

# Final Report

## Columbia River Gorge Vital Signs Indicators Project

*Prepared by*

**The Institute for Natural Resources**  
Oregon State University

*for*

**The Columbia River Gorge Commission**

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## ***The Institute for Natural Resources***

Created by the Oregon Legislature through the 2001 Oregon Sustainability Act, the Institute for Natural Resources' mission is to provide Oregonians with ready access to current, relevant, science-based information, methods, and tools for better understanding natural resource management challenges and developing solutions.

The Institute for Natural Resources is an Oregon University System institute.

***Institute for Natural Resources  
Oregon State University  
210 Strand Agricultural Hall  
Corvallis, Oregon 97331***

<http://inr.oregonstate.edu/>

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## 1.0 Introduction

Until now, the Columbia River Gorge Commission has not put in place an evaluation process for its ongoing work on managing the health of the gorge. The Columbia Gorge Vital Signs Indicators Project marks the first comprehensive and ongoing evaluation in the Commission's 20-year history, an important milestone in implementing the Management Plan for the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area.

The Commission established a community advisory team (comprised of self-nominated interested citizens/residents from both Oregon and Washington as well as the eastern and western ends of the Gorge) and a technical advisory team (comprised of local experts and staff from state, federal and local agencies with expertise in the various resources at issue in the Gorge) to develop a set of indicators. Seeking a neutral unbiased process the Commission requested that the Institute for Natural Resources (INR) staff this effort — helping to shape the process, get needed reference materials, ensure the validity of the process, and consider how to measure performance.

The future of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area involves complex interconnections between various aspects of society—economic, environmental, and social. These aspects must all be monitored to ensure that the purposes of the National Scenic Act are being appropriately followed. The highly valued natural, cultural, scenic, and recreational resources offered by the Gorge must be protected, and the economic strength and vitality of the area must be sustained in a manner that is consistent with resource protection.

A comprehensive assessment was needed to determine the success and effectiveness of the outcomes of Columbia River Gorge Commission decisions, to inform future Management Plan reviews, and to facilitate adaptive management by the Commission.

### 1.1 Project Goals

The Vital Signs Indicators Project incorporates multiple goals, most particularly:

1. Provide a tool upon which to base statutory assessment of the effectiveness of the Management Plan in implementing the Scenic Area Act;
2. Increase performance accountability and tie Commission actions to the purposes of the Act;
3. Foster dialogue among counties, treaty tribes, business leaders, municipalities, ports, the public, and other stakeholders;
4. Facilitate adaptive management in future Commission decisions; and
5. Inform periodic and statutory reviews of the Management Plan.

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## 2.0 Approach

### 2.1 Civic Science Framework

The project was organized around a concept sometimes called civic science. In this context, civic science means a problem-solving process based on regular interaction between technical experts and engaged citizens. Unlike many scientific exercises, where scientists work exclusively among themselves until findings have been developed, civic science allows citizens to provide input along the way. In this case, citizens informed the Vital Signs Indicators Project through a structured deliberation process. A Technical Advisory Team (TAT) met regularly for eight months, and was assisted after the first two months by a Community Advisory Team (CAT) that met monthly. Generally, the TAT proposed and the CAT reviewed and critiqued. The CAT also proposed topics for TAT consideration that were not on the TAT's agenda or preliminary list of Gorge health measures.

The success of a civic science project hinges on three elements. First, the two groups must speak a common language. Second, the two groups must agree on what's important as outcomes to the project. And, third, trust and mutual respect must be built during the process. Practically, both Vital Signs teams worked from charters that spelled out their mutual roles. (The CAT and TAT charters are attached.)

### 2.2 Sequence of Events

The process, then, consisted of three overarching components – creation of advisory teams, nomination of a neutral observer, and design and launch of the wiki.

#### 2.2.1 *Creation of Technical and Community Advisory Teams*

The Technical Advisory Team (TAT) was created by a combination of invitation of identified experts and available personnel. These people came from federal and state agencies, non-governmental organizations, and Oregon universities – wherever the requisite expertise was available and willing to dedicate time to the benefit of the Gorge and future generations. The TAT members were asked to provide sub-group leadership for the SNECR categories: Scenic, Natural, Economic, Cultural, and Recreation. Their task was to develop high-level indicators by which the health of the Gorge could be monitored through time. Sub-groups met as often as was required to develop an acceptable list of indicators. They also attended several joint meetings with the Community Advisory Team (CAT).

