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January 7, 2022

Congressman Earl Blumenauer
911 N.E. 11th Ave, Suite 200
Portland, OR 97232

Senator Ron Wyden
911 NE 11th Ave., Suite 630
Portland, OR, 97232

RE: Recreation Enhancement, Wildfire Resiliency, and Conservation for Mt. Hood and the Columbia River Gorge

Dear Congressman Blumenauer and Senator Wyden:

I am writing on behalf of American Whitewater in support of your efforts to develop legislation for Recreation Enhancement, Wildfire Resiliency, and Conservation for Mt. Hood and the Columbia River Gorge.

American Whitewater is a national non-profit 501(c)(3) river conservation organization founded in 1954 with approximately 50,000 supporters, 6,000 dues-paying members, and 100 local-based affiliate clubs, representing whitewater enthusiasts across the nation. We estimate that approximately 3000 of our supporters live in close proximity to the lands and waters considered in your proposal. American Whitewater's mission is to protect and restore America's whitewater rivers and to enhance opportunities to enjoy them safely. The organization is the primary advocate for the preservation and protection of whitewater rivers throughout the United States, and connects the interests of human-powered recreational river users with ecological and science-based data to achieve the goals within its mission. Our vision is that our nation's remaining wild and free-flowing rivers stay that way, our developed rivers are restored to function and flourish, that the public has access to rivers for recreation, and that river enthusiasts are active and effective river advocates. A significant percentage of our membership, and many of the world's most skilled whitewater kayakers, live in the Columbia River Gorge and in close proximity to Mt. Hood. The region has dozens of rivers that are truly world class.

Comments

We commend you for the robust public process you have convened and thank you for the opportunity our community has been afforded to provide input; your public forums and opportunities to provide direct feedback have been appreciated and utilized by our community.

We fully support the key themes of sustainable and equitable outdoor recreation opportunities, protection of natural features including the wild rivers that define this unique landscape, protection of communities from wildfire, honoring treaty rights, and modernizing transportation and transit.

We support the expansion of Mt. Hood National Recreation Area and updates to the management plan. We appreciate that wildfire planning, protection, and management are all key areas of focus. Recent fires in this landscape have had devastating impacts to recreational infrastructure and disrupted public access. In our view, closures following wildfires have extended well beyond what is reasonable; this has resulted in extended loss of access that affects the local community as well as small business owners who provide services for those who engage in outdoor recreation. Resources agencies need plans and a roadmap for how to better anticipate and manage wildfire protection, response, and recovery.

We support the designation of new wilderness and wild and scenic rivers. For the whitewater paddling community, the West Fork Hood River, Sandy River, and White River are particularly important priorities valued for the recreational opportunities they provide. The West Fork Hood River and its major tributary the Lake Branch represent the headwaters for a popular whitewater paddling resource in the spring that is enjoyed by locals living in the community of Hood River. It is also a destination for paddlers from around the region. Marmot Dam Removal and restored flows to the Sandy River has significantly enhanced recreational opportunities on the Sandy River that are utilized by paddlers in the greater Portland Area and visited by paddlers from across the region. Protecting this river through wild and scenic designation would recognize this river's regionally-significant recreation values. Flowing from the eastern flank of Mt. Hood, the White River was designated wild and scenic in 1988 but a short gap was left at White River Falls that managing agencies recommended closing in their management plan. This legislation affords an opportunity to complete the White Wild and Scenic River including the waterfall that is a defining feature of the river's unique values.

As demand for outdoor recreation continues to grow, it is important to address transportation and public safety and we appreciate that you are considering these important issues as you develop legislation.

Conclusion

Thank you for the continued opportunities to provide input as you draft legislation. We offer our strongest support for legislation that includes conservation for lands and waters, enhanced opportunities for sustainable recreation that responds to the growing demand for experiences in the outdoors that are responsibly managed, investment in smart solutions for transportation and transit, and planning for wildfire. We welcome any future opportunities for continued dialogue and refinement of your proposal and our community stands ready to support your efforts in Congress.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "T. O'Keefe", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Thomas O'Keefe, PhD
Pacific Northwest Stewardship Director