

Help forge a vision for Mount Hood's future

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by REP. GREG WALDEN and REP. EARL BLUMENAUER

For many Oregonians, Mount Hood is more than a geographic landmark. It plays a major role in our lives. It is an essential element of recreation, economic development, forest practices, water and cultural resources. As the second-most-climbed glaciated peak in the world, Mount Hood is a year-round magnet for tourists, hikers, skiers and nature enthusiasts. It is, in short, Oregon's recreation mountain.

The stresses on Mount Hood, which are due in part to the region's growth, are real and increasing. Today more than 2 million people live within a two-hour drive of the mountain and more than 6 million people visit the area annually. We are deeply concerned about the Mount Hood legacy that we will leave for future generations. That's why it is essential today to plan for the mountain's future so that we don't "love it to death."

Oregonians are no strangers to the process of protecting our most treasured places. In 1986, Congress enacted bi-state legislation to protect the Columbia River Gorge. In 2000, we worked together as a delegation to enact the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act, which outlined land-use and environmental regulations that created the single largest addition of wilderness in Oregon while simultaneously preserving existing recreational opportunities and the local ranching way of life. We think there is a unique opportunity to follow the same path to protect Mount Hood, but in doing so also recognize that the forest has many existing uses, including recreation and serving as a source of economic sustainability for neighboring communities.

Last August we brought 300 people together at Timberline Lodge for a community-wide discussion called, "Mount Hood: A View From the Summit." While participants came from many different points of view, they were able to have a civil conversation, discuss their concerns and make recommendations. Together we covered a range of issues including transportation, recreation, environmental protection, tribal trust obligations, tourism, forestry and community development. We reviewed the history of the mountain and how it is managed today, and we initiated the discussion of what we all wanted for the future.

Our premise was right. The status quo won't work for the future. The demands on the mountain will only increase with time. The response to our "summit," including the wilderness and wild and scenic rivers proposal recently offered by Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., and the proposal to make Mount Hood a national park, demonstrates that there is substantial momentum to take action.

We want to accomplish this by developing a holistic, comprehensive model, as we have done in urban areas with light rail and in rural Oregon with Steens Mountain. In each case we worked with all sides as we crafted an "Oregon Solution" to pressing problems, covering access, development, recreation, resource management and transportation. Now we want to craft an "Oregon Solution" for Mount Hood.

Our goal is to build on the positive experience of 2003 with a second summit, titled "Mount Hood: A Vision for the Future" on June 7 at Timberline Lodge. We want to invite a broad cross section of people to shape bold, alternative visions for the future of Mount Hood. Working together, we will sort them to find common ground and build a consensus for legislation. We recognize that this undertaking will be as difficult as the challenges that face both the mountain and the communities and other competing parties that feel so passionately about their positions.

Our own passions for the mountain convince us that we have an obligation to try.

Our hope is that this year, we can have an even better summit to help develop an agenda that the Oregon delegation in Congress can advance in a bipartisan effort. We invite people who love and care about the mountain to join us. Working together, let's see if we can rekindle a little of that Oregon spirit and leave a new legacy to the next generation of Oregon pioneers.

Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore., represents the Second Congressional District, which includes the 20 counties of Southern, Central and Eastern Oregon.

Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore., represents the Third Congressional District, which includes most of Portland, Multnomah County east of the Willamette River and part of Clackamas County, including Mount Hood.

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