

THE OREGONIAN

Future of Hood topic of summit

08/07/03

By Michelle Cole

Mount Hood, defining Portland's eastern horizon, provides captivating views, year-round recreation, millions in tourism dollars, pure drinking water and, for those who seek it, blessed solitude.

Unfortunately, says U.S. Rep. Earl Blumenauer, "We're in danger of loving it to death."

In what may be the first event of its kind, Blumenauer, a Democrat, and U.S. Rep. Greg Walden, a Republican, have invited a variety of people representing different perspectives to spend Friday afternoon at Timberline Lodge addressing one question: What do we want the mountain to be?

An estimated 5 million people visit Mount Hood National Forest each year, bringing with them a host of problems shared by other Western urban forests: crime, crowds, trampled trilliums and sullied streams.

Mount Hood's challenges don't approach those of the jammed, smoggy Angeles National Forest in Southern California or even Seattle's pressures upon Mount Rainier National Park. But many here see the need to protect Oregon's treasure now.

The summit comes as a destination golf-and-ski resort proposed for Mount Hood's east flank is being debated -- and as nearby communities grapple with transportation, tourism and economic development.

"There's a great interest in a great mountain," Walden said Wednesday.

"There's ever-increasing demand for access, and sometimes those demands are competing."

At one point early in the last century, Mount Hood was considered for national park status. Nobody is pushing for that today. But conservation groups do plan to use Friday's summit to press for more federally protected wilderness on the mountain.

"We need to protect what remains for future generations," says Regna Merritt, executive director of the Oregon Natural Resources Council.

The council and the Sierra Club want Congress to add about 160,000 acres to the 189,200 acres of protected wilderness within the 1.1 million acre Mount Hood National Forest.

Construction worker Don Mench says he plans to take the day off work in order to share his priority for Mount Hood.

"We're putting a lot of effort into stream restoration and salmon recovery. I want to see those efforts go forward," said Mench, who is active with the Sandy River Basin Watershed Council.

Recreation is also likely to be a dominant theme of Friday's discussions.

Dave Sauerbrey, president of the Mazamas, a climbing and hiking club, says he'll reiterate his group's opposition to the proposed eastside, all-season, ski-and-golf resort. "The Mazamas were organized on the top of that mountain in July of 1894, so we have a large emotional attachment to it from the beginning," he said. "It's important to us to maintain recreational access to those areas and at the same time to protect the environment."

But Dave Riley, vice president and general manager for the Mount Hood Meadows Ski Resort and the Cooper Spur Mountain Resort, says he wants people to realize that only 1 percent of the Mount Hood National Forest is allocated for ski areas.

"When some people say we're 'loving the mountain to death,' the fact is that the ski areas have a small footprint," he said.

Gail Achterman, recently hired as director of the Institute for Natural Resources at Oregon State University, says there's an opportunity to create a bicycle and scenic road system on Mount Hood that's separate from the state highways.

Achterman said she is also concerned about urban forest issues. "We don't like to talk about crime, drugs and dumping," she said. "But there are certain parts of the forest that people I know are really reluctant to recreate in anymore."

A number of people who live and work near Mount Hood want to be sure that Friday's summit also touches on tourism and economic development.

"We have to take stock of where we are," said Mike McCarthy, who grows apples and pears in the Hood River Valley. "There's a lot of room for growth -- in a planned way and in designated areas."

Hoping to lure more visitors from Oregon, Washington and California, Clackamas County earlier this year adopted a new marketing slogan: "Oregon's Mount Hood Territory. Close to Portland . . . A World Away."

Visitors spent more than \$315 million last year in Clackamas County, said Linda Bell, executive director of the county's Tourism Development Council.

Tourism revenues might have been higher, she said, with better public transportation between the airport and one of Oregon's major destinations.

Neither Blumenauer nor Walden expect Friday's summit to translate immediately into congressional action.

"I hope it leads to ongoing discussion of the mountain," Blumenauer said. "Everybody in the Northwest has a stake in this conversation."

Oregonian staff writer Catherine Trevison contributed to this report. Michelle Cole: 503-294-5143; michellecole@news.oregonian.com