

Economic Vitality Committee

Meeting Summary

August 26, 2025

Commissioners Present:

Lach Litwer, Chair
Laura Brennan Bissell, Vice Chair
Robert Liberty

Staff Present:

Krystyna Wolniakowski
Connie Acker
Sage Ebel
Lisa Naas Cook

Review of the Agenda

The Economic Vitality Committee will decide on a work plan after:

- Determining the support for consulting an agricultural economist to explore the Agricultural Income Test policy;
- Determining the support for examining the definition of the “agricultural use” for the purpose of obtaining a profit;
- Identifying options for policies and guidelines to expand economic opportunities for agricultural landowners that also protect the scenic, cultural, recreation, and natural resources;
- Identifying actions that the Gorge Commission can take to protect and support the economy of the Columbia River Gorge area by encouraging growth to occur in existing urban areas and by allowing future economic development in a manner that is consistent with resource protection.

Krystyna provided an overview of the agenda, stating that the four topics are a carryover from the first meeting on July 29, 2025. The purpose of this meeting was to review the topics and determine which ones were a priority for the committee, and to sequence the topics to determine which ones the committee would address first. As a reminder, the topics are either related to policies in the Management Plan or are topics the committee believes are important to address to support economic vitality and the second purpose of the National Scenic Area Act. Commissioner Liberty offered ideas to the committee for consideration: evaluate workforce training to determine how to increase incomes through programs at the local community colleges, hear more about the (OIB/WIB) loan programs and their performance, and find ways to enhance income on agricultural lands through targeted loan programs outside of urban areas.

- ✓ **Follow-up Action:** Krystyna will ask MCEEDD to provide additional information on the accomplishments of the loan programs and how to support more in rural areas.
- ✓ **Follow-up Action:** Krystyna will work with Commissioner Liberty to determine how to help with workforce training to increase incomes in rural areas.

Economic Development Chapter of the Management Plan

Krystyna reminded the committee to review this chapter and identify any gaps or areas that should be focused on revising during the next Management Plan review, which may begin as early as 2027.

Agriculture Income Test for Large-Scale Agriculture Land Use Designation

Krystyna described the history of the “Agriculture Income Test” by sharing that a CRGC staff member presented to the Commission in 2023 to describe how it was part of the 1991 Management Plan and was adjusted for inflation during the Gorge 2020 Management Plan revision process. Copies are available upon request.

Just as a reminder, the agriculture income test only applies to “large-scale agriculture” land use designations. The reason the Commission adopted this policy in 1991 was to ensure that large tracts of agricultural properties are preserved for farming and ranching. If a landowner wants to build a home on this type of land, they need to show that there is active farming on the land and it will continue. This income test was to prevent people from buying up land, building a home, and then retiring that land from farming use.

The current \$95,000 income level in 2025 dollars that is required is ***gross income*** per year, not net income, for anyone who wants to build a home on their land. Commissioner Brennan Bissel commented that people who are farmers cannot make that amount of money off their land and that it is preposterous. Chair Litwer stated that this is a tool to be used to help the Commission (and counties) to make decisions, but questioned whether it was configured correctly.

Krystyna explained that the Gorge Commission used the **Consumer Price Index** inflation calculator (online) when it compared the \$40,000 in 1991 dollars to the equivalent in 2020 dollars, which is where the \$80,000 originated from in the current Management Plan. The Commission then asked staff to adjust it every year based on the inflation calculator. Krystyna mentioned that it may not be the correct inflation calculator to use for agriculture, and can explore other options.

- ✓ ***Follow-up Action:*** Krystyna will follow up with farmers who worked on this policy when it was passed, as well as current farmers, and will consult with agricultural economists to evaluate if this is warranted given the diversity of agricultural uses throughout the NSA. The Commission will decide if any changes to this policy are warranted during the next Management Plan review.

