



TO: Columbia River Gorge Commission

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Commission's Pro-Equity, Anti-Racism (PEAR) Team

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SUBJECT: Climate Equity Recommendations from the Commission's Pro-Equity, Anti-Racism (PEAR) Team

Purpose

This staff report summarizes climate equity recommendations developed by the Commission's Pro-Equity, Anti-Racism (PEAR) Team over the past year. The report includes background on how climate equity integrates with the Commission's work priorities, an overview of key themes from PEAR Team meetings, and recommended climate equity goals, strategies, and actions for the Commission's consideration. Staff welcomes questions and feedback at the March 10, 2026, Commission meeting.

Background: What is Climate Equity?

At the heart of the Commission's climate action work is our understanding that, while climate change affects all of us, it does not affect everyone equally. The worst effects of climate change in the National Scenic Area are most often experienced by communities of color, tribal communities, and those who are low-income, live in rural areas, or rely on natural resource economies. Many of these communities historically have been excluded from land use decisions. *Climate equity* means that all people have access to and benefit from climate solutions, regardless of race, income, or other characteristics. Climate equity is based on these key understandings:¹

- Communities most impacted by climate change are often least responsible for the emissions causing it.
- Communities should have accessible, meaningful opportunities to participate in decision-making about the places where they live, work, and visit.

¹ Adapted from multiple sources including State of Oregon Climate Equity Blueprint (2021), U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit, and Draft Multnomah County Climate Justice Plan.

- Focused resources and strategies are needed to remove barriers for and invest in those who have historically been left out of decision-making, so that every community can benefit from climate solutions.
- Systemic changes are necessary to address long-standing inequities in land use and planning processes, ensuring that policies, decision-making structures, and resource distribution benefit everyone.

Through the approval of its first Climate Change Action Plan in December 2022, the Commission acknowledged its commitment to listening to and learning from diverse community members who care about protecting the people, lands, and waters of this region from the impacts of climate change. The following sections describe the steps we have taken to integrate climate equity in our work, including specific recommendations from the PEAR Team.

Importance of Climate Equity in the Commission’s Climate Action and Planning Work

The Commission’s Climate Change Action Plan (Action Plan) identifies “Inclusive Climate Action” as a priority. We developed a goal for Inclusive Climate Action included in the Climate Change Action Plan and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Strategic Plan. This language reflects our commitment to implementing actions that integrate climate and equity work moving forward. The goal reads: “By 2025, the Commission has completed a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan with specific, measurable, and timebound goals to advance climate equity.” Staff has been working with the PEAR Team to develop climate equity goals, strategies, and actions in support of this Action Plan goal.

Throughout the Climate Change Action Plan, “Opportunities to Promote Equity” are identified to highlight a few of the clearest connections between the Commission’s work and equity outcomes. Staff considered opportunity to advance equity as a criterion for selecting priorities in the Action Plan. Equity and inclusive community engagement apply to all our work, including the eight adaptation and mitigation priorities in the Action Plan. Of these eight priorities, two were highlighted as having the greatest potential for improving equity outcomes: Tribal Treaty Rights and Regional Transportation. It is important to note that three years have passed since the Commission approved the Action Plan. Staff and Commissioners were in an early stage of our shared journey of learning about equity. Since then, we have increased our awareness of ways to improve equity across our work through training, conversations with the PEAR Team, and various community engagement efforts. This report summarizes some of this learning, specifically as it relates to climate equity priorities recommended by the PEAR Team for Commission consideration.

Historically, many of the communities in the Columbia River Gorge region most affected by land use policy decisions were not included in decision-making processes. Examples include Indigenous land and resources being taken by European settlers and their governing authorities by unjust means; Japanese immigrants having their land and possessions seized and being sent to internment camps during World War II; and Black citizens being barred from residing, voting, owning property, or entering into contracts in Oregon due to past exclusionary laws. The Commission acknowledges in the Management Plan that the legacy of these injustices has systemic impacts on the policies and decision-making in the National Scenic Area. Integrating equity into our land use planning and climate work helps ensure that land use policies are more effective, better informed by lived experience, and more resilient to climate impacts. Equitable engagement leads to better policies, reduced conflict, and improved stewardship outcomes across jurisdictions.

Climate Action and Tribal Sovereignty

The Commission’s Climate Change Action Plan priorities overlap with guiding climate change or resource management plans of the four Columbia River treaty tribes. These include the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Integrated Resource Management Plan (IRMP) (update underway), the [Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation Climate Adaptation Plan \(2022\)](#), the [Nez Perce Tribe Priority Climate Action Plan \(2024\)](#), and the [Climate Action Plan for the Territories of the Yakama Nation \(2019\)](#). The chart below summarizes how the Commission’s main climate action priorities connect with strategies included within the treaty tribes’ climate-related plans.

