



Columbia River Gorge Commission Management Plan Review Urban Area Boundaries Policy Discussion

A federally protected National Scenic Area (NSA), the Columbia River Gorge is a natural treasure and icon of the Pacific Northwest. The Columbia River Gorge Commission and the U.S. Forest Service have begun to review Gorge protection plans to see if they need to be revised.

As a part of this review, the Gorge Commission is reviewing policies for revisions of urban boundaries. This is part of the periodic review of the management plan for the Columbia River Gorge NSA. However, the Gorge Commission is being pressured to weaken current rules and allow major expansions of urban development into rural areas and wild lands in the Gorge. **This could allow new subdivisions, strip malls, and industry to encroach on protected lands** of the Columbia River Gorge NSA.

Background

The Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Act is the federal law that protects the outstanding natural, scenic, cultural, and recreation resources of the Gorge and requires growth and development to be principally directed to urban areas, which are existing towns and cities in the Gorge.

There are 13 urban areas in the Columbia River Gorge NSA. The urban areas comprise nearly 28,000 acres, or 10% of the National Scenic Area. From west to east, these include Cascade Locks, North Bonneville, Stevenson, Carson, Home Valley, White Salmon, Bingen, Hood River, Mosier, Lyle, The Dalles, Dallesport, and Wishram. These urban areas and their boundaries were adopted by Congress in the National Scenic Area Act. Development within the existing urban areas is exempt from Gorge protection standards.

Section 4(f) of the National Scenic Area Act allows for “minor revisions” of the urban area boundaries if four criteria are met. These criteria require there to be a demonstrable need for the urban boundary revision; urban areas must be currently developed at an urban scale; the proposed boundary revision must protect scenic, natural, cultural, and recreation resources; and agricultural lands, forest lands, and open spaces must not be significantly reduced. Minor revisions to urban area boundaries can only be approved if at least 8 of the 12 Gorge Commissioners, including at least 4 of the 6 Commissioners from each state, vote to approve.

Key issues

1. **Climate change should be the number one priority for plan review.** Climate change due to human-caused global warming is likely to impact just about everything in the Columbia River Gorge NSA. Higher temperatures, longer dry spells, more frequent and severe fires, impacts to sensitive species, wildlife habitat, native plants, growing conditions, watershed impacts, recreation, salmon runs, and community development are just a few of the main areas of risk due to future climate change. However, there is currently no mention of climate change or global warming anywhere in the management plan.

2. **Prevent urban sprawl.** One important way to address climate change is to prevent urban sprawl by strengthening protections that control expansion of urban area boundaries. The second purpose of the Scenic Area Act is to support economic development in *existing* urban areas in a manner that is consistent with protection of the scenic, cultural, recreation, and natural resources of the gorge. This is

best accomplished by smart planning and increasing density rather than urban sprawl. Good planning will also prevent increased carbon emissions resulting from urban sprawl.

3. Take a regional approach to urban area policy. The National Scenic Area Act was passed into law to provide for regional, bi-state management of the Columbia River Gorge for planning and resource protection in the Columbia River Gorge, and urban area boundary policy should be no different. Urban areas in the Columbia River Gorge do not function independently of each other. Consideration of minor revisions to the boundaries of one urban area requires a regional analysis of the needs and development potential of the other urban areas.

For example, the urban area of The Dalles, Oregon is adjacent to the urban area of Dallesport, Washington. The Dalles airport is located in Dallesport. The City of The Dalles owns over a thousand acres of land in the Dallesport urban area and coordinates planning and infrastructure with Dallesport. Even though it is designated as an urban area, it has thousands of acres of undeveloped land and is zoned for rural land uses. The development potential of Dallesport and other nearby urban areas in the Gorge can't be ignored when evaluating whether The Dalles should expand into scenic area lands.

Another important consideration is to evaluate the growth needs of the urban areas based upon **commuting patterns between the urban areas** of the Gorge. For example: Hood River, Bingen, White Salmon and other nearby urban areas are closely interdependent. Residents live, work, shop, and recreate between all of these communities. Therefore, boundary revision proposals must be evaluated based on the regional needs and opportunities of these communities.

4. Urban boundary revisions must protect the outstanding resources of the Columbia River Gorge.

Urban boundary revisions are required to be consistent with the purposes and standards of the National Scenic Area Act and with its management plan. This means that any revision must protect scenic, natural, cultural, and recreation resources from adverse effects. Revisions also must be minor in scale and can't significantly affect farm land, forest land, or open spaces.

5. Urban means urban. The National Scenic Area Act requires establishment of a demonstrable need and maximum efficiencies of land uses within and on the fringes of the urban areas prior to approval of a minor revision. If a town seeks a minor revision into protected scenic area lands, then it must demonstrate that it, and nearby urban areas, are truly zoned and developed on an urban scale.

For example, The Dalles has a 47-year supply of residential lands, according to its buildable lands inventory and housing needs analysis. The city also has ample lands available for employment, commercial, and industrial, especially considering the availability of thousands of acres of undeveloped land in the adjacent urban area of Dallesport.

6. Keep rural lands rural. Wasco County has proposed encouraging suburban sprawl by rezoning lands outside of the urban areas to suburban densities, thus circumventing the urban boundary revision rules completely and violating numerous provisions of the National Scenic Area Act. The Dalles has a 47-year supply of buildable lands, and Dallesport has thousands of acres of undeveloped land. Suburbanizing the Gorge would be bad planning and unlawful. There is only one Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, and it needs to be protected. Our children and future generations will thank us for holding the line on sprawl.