

November 20, 2008
Mount St. Helens Congressional Advisory Committee Meeting
Skamania Lodge

**Remarks for Regional Forester Mary Wagner
November 20, 2008**

Thank you for inviting me to have a conversation with you tonight. I appreciate the opportunity to visit with you about Mount St. Helens (MSH), a key icon for our region, nation, and the world.

I would like to introduce two members of my staff and one of our national Directors. They are: Jim Bedwell, Washington Office Director of Recreation, Heritage, and Volunteer Resources; Claire Lavendel, Regional Director of Recreation, Lands, & Mineral Resources; and Tom Mulder, MSH National Volcanic Monument Manager.

From what I've seen and heard, your Committee is made up of people who care about MSH, not just by your words, but by your deeds.

I know that most of you on this Committee represent organizations that have been partners and supporters.

Cowlitz, Lewis, and Skamania Counties have provided generous support of Title II funds under the Secure Rural Schools Self-Determination Act of 2000, which provided \$780,000 last year for Monument road repair, volunteer housing, and recreation maintenance projects.

With leadership and support from county commissioners and the State, our neighboring communities are enthusiastically and proactively building alliances to keep facilities open and serve the public. Our partnerships with tourism groups, chambers, and neighbors have benefited these efforts.

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Our partnership with Discover Your Northwest and Executive Director Jim Adams provides staff and services across the Monument, which we highly value.

I thank each of you for your commitment, time, and effort, and I recognize your vision as community leaders will help Congressional members seek the best course of action for the future.

I have been on the job about a month now, but in that month's time, I have been to the mountain, met with employees, and have a sense of the totality of the Monument program, which I'll discuss in more detail in a few minutes.

I acknowledge the demanding challenges associated with operating MSH. But first, I want to talk about some of our incredible successes.

Recreational groups volunteer more than 13,000 hours of assistance on critical programs that serve the public and welcome visitors.

Volunteers help keep trails open, develop educational programs, and assist with invasive weed control. Their work is a true testament to how people care about MSH.

The Forest has also devoted time and energy into re-vitalizing a dedicated non-profit partner, the Mount St. Helens Institute. This partnership continues to gain traction and offer services to Monument visitors, including over 9,000 hours of volunteer work in the past year. This work includes:

- Staffing the Johnson Ridge Observatory and providing interpretation to visitors all across the Monument.
- Acquiring grants to upgrade interpretive displays.
- | • Providing guided hikes and presentations in conjunction with community sponsors.
- Supporting visitors on the climbing route and in the backcountry; restoring hiking trails and doing conservation projects.
- | • Interacting with school groups (both virtually and in the classroom) and sharing our passion for the volcanic and ecological discoveries occurring at the Monument.

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The Forest Service also supported a \$35 thousand grant to the Institute through our "Kids in the Woods" program. This grant benefited 400 children in Washington.

Another important successful partnership is with Washington State Parks. From October 2000 through spring 2007, the State operated the Mount St. Helens Visitor Center at Silver Lake under a special-use permit. (The visitor center was built on state land, but it was a Forest Service facility.) We successfully transferred the building to State Parks in 2007, and they have continued as strong partners providing service to our visitors.

Many of these measures were born of necessity, but we made a positive discovery about the passion and caring many have for the Monument, and we have incorporated this passion and caring into our agency philosophy.

We embrace "strategic partnerships" and "citizen stewardship" as ways of doing business.

The fact that we can leverage our dollars and work aids us immeasurably and truly makes this the people's mountain.

But there are areas that cause you concern...the loss of interpreters, seeing the Coldwater Visitor Center retired, and concerns about access to the mountain. It's important, however, to remember managing the Monument is managing for a totality of programs and experiences.

Monument visitors want to: feel safe, be amazed and informed; know that this Monument will endure for future generations; and they also want to witness a recovering landscape in ways that protect it rather than degrade it.

When the Monument was established in 1982, Congress gave us the responsibility of:

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- Providing for natural recovery and processes (letting natural processes - both geological and ecological - unfold generally unimpeded).
- Ensuring public health and safety (monitoring volcanic hazards, protecting visitors, and downstream communities).
- Permitting opportunities for scientific study and research on this dynamic, ever-changing volcanic landscape.
- Protecting the significant features of the Monument.
- Providing for recreation and interpretation.

We look for ways to weave objectives together so they can complement each other.

We adjust our management strategies as issues arise and as public interests evolve. However, our legislated monument mission remains steady.

I cannot underestimate the importance of research to the Monument.

The Monument has 110,000 acres, and roughly one-third of it is designated as a priority research area. This area includes the crater, the volcano flanks, the pumice plain, and the Spirit Lake basin.

In the scientific community, MSH is known nationally and internationally as the best studied volcano in the world for geological and ecological processes.

The Monument and its surroundings are ideally suited to study how ecosystems recover from disturbance both with and without human intervention. It is one of very few places where scientists and land managers can make these comparisons.

The Pacific Northwest Research Station has led the studies of the ecological recovery at MSH for over 28 years. Science of great value has been produced by PNW and its university and government partners.

Additionally, USGS has provided important work in conducting geological research and tracking volcanic activities for public safety purposes.

Our vision for the Monument is that we, working with our partners, are the thoughtful stewards of the land and champions for public safety, resource protection, research, education and interpretation, and recreation.