The CAT was created by open invitation to Gorge residents and interested citizens, and participation brought a wide range of ages, occupations, and expertise to the table. Their task was to respond to and critique the indicators developed by sub-groups, in an iterative process guided by the principles of “civic science” described above. They provided their

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feedback in both separate and joint meetings with TAT members. Towards the end of the project, they engaged in a prioritization exercise with the facilitator, at which they were asked to rate proposed indicators from the public's perspective. They had to answer two questions: 1) will the public understand the indicator's meaning, and 2) will the public understand the indicator's importance? Subsequently a complex matrix was developed to incorporate indicators and their relative rankings (spreadsheets containing the ranked indicators are attached).

### ***2.2.2 Nomination of INR to provide neutral observation of the process***

INR was approached to provide observation of the process, so that the Gorge Commission could consider whether it should be used, modified, or discarded for future projects. To achieve this, two INR staff attended TAT meetings, and shortly into the process, agreed to provide a form of "roving attendance" to cover as many sub-group meetings as possible. Jimmy Kagan covered Natural, Scenic, and Recreational meetings, and Sally Duncan covered Economic and Cultural meetings. They also attended full TAT and joint TAT-CAT meetings. Finally, they worked with staff to produce an online survey of all participants, to garner as much feedback as possible on attitudes toward the process and notes for its improvement. Staff managed the survey; its results analyzed by INR.

### ***2.2.3 Design and launch of the wiki***

The wiki was hosted by the Columbia Gorge Community College, and provided a collaborative work space through which all TAT and CAT members could interact. The site allowed documents to be uploaded, unlimited comments to be inserted, and group interaction to be watched or participated in. Because some participants experienced initial difficulty with the novel form of interaction, some communication took place through regular e-mail or by phone with staff.

All interactions and documents on the wiki are archived and are available for interested parties at the Commission office.

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## 3.0 Process Analysis

### 3.1 Final CAT/TAT Comments

Comments captured from the final session of the concluding, April 3 joint meeting in Hood River, Oregon, provided insights into the civic science process followed for the project. These reflections were shared informally by attendees; the majority came from CAT members, but some TAT members also provided comments.

#### 3.1.1 Positive Comments

- CAT perceives CRGC staff to be very helpful, accessible, patient and respectful, and importantly, open to the iterative ebb and flow of the process
- The attempt to get input from the Gorge as a whole provided a good forum; in addition, the diversity of the group, the charter, the openness of the process provided a good learning curve and no one felt marginalized
- Very little attrition from CAT group speaks to the level of welcome and commitment – the collaboration between CAT and TAT was particularly good, with CAT members at sub-group and technical meetings
- Facilitation was well done, the matrices for indicators from each group were helpful, the sub-group chairs were committed and hard-working
- The wiki put some people off but ultimately provided one place to “work it all out”
- Trust was maintained from the start, helped keep the process on track

#### 3.1.2 Negative Comments

- There seemed to be some changes to indicator matrices without notice
- Groups needed a water quality expert
- There was early confusion due to excess data, and the process was entirely new
- The wiki would be improved by using deadlines
- The timing of CAT-TAT group starts could have been improved
- Latecomers to the TAT groups were a problem, had to start over
- Confusion between higher level Gorge health indicators and agency performance indicators persisted well into the process.

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## 3.2 Survey Results

As a concluding component of the Columbia Gorge Vital Signs Indicators Project, a web-based survey elicited input from the entire list of participants in the public involvement process. The results are to be used for adaptation and modification of the process in future phases of Gorge management. This report summarizes the results from the survey.

### 3.2.1 Public Involvement

A total of 43 people responded to the online survey, out of 78 contacted by e-mail by Gorge Commission staff. These results were divided roughly equally between members of the Community Advisory Team (CAT, 12), members of the Technical Advisory Team (TAT) and members of technical sub-groups (11 combined), Commissioners (12), and Commission staff (7), with 3 members of the public who merely observed. Eighty percent of these respondents attended two or more meetings, either in person or by phone. Of the 10 people who dropped out of the process short of this amount of attendance, 9 did so because of personal time constraints. The other commented that s/he did not think her/his comments would make any difference.

Of the 43 respondents, 17 answered only the first two questions (placing themselves in a group and noting they attended more than two meetings). The make-up of this group of 17 included 8 Commission members, 3 technical sub-group members, and 2 each of project staff, public observers, and CAT members.

