff.

## **Commissioner Comments and Questions**

- Commissioner Fowler:
  - Expressed appreciation for the June 18<sup>th</sup> meeting.
  - Clarified that the agenda does not mention a question-and-answer session and expressed hope for a robust Q&A after the presentation, as happened in the earlier meeting with Nic Granum.
- Commissioner Liberty:
  - Thanked Commissioner Mickley for her service and stated the Forest Service is under assault.
  - Asked if Michael Boren has been confirmed as Chief. Stated Boren has an appalling history and asked if he faced Senate questioning about it.
    - Commissioner Mickley: Explained that Borne has not been confirmed and clarified that his position would be Deputy Undersecretary, not Chief; the Chief is Tom Schultz. She confirmed that the Deputy Undersecretary has responsibilities for the Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

**Developing a 2025-2027 CRGC Workplan:** Krystyna U. Wolniakowski provided a budget overview and identified options for Commission consideration given the two-year budget reduction and impact on staff capacity. The Oregon and Washington operating budgets are not yet finalized. Based on Commission discussion, a draft work plan will be presented at the

July 8, 2025, in-person meeting, when the operating budgets will be closer to being finalized.

## Developing the 2025-2027 CRGC Workplan

### ***Considerations:***

- Need to finalize operations costs and fixed fees from a budget of \$1,561,000 from each state (early July)
- Need to allocate \$20,000 from each state for Commissioners' funds
- Budget includes \$138,000 from each state for Climate Program Manager
- Remainder of budget will be allocated to support staff at reduced levels for mandatory program and administration responsibilities
- Will submit supplemental budget request in September 2025 to both states

### ***Current budget does not include:***

- Klickitat County Planning (currently seeking "bridge" funding)
- Implementing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (translations, outreach)
- Access Database Replacement Project Phase 3
- Public Records and Administrative Analyst position

## **Commissioner Comments and Questions**

- Commissioner Weissfeld: Asked to be reminded in the July meeting of the backstory of various projects and priorities, like the Access Database Replacement Project. She requested to be reminded of the budget for the last biennium and the amount of the supplemental budget.
- Commissioner Reynolds: Asked to be reminded of the DEI-funded contract to have ECONorthwest review the Management Plan for language and whether that work has been impacted by the funding change.
  - Wolniakowski: Noted that the work is contracted and staff have received a first draft report.
- Commissioner Weissfeld: Asked for clarification about operational costs and what has been funded by the 10M award for the National Scenic Area and OIB/WIB. Specifically, she requested clarification on how that funding differs from the Commission's budget provided by the two states.
  - Wolniakowski: Explained that the 10M funding does not pass through the Gorge Commission and is managed by the investment boards as a revolving loan fund. She asked if the investment boards should be invited to present on how that money was spent.
- Commissioner Weissfeld: Declined to invite the boards and explained that she is trying to clarify for the public the history of that funding to

correct any assumptions about that funding and its use by the Commission.

- Commissioner Nichols: Requested details from the Oregon Investment Board (OIB) and Washington Investment Board (WIB) on the amount of loan funding, where loans have been awarded, and their success rate. He suggested this should be easy to obtain and that the Communications Committee could share this information.
  - Commissioner Reynolds: Shared that the OIB website has detailed information about the revolving fund.
  - Sage Ebel: Shared that the Vital Sign Indicators data hub will have similar data about job impact and loan distribution, although not the balance of the loan fund.
  
- Commissioner Fowler: Noted that information pushed to her is more effective than information that she must find. She echoed the request for the information to be presented at the next meeting. Suggested that MCEDD information may cover a broader area and noted that the Communications Committee should focus on the NSA.
  
- Commissioner Nichols: Noted that MCEDD does have other portfolios and that totals on their site may not reflect how much was done by the OIB.
  - Commissioner Reynolds: Clarified that he is looking at the Columbia River Gorge Economic Development program with a projects map for the NSA.
  
- Wolniakowski:
  - Noted there was a request not to have additional presentations in the July meeting. Asked for clarification on whether to add a presentation by the investment boards or to delay presentations for a future meeting. She noted that presenters are lined up for several follow-up items previously requested, such as salmon tissue testing and Bradford Island. She asked if it should be discussed during the Executive Committee meeting or now.
  
- Chair Mills: Suggested postponing, and that a decision could be made at the Executive Committee meeting.
  
- Commissioner Fowler: Noted she made the request. She explained that when presentations are put first in the meeting, time for discussion may run out. Requested to see in-person meetings reserved for discussions among Commissioners.
  - Wolniakowski: Thanked Commissioner Fowler for the suggestion and noted she can ask speakers to attend a future meeting to address the requested topics.

