

U.S. House of Representatives

Committee on Natural Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands

Hearing on H.R. 5093 – Wind River Administrative Site Conveyance Act

March 1, 2022, 10:00AM EST

Testimony of Skamania County Commissioner Thomas Lannen

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher and Members of the Committee, my name is Tom Lannen and I'm a County Commissioner from Skamania County, Washington.

Skamania County is a rural community of about 12,000 people 45 minutes east of Portland, Oregon in Southwest Washington State. Our community serves as Washington State's gateway to the Columbia River Gorge and offers stunning natural landscape vistas that are protected by the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Act (Gorge Act), which places significant development restrictions on substantial portions of land within our community.

Within my county, there are only three small urban areas that are exempt from the Gorge Act's land-use protections. Much of my county is also within the Gifford Pinchot National Forest and still more land is state forests that are exempt from property taxes. All told, only about 2 percent of Skamania County's land generates a steady flow of property tax revenue to support public safety, schools, and other local government services.

Historically, my community relied on the timber industry to sustain it, which provided family-wage jobs to generations of Skamania County residents. As this industry began to rapidly decline with the Endangered Species Act listing of the Northern Spotted Owl in 1990 coupled with the implementation of the Gorge Act, jobs for families and revenue sources for local government services began to disappear in Skamania County.

These are serious challenges my community has struggled with over the last several decades and the work continues to diversify our economy, but the reality is that the revenue lost from the changes to the timber industry and land use restrictions may never be fully recovered.

But the work continues, which is what brings me to this committee today. I'm asking for your support of Congresswoman Herrera Beutler's Wind River Administrative Site Conveyance Act, which will help to continue efforts to repurpose an abandoned Forest Service administrative site into something that is a win-win for both the agency and my community.

To provide some historical context. In the early 20th Century, the Forest Service established three administrative sites in Skamania County's Wind River Valley — the Hemlock Ranger Station, the Wind River Experiment Station, and the Wind River Nursery, which was the Forest Service's first nursery and was established to replant forests burned by wildfires. These three administrative sites operated for nearly 90 years.

In the late 1990's, changing Forest Service priorities led to the closure of the Wind River Site, and with it a loss of approximately 300 seasonal and full-time jobs within Skamania County. This was another blow

to my community's economy and since its closure many of the structures at the Wind River Site have fallen into a deferred maintenance status and a state of disrepair.

Recognizing the Forest Service no longer had a use for or resources to adequately maintain the Wind River Site coupled with Skamania County's need and desire to create economic development activities, a collaborative effort was initiated to envision a new use for the site that also honored its historic roots.

As such, in 2000, with Congresses approval, the Forest Service conveyed 187 acres of the Wind River Site. The agency also entered into several long-term agreements with Skamania County that enabled local dollars to maintain and restore many of the structures. The arrangement allows the Forest Service to responsibly reduce its maintenance backlog obligations while providing the county with ways to grow its economy and tax revenue. A win-win.

Today, in partnership with a local nonprofit consisting of retired Forest Service employees, the County has made considerable and meaningful progress towards restoring the Wind River Site. At the County's expense, these efforts include infrastructure upgrades to the site's water mains, installation of separate electrical meters on some of the structures, and the full restoration of two residential structures with a third currently under contract for lead abatement.

These structures would have fallen into an increased state of disrepair had it not been for the County's collaborative efforts with the Forest Service. Instead, some of the buildings are restored, leased, and generating revenue, which the County uses to reinvest in additional restoration efforts on the site.

Looking towards the future, passage of the Wind River Administrative Site Conveyance Act will provide the county with an additional 23.4 acres of the site and enable us to continue our restorations efforts as well as improvements on commercial-use structures with the potential to provide significant economic activity for my community.

Additionally, we are hopeful to proceed with efforts to create a forest interpretative center with a reproduction of a Forest Service lookout tower so that current and future generations can understand the importance of our nation's forest.

Thank you for your time this morning and for your consideration of this legislation, which will give my community the opportunity to continue to strengthen our fragile economy.