Climate Change Action Plan Priorities (below)	Warm Springs IRMP Draft Update	Umatilla Climate Adaptation Plan	Nez Perce Tribe Priority Climate Action Plan	Yakama Nation Climate Action Plan
Cold water refuge streams and riparian habitats	●	●	●	●
Wetlands and wetland species	●	●	●	●
Tribal treaty rights, focus on native plants and wildlife	●	●	●	●
Oregon White Oak woodlands	●			●
Regional transportation, including transit	●	●	●	●
EV infrastructure		●	●	
Carbon sequestration in natural and working lands		●	●	
Fire risk	●	●	●	●

While these plans show strong alignment with the Commission’s climate priorities, there are also areas where the Commission’s land use authority may create unintentional

barriers to tribal priorities, particularly around access to First Foods, cultural resource protection, and housing needs. A key goal of climate equity work is to identify where Commission processes, permitting requirements, or land use designations may conflict with tribal climate and community goals, and to explore opportunities for removing or reducing those barriers in partnership with tribes.

PEAR Team

Beginning in 2023, the Commission convened a Pro-Equity Anti-Racism (PEAR) Team. The Commission's PEAR Team follows a model set forth by the State of Washington for its agencies. The purpose of this group is to facilitate conversations with community members to provide the Commission with guidance on developing and implementing the DEI Strategic Plan and Climate Change Action Plan, while building trust and strengthening relationships with communities in the Gorge. The Washington Office of Equity no longer uses the term "PEAR," instead changing it to "Impact" when referring to these teams. To align with the state, staff will transition this year to using the term Impact Team. For the purpose of this report, we will continue to refer to it as the PEAR Team.

The PEAR Team advises Commission staff on implementing the DEI Strategic Plan by helping to define specific goals, strategies, and actions. One of the first recommendations provided by the PEAR Team was to focus on the goal of fostering ongoing equity training, growth, and leadership among management, staff, and the Commission. PEAR Team members emphasized the importance of having foundational equity training for staff to better understand how the Commission's work may perpetuate inequity and where change may be needed. This recommendation led staff to seek out staff equity trainings, and based on recommendations from other organizations, chose to contract with the Center for Diversity and the Environment (CDE) to facilitate an organizational equity training in December 2024. The Avarna Group facilitated equity workshops with Commissioners at the May and June 2025 Commission meetings.

The PEAR Team met six times from August 2024 through November 2025 to develop climate equity goals and actions, discuss strategies for meaningful community engagement, and identify opportunities for collaboration on shared priorities. PEAR Team discussions have shaped the goals and actions described later in this report. Key themes from these conversations are summarized below.

Themes of PEAR Meetings

Theme 1: Listening to Understand Community Needs and Interests

An overarching theme across different topics was the importance of continuing to engage with and hear from those living in the Gorge. The PEAR Team emphasized the need for the

Commission to conduct outreach focused on listening to and understanding communities' needs, rather than only disseminating information. They made clear that “who” we are listening to matters and suggested focusing on communities who are most impacted by climate change and face the greatest injustices. One example they discussed was how data gathered on the unhoused population in the Gorge does not adequately account for lived experiences of Latino and Native communities, in particular. Several team members mentioned that these statistics often do not account for individuals living with extended family and friends because they cannot afford a place to live. The PEAR Team emphasized that many commonly used datasets—such as census data, housing studies, and wildfire vulnerability maps—undercount or misrepresent Latino, Native, migrant, and unhoused community members. Knowing this, it is important for the Commission to prioritize the use of community knowledge, qualitative data, and lived experience to complement quantitative data. This approach will ensure that engagement strategies and climate resilience policies accurately reflect the conditions faced by communities most impacted by climate change.

The team also shared how building relationships takes time. Though results of relationship-based work may not always be quantifiable, they are valuable and can contribute to climate resilience. Attending tribal events and visiting mobile home communities were some actions recommended by PEAR Team members.

Theme 2: Wildfire Coordination and Communication

The need for improved communication and knowledge about community impacts resulting from climate change was also mentioned during PEAR Team meetings. Team members discussed increasing wildfires in the Gorge and their significant impacts on communities with fewer resources. They emphasized that getting information to these communities has been challenging, given underlying issues such as poverty and lack of trust in local government. Team members suggested partnering with trusted organizations, such as Comunidades and The Next Door, Inc., that work directly with different communities to consider each community's various lived experiences, communication styles, and languages. Specific communities mentioned include the Latino community and mobile home communities across the Gorge.