### 3.2.2 Public Process

Three survey questions relate to overall impressions of the public involvement process. The first asked whether respondents felt their views were valued. Well over three-quarters (84%) said either Yes or Most of the Time. One other respondent noted the unnecessarily “doctoral” level of some technical leaders’ discussions.

Another question asked how well respondents would rate the quality of the overall process. Just under three quarters (73%) said either Excellent or Good. The three comments copied below illustrate the range of opinions captured both in the clear majority noted here, and in the remainder of responses:

There was an impression given by certain people involved that this process was an inconvenience, and not really something that would alter the MO of the Commission. It seemed a number of the more difficult decisions were deferred rather than addressed. The process didn't seem entirely genuine and open, as though decisions were already made about the direction of the GC, and this was just a hoop that needed to be jumped through for appearances.

Political process was OK, technical work was not.

I wanted a Very Good! in here but since it wasn't there, I'll have to go for GOOD! For such a short, time-constrained process, I think the technical folks, staff, and the community did a good job. The



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quality of the process was affected by the rapid timeline. But, on the other hand, a quick and dirty timeline does tend to focus us. So, overall, it might not have been a bad thing to have a less than 6 month timeline.

Finally, when asked how pleased they are with the results, 88% said either Very Pleased or Somewhat Pleased. Comments in this case suggested a clear concern with follow-up work (e.g. “still a lot of work to be done”) which is seen to be essential for the process to have made any difference at all. These results were expanded upon in the question about how confident respondents are that the Gorge Commission will follow through with tracking the Vital Signs Indicators that were developed. While 50% of respondents were Very Confident that follow-through would occur, the remainder fell into the Somewhat Confident and Not Very Confident categories. Comments emphasized the importance of not losing either momentum or public involvement, and of keeping the focus on the indicators rather than getting hijacked by day-to-day business.

### **3.2.3 Providing Information**

Two questions addressed information and how it was provided. Clarity of information provided by five different sources – the advisory team charters, the consultant Jeff Tryens, project staff, the wiki/moodle site, and the Commission web site – was consistently rated by large majorities to be either Very Clear or Somewhat Clear. For the first three categories, the combined Very/Somewhat Clear was over 80%. The two web-based sources of information had the largest Don’t Know/Not Applicable responses (23% for wiki, 39% for Commission site), and the few comments suggested this was because some people did not draw at all from electronic sources of information.

The question about technical information – whether it was applied in a timely manner, whether it was clear, whether it was appropriately used, and whether questions about it were answered – revealed a similar set of clear majorities responding Strongly Agree or Somewhat Agree, all well over the 80% mark when Strongly/Somewhat Agree were combined. One open-ended comment expressed concern that air and water quality were two very significant areas that had no technical experts brought onto the team to address them.

### **3.2.4 Meeting Process**

Three questions related to specific aspects of meeting conduct. One asked how well specific components of the project worked: size of advisory group or sub-team, number of meetings, frequency of meetings, participation via conference calls, communicating directly with staff, and use of the wiki site. Each of these received large majorities (80 to 90%) in the Very Well and Somewhat Well categories, *except* for use of the wiki site. More than a third (39%) responded Somewhat Poorly or Very Poorly in respect to use of the wiki, and a further 15% didn’t know, in line with comments suggesting that use of the wiki was frustrating and confusing, was avoided outright or was only used for genuine interaction by CAT members and not by TAT members. Another question addressing the

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productivity of using the wiki site found that nearly half (45%) of respondents answering this question felt the interaction on the wiki site was either Somewhat Unproductive or Not At All Productive. One person (only) commented that the wiki site was a terrific idea!

The question addressing the *productivity* of various types of meetings found majority responses in the Very and Somewhat Productive categories for CAT meetings, TAT meetings, sub-group meetings, joint meetings, interaction with own team members, and interactions with Commission staff. Interactions with staff received a 100% rating outside of Don't Know/Not Applicable. The Somewhat Unproductive category was greatest for the prioritization of indicators process with Jeff Tryens, though Very and Somewhat Productive still summed to over 75% on this point. On this part of the process, one comment notes:

I would have liked to have seen the indicators prioritized more rapidly and according to several prioritization areas. For example, prioritizing by available data, by urgency of need (do we need to know what our air quality is NOW, not in 2 years, for example); would have liked to have seen how some of the urban areas and elected officials would prioritize the list.

