

Columbia River Gorge Commission

Meeting Minutes
September 9, 2025
via Zoom Webinar

COMMISSION MEMBERS PRESENT

Laura Brennan Bissell ~ 8:36 a.m.
Valerie Fowler
Alex H. Johnson
Lach Litwer
Donna Mickley
Robert Liberty
Jerry Meninick
Michael Mills
Rodger Nichols
Pah-tu Pitt
Nathan Reynolds
Amy Weissfeld

COMMISSIONER MEMBERS ABSENT

Carina Miller

STAFF PRESENT

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
Jeff Litwak, Legal Counsel
Mike Schrankel, GIS Manager
Krystyna U. Wolniakowski, Executive Director

AUDIENCE PRESENT

Joshuah Albert – Columbia Community Connection
Sean Bailey – Wasco County
Nathan Baker – Friends of the Columbia Gorge
Phil Brady – Wasco County
Angie Brewer – Oregon Department of Land Conservation & Development
(DLCD)
Lynn Burditt
Rich Busch, Attorney
Jaime Castro – University of Oregon
Keith Cleveland – Hood River County

Deborah Cohen
Dan Corcoran
Sylvia Crompton
Kaylee Crosby – Wild Wood Tours
Pat D
Sheila Dooley
Daniel Dougherty – Wasco County
Melissa Fahrni – Skamania County
Rob Farris – Skamania County
Ed Flick – Oregon Department of Human Services
Aiden Forsi – USDA Forest Service
Casey Gatz – USDA Forest Service
Johnny Haliday
Scott Hege – Wasco County
Karen Heinemann
Patrick Hollander
Dr. Kelly Howsley-Glover – Wasco County
Larry Keister
Madison Kenney – Friends of the Columbia Gorge
Adam Kick – Skamania County Prosecuting Attorney
Eric Kloster
Nick Kraemer – Friends of the Columbia Gorge
Paula Latasa
Terra Lingley – Oregon Department of Transportation
Steve McCoy – Friends of the Columbia Gorge
Josh Neblock – Skamania County
Armando Negrete – Wasco County
Beatriz Parga
Peter Patricelli
Barbara Speck
Nate Stice – Oregon Regional Solutions Coordinator
Tyler Stone – Wasco County
Renee Tkach – Friends of the Columbia Gorge
Bill Vartan
Erick Walker – Hood River County
Michael Wardell, Attorney
David Waymire – Skamania County
Dustin Williams – Wasco County
Nathan Wilson – Gorge News
Shane Wolfe

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.

Oral Argument on Appeal Hearing: *Smartlink, LLC v. Skamania County*, CRGC No. COA-S-24-01 (8:33 a.m.) The Gorge Commission held oral argument on the above appeal. The Gorge Commission heard oral argument from the parties and began deliberating to an oral decision. (Attachment A)

Chair Mills announced that the hearing procedure is contained in the Notice of Hearing. No parties had questions about the hearing procedure.

The following Commissioners made disclosures of ex parte communications and potential conflicts of interest:

- Commissioner Lach Litwer stated that he had no ex parte contact with any of the parties and had no conflicts of interest. He did disclose that he is the owner of a telecommunications engineering company, but his company does not do business with any of the parties.
- Chair Mills stated that he had no ex parte contact with any of the parties. He added that he was a member of Friends of the Columbia Gorge before being appointed to the Gorge Commission and that his deceased spouse had been a member of Friends of the Columbia Gorge.

Chair Mills asked the parties if they had any questions or wished to challenge any Commissioners from participating in the appeal hearing. No party raised any objection.

Commissioners asked questions for the parties to address in their oral argument. The parties presented their oral argument, and Commissioners asked questions of the parties.

Break – 10:17-10:30 a.m.

Commission Questions, Discussion, and Deliberation (10:30 a.m.) The Commission discussed the case and began deliberating. The following motion was brought before the Commission for a vote:

Moved by Commissioner Litwer:

Motion: Move to affirm the Hearing Examiner’s decision dated June 19, 2024, and reject the first and second Assignments of Error, and do not address the purported third Assignment of Error.

