

STATEMENT FOR THE NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS, AND PUBLIC LANDS
SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING
REPRESENTATIVE EARL BLUMENAUER
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Chairman Neguse and Ranking Member Fulcher, thank you for having me today. Thank you also to Bobby Brunoe, the Natural Resources Manager for the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs, who is joining us today by Webex conference. I am proud to be here to speak on behalf of H.R. 7665, the Mt. Hood and Columbia River Gorge Recreation Enhancement and Conservation or “REC” Act.

Since 2002, when we began planning the first Mt. Hood Summit, I have listened carefully to hundreds of stakeholders and reviewed thousands of comments from people who live, work, and play in and around Mt. Hood and the Gorge. Everyone wants these areas, and the benefits they provide, to be preserved and enhanced for future generations. My intention has always been to build trust and collaboration among stakeholders and to strike a balance for the many needs that Mt. Hood and the Gorge fulfill.

I also recognize that the federal government must improve its partnership with Native Americans. It is only working in partnership with Tribes to co-manage land and improve their ability to exercise Treaty rights, that we advance the stewardship and conservation value of public lands.

I am very pleased that my bill contains a first-in-the-nation provision that allows for federal-Tribal co-management of Treaty Resource Emphasis Zones. The bill directs the Forest Service to co-develop a management plan with the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs to protect and enhance Tribal Treaty resources within agreed-upon Treaty Resource Emphasis Zones.

The legislation also enhances recreation, transportation, and conservation on Mt. Hood and the Columbia River Gorge. The proposed 350,000 acre expanded National Recreation Area will prioritize resources to accommodate the growing number of people visiting the area for recreational purposes, while ensuring protections for Tribal treaty rights, carbon storage and sequestration, and ecological values like native plants and wildlife. The bill’s transportation section complements the sustainable recreation management planning efforts by creating Access Committees for the Mt. Hood National Forest and the Columbia River Gorge. The Committees will create comprehensive, coordinated, multi-jurisdictional plans to improve safe, equitable, and ecologically sustainable access to Mt. Hood and the Gorge.

As wildfire is an ever-present reality on Mt. Hood and in the Gorge, the bill also requires a wildfire risk assessment for the Mount Hood National Forest, the Columbia River Gorge, and any private, state, or tribal land adjacent to those areas. The assessment includes a plan to implement cost-effective, non-commercial, science-based restoration treatments and wildfire mitigation techniques informed by traditional indigenous knowledge to improve wildfire resilience and reduce wildfire risk and damage.

In addition, the bill designates over 7,500 acres of proposed Wilderness, 93 new miles of Wild and Scenic Rivers, and ensures adequate management and protection of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail, building on the conservation enhancements in the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009. It will also improve search and rescue and other emergency response on the Mount Hood National Forest and in the Columbia River Gorge by creating a pathway for reimbursement of local public agencies who perform these essential services on federal public land. Finally, and importantly, the bill includes authorized appropriations which will help ensure that these priorities and projects do not become unfunded mandates for the Forest Service.

This bill recognizes that we are in a new reality with climate change, including catastrophic wildfires and greater stress on water resources, and increased demand on the land and surrounding communities. It's forward-looking and deals with the opportunities and challenges of resource management and protection.

This legislation represents many years of listening to community members and refining ideas. It also remains a work in progress. I look forward to continuing this community-focused effort to protect and enhance management of Mount Hood and the Columbia River Gorge.

I am also grateful to be able to support the other legislative proposals being heard in this Subcommittee today, including the Roadless Area Conservation Act. Mr. Gallego and I, as well as many others here today, share the goal of protecting treasured areas, especially old growth and mature trees, within the National Forest System from development, logging, and roadbuilding.

Thank you for the opportunity to have the REC Act heard before your committee today, along with these other legislative proposals which I strongly support.