Definition of “Agricultural Use”

Commissioner Liberty asked Krystyna to find the section of the Management Plan that defines profitability on agricultural land. In the Management Plan glossary, the definition of “agricultural use” states:

*Agricultural use: The current employment of land for the **primary purpose of obtaining a profit in money** by raising, harvesting, and selling crops; or by the feeding, breeding, management, and sale of, or production of, livestock, poultry, fur-bearing animals or honeybees; or for dairying and the sale of dairy products; or any other agricultural or horticultural use, including Christmas trees*

This definition is applied when someone wants to build a structure on their property that is designated for agricultural use. Commissioner Brennan Bissell asked about how this definition applies to agricultural lands that are decommissioned by the Forest Service after they purchase them. She asked for a map of agricultural lands when the NSA was created, and the current agricultural lands. Krystyna clarified that agricultural land zoning has not changed since 1986, and there have not been any Management Plan amendments to change the zoning of any land use designations. She explained that landowners may not use their lands for agriculture, but they are still designated as agricultural lands. Commissioner Liberty agreed that farming is not always profitable. The standard is “for the purpose of obtaining a profit.” This is a 50-year-old standard in Oregon. It is a farm-business test for the purpose of obtaining a profit to ensure that agricultural land is not used for other non-agricultural purposes. He stated that he is opposed to adding this to the work plan since it is Oregon law and cannot be changed.

Commissioner Liberty asked how many houses existed on agricultural properties when the NSA Act was passed in 1986, and how many houses are currently on agricultural properties.

- ✓ **Follow-up Action:** Krystyna will follow up with Commissioner Liberty’s question to determine if it is possible to compare the number of houses on agricultural lands pre-Act and currently.

[Identifying actions for the Gorge Commission to enhance its support for agriculture in the future](#)

Krystyna mentioned that Commissioner Brennan Bissell has stated that the Gorge Commission should do more to support agriculture and small farmers in the Gorge, including ways to generate income. Commissioner Brennan Bissell is concerned about farming in America and how little they are making, and wants to expand their options, such as allowing Accessory Dwelling Units, Airbnb, agritourism, and farm stands, and suggested that the Commission should think beyond the restraints of conservation from 40 years ago. She is also concerned about housing shortages and high prices in the Gorge and mentioned that farmers could provide additional housing.

- ✓ **Follow-up Action:** Chair Litwer asked Commissioner Brennan Bissell to facilitate a structured discussion on how the Gorge Commission can more effectively support agriculture in the NSA and discuss housing shortages and what the Gorge Commission can do to assist.

Identifying actions that encourage growth in existing urban areas and allowing future economic development in a manner consistent with resource protection.

Commissioner Brennan Bissell mentioned that the Commission does not have jurisdiction in urban areas and that staff do not have the time or capacity to work on this topic.

Commissioner Liberty stated that the Commission needs demographic data to better understand how many people reside in urban areas vs rural NSA lands, and where we can help and connect people with the loan programs and workforce training. He mentioned the loan programs (run by the Oregon Investment Board and the Washington Investment Board), which are mostly focused on recipients in the urban areas but could be expanded to rural areas.

- ✓ ***Follow-up Action:*** Chair Litwer asked Commissioner Liberty to take the lead on facilitating a discussion on the loan programs.

There was no public comment.

The next meeting is scheduled for September 30, 2025, at 11:00 a.m. via Zoom.

Follow-up Actions and Next Steps:

- ✓ **Follow-up Action:** Krystyna will ask MCEDD to provide additional information on the accomplishments of the loan programs and how to support more in rural areas.
- ✓ **Follow-up Action:** Chair Litwer asked Commissioner Liberty to take the lead on facilitating a discussion on the loan programs.
- ✓ **Follow-up Action:** Krystyna will work with Commissioner Liberty to determine how to help with workforce training to increase incomes in rural areas.
- ✓ **Follow-up Action:** Krystyna will follow up with farmers who worked on this policy when it was passed, as well as current farmers, and will consult with agricultural economists to evaluate if this is warranted given the diversity of agricultural uses throughout the NSA. The Commission will decide if any changes to this policy are warranted during the next Management Plan review.
- ✓ **Follow-up Action:** Krystyna will follow up with Commissioner Liberty's question to determine if it is possible to compare the number of houses on agricultural lands pre-Act and currently.
- ✓ **Follow-up Action:** Chair Litwer asked Commissioner Brennan Bissell to facilitate a structured discussion on how the Gorge Commission can more effectively support agriculture in the NSA and discuss housing shortages and what the Gorge Commission can do to assist.
- ✓ **Follow-up Action (from the 7/29/2025 meeting):** Commissioner Liberty suggested seeking expertise and getting facts about allowing Accessory Dwelling Units in the NSA.