

Wild rivers get a new look from U.S. forest officials

Brittany Allen, Emily Lindstrand

Tuesday, August 06, 2019

Next phase of rivers plan to address added protections, boundaries, user capacities



COURTESY PHOTO - The Zigzag River is one of nine Wild and Scenic Rivers on the Mt. Hood National Forest, with recreation as one of its main 'outstandingly remarkable values.'

A cascade oasis just 20 miles from Portland, Mt. Hood National Forest is home to a host of opportunities for recreation. What makes the natural area unique is its nine nationally recognized Wild and Scenic Rivers.

In 2009, Congress designated nine rivers within the forest as part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, requiring foresters to plan for those waterways' future protection.

"We are blessed on the Mt. Hood National Forest to have so many scenic rivers," said Laura Pramuk, public affairs officer for Mt. Hood National Forest. "It's a pretty large amount of wild and scenic rivers for one forest."

In an effort to look to the future for conservation and management of those rivers, the Forest Service is working on a plan.

Last year, forest officials polled citizens on what they deemed "outstandingly remarkable" or "unique, rare, or exemplary ... significant when compared to other rivers in the region or nation."

Of the 81 miles of waterways in the Mt. Hood National Forest designated as national rivers, some are recognized for their botany, being critical habitats for endangered species, the recreational opportunities they offer, and other features.

"You have to know what you're protecting before you can write the plan," noted Jennifer Watts with the Business and Public Services department of the Mt. Hood National Forest. "In the Pacific Northwest, there's already multiple layers of protection on our rivers. This plan is an added layer because of the congressional designation."

With those qualities in mind, officials are moving ahead to another public input period and asking people to voice their opinions on what the user capacity and boundaries of the rivers should be. Affected by the plan are the Collawash River, Eagle Creek, East Fork Hood River, South Fork Roaring River, Fifteenmile Creek, Fish Creek, Middle Fork Hood River, South Fork Clackamas River and Zigzag River.

Community expectations

So far, conservation groups like Bark and the Clackamas River Basin Council seem to approve of the overall mission of the plan: to add protections to the rivers on the forest.

Cheryl McGinnis, executive director of the Clackamas River Basin Council, appreciates that the proposed plan balances sustaining natural resources with providing opportunities for recreation. She noted that the Clackamas River's South Fork provides valuable spots to access the water because of its proximity to the Portland area.

"We share an interest with the Forest Service in seeing recreation open to all users . . . not all users at one time, which comes out in the report," she said. "It's important that we preserve and protect the river for future generations. Some areas show overuse, or behavioral issues that require more education."

McGinnis also noted that the plan would support the Clackamas River Basin Council's goal of creating sustainable habitats for fish. "Bolstering fish returns and protecting the water quality is something we're all engaged in," she said, adding that proposed trail maintenance in the plan would reduce sediment loading in the Clackamas River.

While discussing the proposed plan's focus on the Eagle Creek River, Estacada resident David Bugni said he didn't find anything he considered harmful. "I didn't see anything in the regulations for Eagle Creek that was a potential red flag," he said.

Bugni is involved with the development of the Eagle Creek Community Forest, a wooded area that spans more than 1,000 acres and will focus on the area's long-term maintenance needs, fish and wildlife necessities, topography and the implementation of recreational trails. Because of the area that the plan focuses on, Bugni noted it will not affect the creation of the community forest.

"The plan is focused within the Mt. Hood National Forest, which is upstream from the community forest. It will have little impact one way or the other," he said.

McGinnis sees value in protecting Wild and Scenic Rivers around the region. "(The Clackamas River) is a great gem we have in our county," she said.

Bark has often been a key player in public input periods for the forest, especially those related to timber sales. Though not as involved in this plan, policy coordinator Brenna Bell hopes after completed the policy will "change the Mt. Hood National Forest's behavior."

"Often we see lines drawn on a map, but the impact on the ground hasn't changed," Bell noted.

She added she'd be interested to see "what it really means to protect and enhance wild and scenic rivers if commercial timber sales are still being planned and how these management plans will change that."

All work and no play?

"We as an agency based on the outstandingly remarkable values can take actions to enhance those with this plan," Watts told Pamplin Media Group.

To those concerned about the effects a new management plan might have on their weekend play plans, Watts said, "Where rivers had recreation as an outstandingly remarkable value, we'll look for

management actions that protect and enhance those opportunities while retaining the free-flowing nature of the rivers. Where recreation wasn't already a value, it'll be dependent on how recreation would affect those values."

For now, Watts encourages people with any interest in the Mt. Hood National Forest and its waterways to review the scoping letter on the plan process at www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=54674 and contributed their feedback on what they think the boundaries and user capacities of the rivers should be.

"Public involvement is a key element of the land management planning process," according to a statement from the forest service. "The National Environmental Policy Act and Wild and Scenic Rivers Act provides the framework for public participation in the federal decision making process."

Electronic comments can be submitted at cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public/CommentInput?Project=54674 no later than Monday, Aug. 26.

Written comments can be turned in via mail or hand delivered to the Zigzag Ranger Station between the hours of 7:45 a.m. to noon and 1-4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays.

Comments must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic comments.

When mailing, please address your comments as such: Wild and Scenic River Planning Comments, 70220 E. Highway 26, Zigzag 97049 or BLM Northwest Oregon District, Wild and Scenic River Planning Comments, Attn: Whitney Wirthlin, 1717 Fabry Road S.E., Salem 97306.

For questions, contact project team leader Jennie O'Connor Card at 406-522-2537 or jennie.oconnorcard@usda.gov