



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

2705 East Second Street • The Dalles, OR 97058
p: [541] 506-2560 • f: [541] 506-2561 • www.co.wasco.or.us

Pioneering pathways to prosperity.

July 7, 2025

Columbia River Gorge Commission
PO Box #730
White Salmon, WA 98672
(Sent by email to: krystyna.wolniakowski@gorgecommission.org)

Subject: Rowena Fire

Dear Chair, Vice-Chair and Commissioners;

I am writing to provide a brief to the Commission about the impact to development resulting from the Rowena Fire.

The Rowena Fire ignited on June 11th. Our first responders, Mid-Columbia Fire and Rescue, and the Wasco County Sheriff's Office, acted quickly and were able to not only prevent any loss of life but quickly reach the Governor's office who declared a conflagration. This enabled the Oregon State Fire Marshal and Oregon Department of Forestry to assume incident command and call in additional resources. We had over eight counties, including many structural protection teams, fighting the fire over the next several days fighting extreme winds, hot temperatures, and dry conditions.

At the time, thousands of Wasco County residents were evacuated or prepped for evacuations, including the West half of The Dalles and all of Chenoweth which lies in the National Scenic Area. While fire crew managed to save many homes and the Discovery Center, as well as countless lives, the damages were significant. The current assessment counts a loss of 56 homes, 91 structures, and over a hundred vehicles. An Emergency Declaration was declared by the Wasco County Board of Commissioners and the Governor's office declared a State of Emergency. Senator Ron Wyden, Governor Kotek, and our representatives have visited the disaster site and been briefed by local leadership. The State of Oregon has been dispatched to assist with many aspects of relief and recovery.

Rowena has been considered a rural service center, or unincorporated community, before the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Act, due to dense, historical development patterns. Tooley Terrace was a platted subdivision in 1954, and what is now called Rowena Crest Manor was a mobile home park platted around the 1960s. Most of the development along Highway 30 is equally as historic, forming a tight knit community that houses a diverse population of households including a high density of low and middle class families including members of the Latinx community. Census shows 59.4% of the population in Rowena are in poverty with a 32% employment rate. The median gross rent was \$961/month compared to a median gross rent in Oregon of \$1,481/month.

A high percentage of the homes lost were manufactured homes or older stick built homes that no longer carried mortgages, and as a result were under or uninsured. There are a large percentage of renters in this area; homeownership rates according to the Census are 23.5% for Rowena. Many residents lost everything.

Wasco County and state and regional partners have organized under an Incident Command/Emergency Operations Center to address relief and recovery. As Section Chief of the Recovery Branch I am organizing, in partnership with Mid-Columbia Economic Development District as our fiscal sponsor and convener, a long term recovery group. One aspect of this will be to understand development barriers that we can resolve in our goal to help impacted households return home.

In similar rural residential zones outside the National Scenic Area in Wasco County, staff's average time to permit a replacement dwelling would be two weeks. This is aided by clear and objective standard requirements that allow us to process many replacement or new dwellings as a ministerial review, even when considering resource protections. We would also be able to implement recent state law updates that allow for disaster victims to live on site in an RV for up to five years, including modular homes that might be made available from state or federal resources. In addition, we would be able to quickly permit the RV Park on County owned property next to The Dalles Urban Growth Boundary to use as a transitional housing location and community center for fire victims.

I appreciate that Executive Director Wolniakowski heard some of our concerns and initial requests and will be recommending a plan amendment to revise the expedited replacement timeline from two to five years. Based on recent information from previous fires and the 2020 wildfires which devastated many communities in Oregon, we are seeing an average of seven years to rebuild. I should have more detailed information for you, as I intend to come before you in September with a formal ask for assistance to help navigate the process for recovery once final assessments have been made. I should have a more thorough report and information for you at that time, to include detailed information from State partners on the realities of recovery.

Sincerely,



Kelly Howsley Glover, PhD
Wasco County Community Development Managing Director