Chair Mills seconded the motion.

Roll Call Vote

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Motion 1	
Motion	Litwer
Seconded	Mills

Move to affirm the hearing examiner's decision dated June 19, 2024, and reject the first and second assignments of error and do not address the purported third assignment of error.

	Yes	No	Abstain
Brennan Bissell		x	
Fowler		x	
Johnson	x		
Liberty	x		
Litwer	x		
Meninick	x		
Miller			
Nichols		x	
Pitt	x		
Reynolds	x		
Weissfeld		x	
Mills - Chair	x		
Total	7	4	0

Approval of July 8, 2025, Commission Meeting Minutes (12:01 p.m.)

Commissioner Valerie Fowler moved to adopt the July 8, 2025, meeting minutes, and Commissioner Amy Weissfeld seconded. The July 8, 2025, Commission Meeting Minutes were approved by a voice vote.

Land Acknowledgment (12:02 p.m.) Commissioner Alex Johnson read the Land Acknowledgment.

Break – 12:04 p.m. - 12:15 p.m.

Treaty Tribe Word of the Day (12:16 p.m.) Commissioner Pah-tu Pitt shared ipseq, which is red-tailed hawk, as the Treaty Tribe Word of the Day. Commissioner Pitt shared with the Commission that she was lucky enough to spot an ipseq earlier in the day.

Opportunity for Treaty Tribe Nations to Address the Commission

(12:17 p.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 (12:17 p.m.)

- No public comment was offered.

Executive Director's Report (12:18 p.m.) Krystyna U. Wolniakowski, Executive Director, provided an overview of supplemental budget requests for Oregon and Washington, along with updates on staff actions to support landowners affected by the Rowena and Burdoin fires.

Commissioner Comments and Questions

- No commissioners offered comments.

USDA Forest Service Report (12:42 p.m.) Donna Mickley, Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Forest Supervisor, and Casey Gatz, Resources, Planning, and Lands Staff Officer, provided updates on Forest Service activities in the National Scenic Area:

- Casey Gatz shared updates about staff's work on responses to the Burdoin and Rowena fires. Much of the work focuses on land stabilization, natural resource protection, and maintaining dozer lines for future firefighting efforts.
- Recreation updates:
 - The Multnomah Falls timed entry system is ending for the season and has worked well. Funding will drive implementation of the timed entry system going forward.
 - Working on design concepts for the Dog Mountain parking area to increase ingress and egress safety.
 - Preconstruction work has started on the Wyeth Bench parking area serving the Cascade Locks bike system.

Commissioner Comments and Questions

- Commissioner Brennan Bissell: Asked whether the Forest Service plans pH amendment work to remediate effects of large amounts of ammonium phosphate.
 - Gatz & Mickley: No pH amendment work is currently planned. They do have burn severity mapping and assess impacts on soil, so retardant application has been mapped and inventoried. They monitor any impacts on revegetation and would be proactive in addressing issues if they are identified.
- Commissioner Brennan Bissel: Stated she would like to speak with the botanist. Stated soil pH changes what will grow, and PFAS and ammonium phosphate can disrupt the post-burn environment that would otherwise be ideal for native plants.

Possible Management Plan Amendment: Rebuilding After Disasters* (12:59 p.m.) Staff presented possible amendments to the Management Plan to make rebuilding after a natural disaster easier and clearer for landowners. Staff and Dr. Kelly Howsley-Glover, Wasco County's Community Development

Director, presented plan amendment concepts. The Gorge Commission welcomed residents affected by the Rowena or Burdoin fires to give their perspectives on rebuilding. (Attachments B and C)

Commissioner Comments and Questions

- Chair Mills expressed support for the faster timeline.
- The Commission decided to hear public comments before discussing the matter.