Interaction with sub-groups also had a higher Somewhat Unproductive rating (24%). Again, the wiki site appears not to have worked well for just under half the respondents (42%). Notably, 23% of respondents probably did not use the site at all, choosing Don't Know/Not Applicable.

For the most part, the advisory team meetings, attended by both CAT and TAT members, were perceived to proceed quite well. Over 90% of respondents chose Strongly Agree or Somewhat Agree that participant discussions were encouraged and input was valued. The remaining specific process issues received only slightly lower marks: a strong majority chose Strongly Agree or Somewhat Agree responses to questions about whether the chair was knowledgeable about the issues at play in the Gorge (85%); whether the chair was knowledgeable about the National Scenic Area Act and the goals of the Gorge Commission (80%); whether team meetings were kept on task (77%); and whether discussions were well-managed (81%). Comments on this question, however, reveal some concerns about individuals bringing bias and inflexible world views to meetings. Several comments here related to those made on other questions about the perception that decisions were made outside of CAT meetings that left that group feeling excluded from decision making.

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### 3.2.5 SUMMARY

In general, the public involvement process designed and implemented by the Gorge Commission to establish Vital Signs Indicators appears to have received consistently high marks from the majority of participants who responded to the survey. One comment in particular puts the process in a useful perspective:

The overall experience was a great first attempt to further the work. I applaud the staff, the Commissioners and Jeff for trying to herd a bunch of cats in to consensus. I think we are going in the right direction.

This comment takes into account the “first attempt” and the fact that this is by no means a completed process. The “bunch of cats” is an apt comment on any public process involving potentially volatile content and opinions. Other summary comments concurred, noting for example that careful vetting of chairs is important, and that clarity of goals is periodically elusive in a complex project such as this.

Several comments suggested the weighting of CAT and TAT opinions and input was biased in favor of the technical group rather than the community group. Specific comments to this effect included the lack of technical expertise on air and water quality, which was seen negatively by some CAT members, since these two issues are so important to the local community. Finally, differing perspectives exist on tracking build-out, for example whether non-urban or maximum build-out is most important to gain the full picture of Gorge health.

Without wishing to give any one person undue weight, one longer comment provided concise input that served to summarize a number of concerns across all questions:

Suggestion #1: involve the public at all phases, including phase 2, where as it is proposed now is an agency self-audit process, without any public input or oversight until a final report is issued at the end of phase 3.

Suggestion #2: post the entire wiki comments on the GC website, rather than force the public to figure out where and how to get a hardcopy once they have figured out the info is out there. This should be an open, transparent process, not a hide the pea shell game.

Suggestion #3: make sure charters are clear, concise, correct and consistent. If one team charter says one thing and another team charter is conflicting, the teams can't interact on the same level.

Suggestion #4: make sure the facilitator is there to facilitate and not control the process. It is still unfortunate to me that no enforcement or compliance indicators were included (nor were) little indicators important to gorge residents.

It was particularly notable how well-regarded the Gorge Commission staff is. This provides a very strong basis for the next phases of Gorge/public interaction, suggesting that staff may provide the best focal point upon which to make any adjustments to the public involvement process.

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## 4.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

Following the completion and analysis of the survey, INR notes here a number of potential steps that could help the Commission retain and build public support for the ongoing efforts they are making with the Vital Indicators process.

1. To the degree possible, support ongoing staff interactions with the public, thereby building on the strong existing goodwill. This may mean providing several points of access, both online and person-to-person. It could include developing an e-mail list for updates, a printed newsletter, an Indicator-specific series of public meetings, a liaison group, or other solutions. To have this level of goodwill at the outset of such a long-term project is a tremendous strategic advantage which should not be wasted.
2. Adjust the level of involvement of the Community Advisory Group for the next iteration of the process, to reduce the sense of marking time, exclusion, or confusion of effort that plagued the beginning of this process.
3. Develop a plan for credibly addressing air and water quality with trusted technical input. This is perceived, rightly or wrongly, by community members as a crucial neglected area.
4. Consider ways to provide buildout scenarios for public review and input, with careful definitions of what each scenario means and what assumptions are included. Expect very well-informed questions, just as much as you expect “soapbox” stands on particular issues.
5. Carefully consider who is to chair any new community advisory groups, seeking to identify chairs who do not advocate for particular positions but instead for a fair and balanced process.
6. Do not lose momentum. The Vital Indicators process has the potential to engage the community in designing a sustainable future, building on trust that is irreplaceable. One way to enhance that trust is to continue to make and share progress.

