

THE OREGONIAN

**Mount Hood summit starts search for a vision**

08/09/03

By Kevin Graham

Neighbors and others who love Mount Hood are best-qualified to work on a plan that will put it to its best use but save it from being overrun, a forest official said Friday at a summit on the future of the mountain.

Nearly 300 people filled a conference room at Timberline Lodge on Friday to discuss the future use and management of Mount Hood and to hear the announcement of a new community-involvement program.

Gary L. Larsen, supervisor for the Mount Hood National Forest, described the U.S. Forest Service's Mount Hood Recreation Initiative, which calls on surrounding communities to develop a vision for public and private recreational use.

Forest officials "don't get to go into a closet and make our grand plan for the forest," Larsen said.

He said he's looking to volunteers to host community meetings during the next year and to brainstorm ways to make sure the natural resources of the mountain and the forest aren't damaged by overuse. About 2.3 million people use the national forest each year, according to the Forest Service.

U.S. Reps. Earl Blumenauer, a Democrat, and Greg Walden, a Republican, invited dozens of people with various interests in Mount Hood to what might have been the first meeting of its kind.

"It's clear that there are some very deep passions about this issue," Walden said after the discussion.

The daylong event consisted of two panel discussions: governing Mount Hood and managing Mount Hood.

Blumenauer said the summit could become an annual event. Meanwhile, he encouraged communities represented Friday to continue crafting their own visions for the area.

Gail Achterman, new director of the Institute for Natural Resources at Oregon State University and a panelist, said many of the roads in the national forest, built to harvest timber and to fight fires, are outdated, and some should be closed.

In addition, state and federal governments working together could improve highway access to the mountain and provide for bicycle lanes and even future rail transportation, Achterman said.

"That's an idea we can sink our teeth around," Blumenauer said later.

State Forester Marvin Brown said key to a sustainable forest are economic, environmental and social values. Any solution to problems that Mount Hood may face must include aspects of all three, he said.

Mount Hood supporter Margo Earley, 72, of the upper Hood River Valley, wasn't at the meeting because she was leading hikers from the East Coast through the area, said her husband, George, 76.

So while his wife, a Sierra Club member, showed visitors how Mount Hood has changed during the years, George Earley shared his vision of preserving the wilderness.

The summit was "a good start," he said. "It's probably 10 years late, but better late than never."

To host a Mount Hood Recreation Initiative discussion, call the U.S. Forest Service's partnership coordinator, Penny Falknor, at 503-668-1725.

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