Written Public Comment

- Written public comment – Kate Bertash – 8/8/2025 (Attachment D)
- Written public comment – Gregory Faust – 8/8/2025 (Attachment E)
- Written public comment – Gregory Faust – 8/18/2025 (Attachment F)
- Written public comment – Skamania County Public Works & Community Development – 8/18/2025 (Attachment G)
- Written public comment – Hood River County – 8/20/2025 (Attachment H)
- Written public comment – Klickitat County Board of Commissioners – 9/2/2025 (Attachment I)
- Written public comment – Pat DeJean – 9/3/2025 (Attachment J)
- Written public comment – Patrick Hollander – 9/3/2025 (Attachment K)
- Written public comment – Carrie Buchanan & Jeffrey Johnston – 9/5/2025 (Attachment L)
- Written support letter – Oregon Governor Tina Kotek – 9/5/2025 (Attachment M)
- Written public comment – Wasco County Board of County Commissioners (Attachment N)
- Written public comment – Jarrod McClean, PhD – 9/6/2025 (Attachment O)
- Written public comment – Kate Bertash – 9/6/2025 (Attachment P)
- Written public comment – Nancy Richter & Ray Segale – 9/6/2025 (Attachment Q)
- Written public comment – Skamania County Board of Commissioners – 9/7/2025 (Attachment R)
- Written public comment – Peter Patricelli, MD – 9/7/2025 (Attachment S)
- Written public comment – Oregon Department of Land Conservation & Development – 9/8/2025 (Attachment T)

Oral Public Comment

- **Renee Tkach, Conservation Director for Friends of the Gorge and a resident of Skamania County**
 - Expressed condolences to residents who lost their homes.

- Stated that Friends supports moving forward with a Plan Amendment for disaster preparedness and recovery.
 - Added that Friends wants to be involved in the process and hopes for a balanced outcome.
- **Angie Brewer, DLCD Central Oregon Regional Representative, former Planning Director at Wasco County, and former CRGC staff member**
 - DLCD offers technical assistance to the effort and commends the collaborative efforts of the counties and the Gorge Commission.
 - Reiterated that this is not a Gorge- or county-specific problem but is occurring worldwide more frequently. Any efforts by planners and land use professionals to prepare for catastrophic events, reduce risks, and build community resilience are supported by DLCD, along with the initiatives of the Gorge Commission.
 - Expressed support for the concept of the Plan Amendment.
 - Offered sincere condolences to those impacted by the fires.
- **Peter Patricelli**
 - Lost his vacation home but was fortunate to have insurance.
 - Suggested his case might be an example of like-for-like replacement; the only changes would be fire-resistant materials on his new manufactured home.
 - Excited to hear the term expedited and hoped to remove obstacles.
 - Expressed concern about lot size requirements.
 - Expressed concern that the next fire could take out screening trees and that with fire protective zones, very few trees could be planted.
 - Stated there were no firefighters in the area and that fire protective zones and changes are the only protection with other structures so close.
 - Concerned with required screening trees and vegetation related to fires.
 - Asked to what extent the subdivision should be given the same urban status as The Dalles, Hood River, etc.
- **Patrick Hollander**
 - Stated he is Peter Patricelli's neighbor and reiterated Mr. Patricelli's comments.
 - He expressed that terms like 'expedited' and 'streamlining' are just word salad and feels that the bureaucracy is constantly stalling progress.
 - Shared that no one truly understands what it is like to be 70 years old, retired, enjoy many hobbies, and then lose everything in a

single day, including his three beloved dachshunds, unless they have gone through it.

- Expressed frustration about the Phase 1 cleanup and testing that was delayed.
- Expressed frustration with the complicated application forms and \$3,800 fee for a streamlined review. Thanked the Wasco County planning staff for their four hours of assistance before accepting his application.
- Expressed fury at the bureaucratic obstacles.
- Expressed that two years is an eternity.
- Asked "who is in charge" and answered that no one is. Asked to be proved wrong.