Theme 3: Honoring Tribal Sovereignty

The PEAR Team discussed common challenges that tribal communities face, such as environmental threats to cultural resources and limited access to traditional gathering areas. Tension between tribes and landowners was identified as an issue, as well as lack of knowledge of responsible land and water stewardship among some residents. Team members highlighted the need for confidentiality related to sensitive information and knowledge held by tribes. They also discussed how improved tribal housing is foundational

to building climate resilience, offering examples such as a housing community land trust or rapid re-housing project in the Gorge.

Climate Equity Priorities

This section highlights the recommended climate equity priorities that the PEAR Team developed over the past year. They are organized by key topics, with goals, strategies, and actions included for each.

Some of these actions are within the Commission's current purview and can be implemented directly by staff, while others are collaborative efforts, supporting the work of other organizations with shared priorities. Some of the actions listed here are aspirational policies that may be developed during future Management Plan updates.

1. Community Engagement

Goal: The Commission's community engagement efforts for climate action priorities are shaped by, and responsive to, the needs and interests of diverse communities most impacted by climate change in the Gorge.

Strategy: Work together with communities most impacted by climate change to develop engagement strategies for specific climate priorities.

Actions:

- Facilitate an advisory group of community leaders (e.g., PEAR Team) to provide ongoing input on the Commission's climate equity work, collaborate on shared priorities, and share resources.
- Co-host community wildfire outreach and education workshops that offer resources to landowners, renters, farmworkers, and unhoused individuals. Working with community-based partners, identify main information needs for different communities (e.g., defensible space resources or protection from smoke impacts).
- Work with community-based organizations to pilot a climate resilience workshop for Latino/Hispanic and Spanish-speaking communities.
- Incorporate the PEAR Team's climate equity recommendations in engagement approaches and content for Columbia Gorge Climate Stewards community training program.
- Share climate equity goals and action outcomes, including community stories, in an accessible format on the Commission website or story map.
- With input from community partners, incorporate demographic analysis of most impacted communities when developing specific engagement strategies for climate

action priorities. Review Equitable Engagement Toolkit from Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development for possible use in the National Scenic Area.

- Coordinate with tribes, county planning departments, agencies, and community-based organizations on climate resilience and hazard mitigation planning to reduce the risk of siloing across regional emergency response departments.
- Develop a tribal engagement plan or strategy for the Commission and the Columbia River treaty tribes.

Strategy: Co-develop engagement approaches with community leaders and evaluate the impact of engagement strategies focused on communities most impacted by climate change.

Actions:

- Develop evaluation measures using qualitative (e.g., storytelling) and quantitative approaches, as appropriate, to assess how well engagement strategies reach impacted communities and support action.
- Provide an engagement strategy impact summary as part of annual reporting on the Commission’s Climate Change Action Plan and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Strategic Plan.
- Share climate equity goals and action outcomes in an accessible format on the Commission website or story map.

2. Capacity Building

Goal: The Commission cultivates relationships, shares resources, and supports collaborative learning with diverse partners to build resilience for communities most impacted by climate change in the Gorge.

Strategy: Collaborate with community partners to share resources, information, and learning opportunities that help impacted communities benefit from climate solutions.

Actions:

- Develop an agency internship program in partnership with interested organizations, colleges, or tribes. (Note: The Commission partnered with Heritage University to host an intern in Summer 2025.)
- Develop a relationship map of the Commission’s existing relationships with partners, communities, and other entities across program priorities. Use to inform outreach strategies to improve engagement and representation in Commission work.
- Coordinate a “community of practice” climate action forum for community partners to share information, resources, and collaboration opportunities.

- Engage in annual equity staff training to continue to build staff and Commission capacity to make internal organizational changes (e.g., hiring, retention, etc.) that support climate equity and community engagement goals.

3. Policy Implementation and Development

First Foods

Goal: First Foods, and the habitats that sustain them, are healthy, abundant, and accessible for tribal communities in the National Scenic Area.

Strategy: Support tribes in their work to improve First Foods availability and access on public and private land in the National Scenic Area. Respect tribes' need to maintain confidentiality and culturally sensitive information.

