

HOOD RIVER NEWS

Mt. Hood Summit spans range of issues

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By RaeLynn Ricarte

Two federal officials want to bridge a crevasse of differing ideologies over the use of resource land on Mt. Hood.

The goal of U.S. Reps. Greg Walden and Earl Blumenauer to span that gap seems mired with difficulty. But Walden is confident that consensus can be reached on a number of outstanding issues.

"I think the mountain is large enough to accommodate the multiple uses that people desire – as long as they aren't doing environmental damage," he said.

But there appears to be no easy answer to the question of how best to protect watersheds and wildlife habitat. An example of the polarized viewpoints that exist over the issue was evidenced at Monday's "Mt. Hood Summit II: A Vision for the Future."

Two panelists invited by Walden and Blumenauer to speak about forest health and the ecosystem at Timberline Lodge evidenced the sharply differing opinions. The large audience of about 300 people was informed by Tom Partin, president of the American Forest Resource Council, that unmanaged wilderness areas filled with diseased and dying trees were susceptible to fire danger that destroyed resources. Conversely, Regna Merritt, executive director of the Oregon Natural Resources Council, enthusiastically supported a new proposal by U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden to preserve 160,000 more acres of wilderness on Mt. Hood and in the Columbia River Gorge.

"We think forest health and community health go hand in hand," said Partin, reiterating that a sustainable yield of timber promoted a healthy forest and provided needed jobs.

"Roads, clearcuts and dams have devastated what was once pristine in our national forests," said Merritt, who advocated for no logging, mining, roadbuilding or pesticide use.

These same arguments were also aired at the first summit held by Walden and Blumenaur last year.

New to the 2004 forum was a discussion on Wyden's draft Lewis and Clark Wilderness Act that was released publicly this spring.

Supporters of the plan contend it will leave an environmental legacy for future generations and strengthen wildlife habitat and watershed protection.

Opponents argue that the plan was created without any study of the economic impact or the existing level of protection already provided by the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Act and other regulations. Wyden is not only seeking to protect more forest, but also 36 miles along four rivers, including 25 miles on the East Fork and five on the Middle Fork of the Hood River.

Also new to the second summit was a presentation by four members of a Transportation and Recreation Vision Panel. Shane Wilson, owner of Discover Bicycles in Hood River, was one of the guest speakers.

He said land-use planning on Mt. Hood needed to equitably address economic, recreational and conservation needs.

"If we expand the wilderness areas without paying attention to the user groups we will upset that delicate balance," he said. "There are more creative ways to take care of this mountain and all of the people who love it."

Dave Riley, general manager for Mt. Hood Meadows, was also seated on the new panel.

He championed consolidating a variety of "overlapping" regulatory plans to provide old growth recovery zones, easily accessible tribal use areas – such as huckleberry fields – and expanded recreational development zones.

"I am very confident that by working together we can create a model that the entire nation will look to as The Management Plan for the urban/rural interface," he said.

Walden and Blumenaur also heard Brian Nakamura, head of the East Fork (Hood River) Irrigation District. He said any new protection measures needed to accommodate the provision of water for agricultural uses. Matthew Garrett, regional manager of the Oregon Department of Transportation, said planning should not impede the efforts of his agency to repair road damage from flooding and provide safe passage for both tourists and freight.

The federal officials also provided time at the summit for public comment in their educational quest to learn more about the areas where about four million people go every year to recreate or seek solitude.

Walden said after hearing from a broad cross section of Oregonians, he and Bluemenaur are ready to begin working on legislation that will address their concerns.

"For me it's a question of how we accommodate the ever increasing demand for access to the mountain," he said.