- **Sylvia Crompton**

- She is representing herself, her elderly parents, and several neighbors. Her family lost two homes – their longtime residence of 30 years and a rental property, along with everything they owned.
- Facing the possibility of being unable to rebuild the rental property due to bureaucratic hurdles from the County and CRGC. Bringing the septic system up to date would cost between \$25,000 and \$40,000 for just one property. Losing the rental income would eliminate an affordable rental and impact her parents' retirement.
- Her family already went through the process when they built their home in 1996 and should not have to go through it again. Charging a \$3,800 permit fee to disaster survivors is unacceptable; believes it should be \$0. Many of the Plan requirements will only serve to make housing more expensive and recovery harder. The message fire survivors are hearing is that only wealthy people should rebuild after a disaster when real people are hurting.
- Encouraged to hear about the steps being taken, but noted that more changes are needed: enable safety and accessibility improvements, remove rules requiring tree planting in burned areas, and limit frivolous appeals.
- Shared that the Gorge Commission and Wasco County have this opportunity to demonstrate support for the community after disasters instead of displacing them. These decisions will influence recovery both now and in future fires.

- **Shane Wolfe**

- He and his father owned a home now reduced to ash.
- Proud to call this area home but asked for help to protect not just the Gorge but the people who live here.
- The Rowena fire survivors' community has been meeting weekly to share information and speak with one voice, since individuals are not getting answers.

- Fire survivors are facing overwhelming obstacles:
 - Cleanup has stalled. Governor Kotek announced funding, but there is still no plan or timeline. Until the cleanup is completed, residents are prohibited from building. Expressed concern that permits may expire before cleanup is completed.
 - Some families can pay out of pocket for clean up, but many cannot. They have lost everything and have no money for fees.
 - Expressed concern about setback requirements, septic and drain field requirements, clean drinking water, people living in RVs, cars, and unsafe living conditions. Some residents are considering leaving the area due to unbearable uncertainty.
 - Asked the Gorge Commission to make fire recovery the top priority.
 - Asked for a clear, fast pathway for rebuilding and a waiver of permit fees for disaster zones.
 - Asked for help accessing grants for critical needs like septic tanks or erosion control as the weather shifts to rain.
 - Asked for information about the approved temporary housing option that Wasco County has proposed.
 - Requested that the Gorge Commission use its influence with United Way and the Office of Emergency Management so that survivors get a seat at the table when it comes to recovery funds.
 - Asked for help moving the cleanup Phase 2 forward and opening doors to funding to provide the dignity of shaping their own future.
- **Ed Flick, Director of the Office of Resilience and Emergency Management (OREM) at the Oregon Department of Human Services (ODHS)**
 - OREM is the lead agency supporting sheltering, feeding, hydration, and individual recovery. The agency also has a role in long-term shelter and intermediate housing.
 - OREM has been supporting Wasco County in providing drinking water and hygiene and has met with survivors to understand impacts. Working to improve the availability of disaster case management.
 - Encouraged the Gorge Commission to enable intermediate housing as quickly as possible.

Commissioner Comments and Questions

- Commissioners expressed gratitude and appreciation for hearing the experiences of survivors and residents impacted by fires.
- Several Commissioners expressed support for fast-tracking a Plan Amendment process.

- Commissioners suggested several potential additions to the proposed concepts:
 - Commissioners should be decision makers.
 - Allow flexibility in setting upper limits for parameters like increased size and let each county interpret “like”.
 - Accept local credentialed expert opinions to make determinations on issues like engineering, similar to how archaeology experts’ input is used.
 - Flexibility on roofing materials, like allowing time for roofs to rust.
 - Encouraged consideration of defensible space foremost when setting screening tree requirements.
- Commissioners expressed that a tradeoff of the fast-track process might be things slipping through the cracks or loss of opportunity to strengthen amendments, but on balance supported a fast process and expressed trust in the Counties to assist Gorge Commission staff.
- Commissioners emphasized the need to consider the people and residents in the Gorge and prioritize work that will help them.
- Commissioners asked about permitting costs.
 - CRGC staff clarified that the Gorge Commission does not charge permitting fees for Klickitat County, where it does permit work.
 - Commissioners suggested creative approaches to how the Gorge Commission might help with permit costs, including asking for additional funding from the states.
 - Dr. Howsley Glover explained how Wasco County sets fees:
 - County assesses costs annually and sets fees to recoup 50% of the actual cost; the General Fund subsidizes the other 50%.
 - Fee waivers are available for residents below 150% of the federal poverty line.
 - Expedited review costs are approximately half of the \$3,800 full review cost.