**Committee Reports** (12:06 p.m.) The various committees provided updates to the Commission.

Chair Mills: Noted that the bylaws state the committee appointments require approval from the Commission and shared the current appointments for discussion. Connie Acker shared lists of the membership for the various committees.

- Commissioner Nichols: Expressed interest in joining the Rules and Communications Committees.
- Commissioner Litwer: Expressed interest in joining the Communications Committee.
- Commissioner Fowler: Expressed interest in filling the last Executive Committee spot.

Commissioner Liberty suggested a vote on the package appointment and motioned to approve all the committee appointments. Chair Mills seconded the motion. The Commission approved the appointments package by unanimous voice vote.

Executive Committee	Communications Committee	Economic Vitality Committee	Rules Committee
Jerry Meninick	Valerie Fowler	Laura Brennan Bissell	Laura Brennan Bissell
Donna Mickley	Alex Johnson	Alex Johnson	Valerie Fowler
Michael Mills	Amy Weissfeld	Robert Liberty	Robert Liberty
Nathan Reynolds	Rodger Nichols	Lach Litwer	Pah-tu Pitt
Amy Weissfeld	Lach Litwer	Michael Mills	Rodger Nichols
Valerie Fowler			

- **Communications Committee** – Commissioner Weissfeld reported:
  - The Committee meets monthly from 9:00 to 10:00 a.m.
  - They are working on finalizing website copy.
  - They decided that the review and editing of the website should be managed by the Committee or presented to the full Commission.
  - They discussed launching the data hub and website at the July meeting, but due to staff capacity, this is not possible.
  - The data hub will be previewed by the Commission.
  - They discussed social media use and public records requirements.

- They discussed avenues to develop stronger legislative relationships in light of the disbanding of the One Gorge group, which had previously facilitated legislative outreach.
- They discussed updates to the scenic handbook related to defensible space.
- **Rules Committee** – Jeff Litwak reported:
  - Washington has updated its conflict-of-interest law and is awaiting the completion of the Oregon Legislative session to make further updates.

## **Commissioner Comments and Questions**

- Chair Mills: Asked if there is a prohibition against guest speakers at meetings.
  - Litwak confirmed there is not.
- Connie Acker: Clarified that the meetings are on the last Tuesday of the month:
  - Executive Committee is from 8:30 a.m. to 9:00 a.m.
  - Communications Committee is from 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.
  - Economic Vitality Committee will be from 11:00 a.m. to noon.

## **Other Business** (12:20 p.m.)

- Commissioner Meninick:
  - Expressed appreciation for the discussion in the workshop. Stated that elders continue to ask him what advancements have been made regarding protecting sacred and legendary sites like pictographs and graves.
  - Explained that those sites are now recognized and that he and Michael Boynton, when working for the Forest Service, saw cases where grave robbers were prosecuted.
  - Reported that he is also asked if there is a way the Gorge Commission can look at its records from the time it began and evaluate whether the intent of the Commission and its management have been successful: has the Gorge been enhanced, or has further damage occurred?
  - Stated that the protection of sacred sites is a completely different level of understanding that he doesn't think the public is fully aware of.
- Chair Mills: Thanked Vice Chair Meninick for his comments and wisdom. He invited Wolniakowski and staff to explain how the VSI (Vital Sign Indicators) program addresses his question and suggested outreach to the tribes to share progress.

- Wolniakowski: Confirmed the VSI program is intended to monitor whether resources are protected and expressed interest in doing outreach to the tribes to share.
  - Ebel: Stated it is a goal of the VSI program to answer some questions, but expressed understanding that science is not the only way to measure success and that staff are eager to hear ideas and feedback about how to expand on the data sets used or measure outcomes in other ways.
  - Commissioner Liberty: Asked for a map of all development in the scenic area. Noted that the Oregon Symphony has been performing a piece called Celilo Falls about the past, present, and future of that place.
  - Commissioner Fowler: Thanked Vice Chair Meninick for sharing. Stated that she would like to see any approach to engagement be listening, learning, and engagement, rather than making presentations to the tribes.
- Wolniakowski: Shared that this is Joanna Kaiserman’s last meeting before going on family leave for several months to welcome her second child.
  - Commissioner Fowler: Announced she has been re-appointed by Klickitat County for another four-year term and expressed that she looks forward to continuing to work with the Commission.

**Adjourn** – 12:33 p.m.

**Meeting Attachments:**

- Attachment A – Public Comment - Mark & Theresa Mugerditchian
- Attachment B – Foro Comunitario Flyer

**Approved** – July 8, 2025