



Oregon

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**Testimony
Before the Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health,
Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives**

**Hearing on the Mt. Hood Stewardship Legacy Act
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Thank you for the opportunity to speak before this committee about the transportation challenges facing the State of Oregon's Mt. Hood region. I want to thank Congressman Walden and Congressman Blumenauer for their vision for protecting the amazing resource we have in Mt. Hood. Having been involved in the process that produced this legislation, I have been impressed by the way you have worked with people from various perspectives who have a passionate interest in the future of Mt. Hood. Despite the challenges, you have managed to strike a balance between competing interests that will preserve the mountain for future generations. Oregon's Governor, Ted Kulongoski, asked me to pass along his gratitude for your hard work, and he is very hopeful that you will achieve success with this proposal.

Unlike many of our nation's wild places, Mt. Hood is located just 45 miles from an urban area of nearly two million people, with more streaming in every day. With the outdoor ethos that defines life in the Pacific Northwest, Mt. Hood is a much-loved destination, and its many recreation attractions are easily accessible by a high-capacity highway that moves people within a stone's throw—almost literally—of the mountain's slopes.

There are two primary routes to the Mt. Hood area, which boasts a number of ski areas, resorts, hiking trails, and snow recreation opportunities. Highway 26 connects the Portland metropolitan region to Mt. Hood and points beyond, traveling through the scenic gateway communities that rely on visitors to the mountain for their livelihood. An average of 8500 vehicles per day take Highway 26 all the way to Mt. Hood, with peak traffic volumes on weekends during the ski season nearly double that level.

Most of these vehicles bring people to recreate in the shadow of the mountain, but many also pass through the area. Highway 26 provides one of Oregon's most important and highly-traveled east-west routes across the Cascade Mountains, carrying a significant volume of goods and people between Portland and central and eastern Oregon. Consequently, maintaining and enhancing the mobility of through-traffic, particularly freight, on this route is an important goal of the State of Oregon.

The other major route to the mountain is Highway 35, which winds its way from the windsurfing mecca of Hood River in the Columbia Gorge through the fertile agricultural lands of the Hood River Valley—which produces some of the best pears and cherries in the world—and drops travelers at the foot of the mountain. While Highway 35 carries a significantly lower volume of traffic to the Mt. Hood area, it is just as important to the communities it serves. The fate of Highway 35 is strongly tied to Interstate 84, which connects it to the Portland metro area and eastern Oregon and provides most of the traffic that travels Highway 35 to Mount Hood.

Because of their importance to the state's transportation network, the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) has a very strong interest in maintaining the safety and integrity of these routes. ODOT has put a very heavy emphasis on safety in this area, and we have invested significant resources in safety improvements that will pay off in fewer crashes and improved mobility.

While Highway 26, and to a lesser extent Highway 35, are very efficient at getting people to Mt. Hood, movement within the recreation area immediately surrounding the mountain is much more constrained. Simply put, there are too many cars at peak times for a transportation system never designed to handle this volume of traffic, leading to challenges such as congestion and safety

problems. With thousands of cars traveling within the relatively small recreation center of the mountain, crashes, gridlock, and driver impatience are inevitable.

Having viable highways is vital to the mountain communities that rely so heavily on visitors for their economic well-being. Our challenge is to achieve the balance necessary to maintain the context of communities while safely serving the transportation needs of residents, freight haulers, visitors, commuters, and travelers to eastern Oregon.

The State of Oregon is grateful that the legislation before this committee would help us address these challenges. This bill recognizes the importance of the transportation system to the future of Mt. Hood and the region's communities and sets up a process that would engage key stakeholders in the region in a collaborative effort to develop long-term solutions to address these challenges.

The legislation directs the U.S. Forest Service to work with the State of Oregon to develop an integrated, multi-modal transportation plan for the Mt. Hood region that will develop solutions to transportation challenges and promote appropriate economic development, preserve environmental values, and enhance safety. This plan would cover the recreation areas surrounding the mountain as well as the Highway 26 and Highway 35 corridors and the gateway communities along them. The legislation states that this process should conform with Oregon's transportation planning process, and asks that the Oregon Department of Transportation develop the plan in collaboration with key stakeholders, including local governments in the area and the Forest Service. If this legislation passes, ODOT would convene a stakeholder group to provide direction on the development of the plan.

The legislation asks ODOT to address both how to move people *to* the Mt. Hood region and how to move people *within* the Mt. Hood region; I would add that the plan should address how to move people *through* the area. It envisions identifying transportation alternatives that would move more people but in fewer cars to and from key recreation destinations. To accomplish this, the plan would examine possible solutions such as park and ride facilities that would provide transit service from gateway communities to the recreation areas on Mt. Hood, and intermodal transportation centers on the mountain that would allow people to leave their car behind and take alternative forms of transportation to and between recreation areas. We would also use the plan to address highway improvements that will improve safety and mobility of through traffic, particularly freight, because Highway 26 and Highway 35 are both designated freight routes on the National Highway System. Just as importantly, the plan will identify means of paying for the projects it envisions, including federal grants, public-private partnerships, incremental tax financing, and other tools. We hope this will inject a measure of reality in the process and keep the focus on what is financially feasible.

ODOT believes that the transportation plan envisioned by this legislation would play an important role in preserving the scenic and environmental values that makes Mt. Hood so special as well as promoting the businesses and communities that rely on visitors for their economic well-being and improving safety. I look forward to working with Congressman Walden and Congressman Blumenauer to make this vision a reality, and I thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.