Moved by Commissioner Nichols:

Motion: Move to fast-track the Plan Amendment timeline and concepts offered by Commission staff.

Commissioner Fowler seconded the motion.

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Motion 2	
Motion	Nichols
Seconded	Fowler
Move to fast-track the Plan Amendment timeline and concepts offered by Commission staff.	

Commissioners held a voice vote, unanimously approving the motion.

Committee Reports (2:32 p.m.)

- **Communications Committee** – Committee Chair Weissfeld reported:
 - The committee reviewed the Strategic Plan drafted by Commissioner Johnson and added additional items. Plan to finalize and adopt the revised plan at the next meeting.
 - At the next meeting, the committee will review:
 - Social Media Engagement Plan
 - Content Document
 - Engagement with legislators
 - Solicited input on how the Gorge Commission can better communicate.

- **Economic Vitality Committee** – Committee Chair Litwer reported:
 - Wolniakowski shared the history of the ag income test and offered to follow up with farmers who worked on the policy when it was passed. The committee will make a decision on whether any changes to the policy are warranted after reviewing all background information.
 - Discussed housing shortages in the NSA and will explore whether ADUs could be considered on ag lands to provide additional housing and income sources for farmers and rural residents.
 - Consider the current ag use definition in the Plan, which describes the employment of land primarily for profit rather than a specific numerical threshold, and clarify this definition in the permitting process.

- **Rules Committee** – Jeff Litwak reported that the committee:
 - Met twice in August.

- Completed review of Rules 11 and 14 (open meetings and conflicts of interest).
- Planning on one more meeting to discuss public records and administrative procedure, but this meeting has not been scheduled due to higher priority work on the Plan Amendment.
- Tentatively hoping to bring the Rules to the Commission during January's meeting.
- Hoping to review the appeals rules and a few other miscellaneous rules.

Other Business (2:40 p.m.)

- **2026 Commission Meeting Schedule**

- Commissioners were reminded that a reduced Commission meeting schedule was discussed and approved as part of the Executive Director's proposed work plan in response to staffing and budget cuts.
- Commissioners discussed the additional committee meetings and whether those increase staff burden.
- Commissioners expressed concern about scaling back meetings, given many priorities.
- Commissioners suggested reducing staff attendance at Commission meetings.

- **Decision/Action item:**

- Staff to complete draft Plan Amendment policy language with a goal of September 18, 2025, to begin the 30-day comment period; Commissioners can also provide input. Comments will be assembled in a report with staff recommendations ahead of the public hearing in November.
- Chair Mills asked staff to present a proposed Commission meeting schedule for 2026 for a final Commission decision at the November 12, 2025, Commission meeting.

Adjourn – 2:52 p.m.

Meeting Attachments:

- Attachment A – Staff Report – Appeal Hearing (Smartlink v. Skamania County (COA-S-24-01))
- Attachment B – Staff Report – Introducing Concepts for Plan Amendments to Clarify and Address Landowner Needs for Disaster Recovery
- Attachment C – Staff Presentation – Disaster Replacements Plan Amendment Concepts
- Attachment D – Written public comment – Kate Bertash – 8/8/2025

- Attachment E – Written public comment – Gregory Faust – 8/8/2025
- Attachment F – Written public comment – Gregory Faust – 8/18/2025
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Approved – November 12, 2025