Actions:

- Through work with tribes, landowners, conservation districts, and others, promote land management practices that protect ecosystem and human health:
 - Reduce pesticide and herbicide use on public and private land and along roadsides,
 - Reduce the spread of invasive plants and promote the use of native plants, such as by working with landowners to re-vegetate development sites using native seeds and plants, and
 - Support the restoration and protection of native plant and wildlife species. Prior to doing restoration work, consult with Yakama Nation Cultural Resources or local Yakama tribal members living on the ceded territories of the Yakama Nation if the restoration work is in Washington. If in Oregon, consult with Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs Cultural Resources or Warm Springs tribal members living on the ceded territories of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs.
- Develop potential Management Plan language or policies to support tribal access agreements.
- Promote incentive programs and voluntary efforts to increase access to private lands for gathering traditional plants and hunting. Improve public awareness of Treaty Rights and help build relationships with land trusts and other partners.

Tribal Housing

Goal: Tribal communities have safe and affordable housing² that honors their relationship with and stewardship of the lands and waters within the National Scenic Area since time immemorial.

Strategy: Improve understanding of tribal housing needs among National Scenic Area counties, the Commission, and other partners.

Actions:

- Provide opportunities for community members impacted by the housing affordability crisis to share experiences and policy approaches with the Commission (e.g., consider accessory dwelling units or land use designation updates). Coordinate with Nch'i Wana Housing and other interested organizations to present to National Scenic Area county planning directors and planning department staff. Focus on the shared value of affordability and need for additional housing.
 - Support developing an updated comprehensive tribal housing needs assessment for the Gorge.
 - Review community needs analysis completed by Nch'i Wana Housing in 2021. This focused on in-lieu sites. Based on lessons learned, it would be valuable to add urban areas to assess where people currently live and work across the Gorge. Need to identify where people want to live, what type of housing they prefer, and how far they want to commute.
 - Consider sources of information and studies on affordable housing in the Gorge. For example, if conducted by a contractor outside the area, they may not understand local community needs. It is important to use the income level of community members who live in the specific area where housing is proposed, rather than a regional average that does not accurately reflect those with the greatest need.
 - Consider negative impacts of current, low-income housing assistance programs that often have the effect of keeping people in poverty. For example, when someone begins to earn more than the eligibility requirement, they cannot stay in current housing, yet other housing is too expensive. Income eligibility can disincentivize seeking higher paying jobs that help people move out of poverty.

² U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development definition for “affordable housing”: Affordable housing is generally defined as housing on which the occupant is paying no more than 30 percent of gross income for housing costs, including utilities. Reference: www.hud.gov

- Identify priority tribal housing areas of interest based on needs assessment. Map how these overlap with Urban Areas and National Scenic Area land use designations to assess opportunities and barriers to support housing in these preferred areas.
- Assess how existing land use designations, zoning restrictions, and permitting processes may create barriers to tribal housing, culturally appropriate housing models, and workforce housing. Identify opportunities to revise these frameworks to better support community needs while meeting National Scenic Area protections.

Strategy: Review and revise the Management Plan as needed to improve housing affordability and access for tribal and low-income communities.

Actions:

- Work with tribes, organizations serving tribal communities (e.g., Nch'i Wana Housing), USDA Forest Service, and counties to develop policies that improve housing options and access with a focus on tribal and low-income communities.
 - Develop policy options to reduce permitting barriers for tribal housing.
 - Explore policy options to reduce permitting barriers for workforce housing (e.g., often lower than “low-income” requirement).
 - Identify opportunities for allowing multi-family and intergenerational housing options.
 - Identify opportunities to allocate tribal housing areas within the National Scenic Area and consider updating land use designations as needed.
 - Identify opportunities for the Commission to work with Urban Areas to allocate areas for tribal housing.

Strategy: Improve funding for low-income and tribal housing in the National Scenic Area.

Actions:

- Work with tribes, organizations serving tribal communities, and local governments to identify funding sources for low-income and tribal housing in the Gorge. Some ideas include:
 - Explore feasibility of bond measures or local levies to help fund affordable housing.
 - Identify private funders interested in supporting environmentally sustainable development and affordable housing.

National Scenic Area Management Plan

Goal: The Management Plan reflects the Commission’s DEI vision, values, and goals.

Strategy: Review the Management Plan with a focus on equity to identify inadequacies and opportunities for improvements.

Action:

- Review the Management Plan to identify policies that may cause disproportionate impacts to communities most impacted by climate change. (Note: Given the Commission’s budget and staff reductions, staff will complete this equity review before the next Management Plan review process begins.)

PEAR Team Acknowledgements

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Topic for Commission Consideration: What additional information and learning would be helpful for you to dive deeper into these recommendations during a future meeting?