We want people from around the country and around the world to be attracted by the spectacular beauty, the outstanding recreation opportunities, the compelling stories of volcanism, and an ecosystem reborn at MSH.

We work closely with communities and private enterprises to jointly invest in making this vision a reality.

You asked about our budget from the top down to the ground.

The budget process begins when we respond to a call from the Office of Management & Budget (OMB) for data for the next fiscal year. OMB puts together the President's budget, which the President submits to Congress when he gives his State of Union address. Congress appropriates the money in an Appropriations Bill (beginning October 1), and then OMB apportions it to the agency.

Our national office then distributes the funding to the nine regions primarily through the use of budget criteria. When we receive our budget in the Pacific Northwest Region, funding is allocated to each of the 17 National Forests, including the Gifford Pinchot National Forest.

The Monument's budget is a part of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest budget. Some funding sources, such as capital investment projects, are line items from Congress, and projects compete and are selected for funding through Regional processes. Other funding sources include special initiatives such as the Recreation Site Improvement (RSI) funding and the National Priority List (NPL), a capital investment initiative.

Funding comes in various categories critical for effective management of the monument including funding for recreation, Wilderness, trails, and heritage. Funding is also necessary for managing facilities (both administrative and recreation), roads, the Spirit Lake Tunnel and Coldwater and Castle Lakes spillways, wildlife and fisheries, vegetation, forest products, and monitoring among others.

There are additional investments we make in the Monument, such as funding for law enforcement and the Monument manager's salary.

Research, as I mentioned before, is an important activity on the Monument, and they too have their own budget structure from Congress.

These myriad sources of funding give us complexity but also flexibility. And certainly I can't speak of the Monument's budget without addressing the incredible ability to stretch and leverage funds with the tremendous support of partners like you.

One of our strengths is our strong relationships, strong partnerships, and the citizen stewardship evidenced in the tender loving care of MSH. Our volunteers include diverse groups such as the:

- Mt. St. Helens Institute.
- Discover Your Northwest (formerly NWIA).
- Washington Trails Association.
- Back Country Horsemen.
- St. Helens Track Riders Snowmobile Club.
- Americorps.
- NW Service Academy.
- Departments within the State of Washington.
- All your Counties.
- SW Washington Tourism Coalition.
- Weyerhaeuser.
- USGS.
- Universities.

And many other partners -- too numerous to mention but just as important.

We also work congenially in partnership with our counterparts in the National Park Service as well as other agencies such as State Parks. We exchange ideas, skills, and even loan staff. The Monument is renowned for its training and development of captivating interpretive talks, and we exchange ideas about interpretive displays and visitor facilities between agencies.

Fees collected under the National Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) are also an important fiscal component for providing and enhancing services all over the Monument. This Act has not been without controversy, but we found a strong support for fees by many visitors and the Recreation Resource Advisory Committee.

I recognize that our national monuments, along with national recreation and scenic areas, deserve special emphasis. I will be working with my new Director and leadership team to advance the emphasis on these special areas.

There is ongoing discussion at the national level about an initiative to showcase nationally designated areas. At this point national monuments, including MSH, receive priority consideration as special initiatives or increased funding opportunities arise.

I want to acknowledge that times are tough across the United States. The economy is tight (to say the least), and *all* federal and state agencies are currently challenged now and into the foreseeable future. But I do have faith in the strength of this country and its economy to rebound.

Let's plan to invest in these great natural resources and attractions like here at MSH. I plan to bring all tools to bear, including providing jobs through our Curlew and Timber Lake Job Corps.

Although I don't have a magic wand that will solve all of our collective concerns, I'd like to share what we have done to date; what we will do; and ask what you can do to help too.

What have we done?

We have a long tradition of developing positive working relationships with our community neighbors and counties, which have been key to the management of MSH since before the 1980 eruption.

We have been emphasizing an innovative recreation strategy for MSH that offers Monument-wide visitor services. It includes:

Focusing financial and human resources on the highly utilized visitor center at Johnston Ridge, on unique backcountry experiences, and on interpretive sites throughout the Monument. For example, we are funded in FY 2010 for approximately one-half million dollars for deferred maintenance at Johnston Ridge Observatory

- Making a courageous decision to retire the Coldwater Visitor Center to benefit the larger delivery of services across the Monument.

We have developed approaches to meeting visitor needs, while protecting people and resources in a cost-effective way, such as:

- Partnering efforts I mentioned earlier, including with MSH Institute, Washington State Parks, USGS, and Discover Your Northwest, among others.

- Advancing citizen stewardship by maximizing the volunteer program.

The Monument received supplemental funding for three years (2004-06) to stabilize the recreation program, while we transitioned toward our strategic resource plan and allowed the Institute to grow. We have also supplemented their funding in 2008 and 2009.

Roads damaged during the 2006 and 2007 floods are being repaired. During the summer of 2008, when we learned of the critical needs on the access (Road 99) to Windy Ridge, Regional leadership made support for this effort a high priority and acquired essential funding to support repairs needed for public safety. Our partnership with Federal Highways has been a key element in facilitating this work, and we hope to have access reopened for the summer of 2009.

Spirit Lake Tunnel repair needs have been a high priority for the agency. While this facilitates the core mission related to public safety, the work is often not visible to the general public or our key partners.

The transfer of Mount St. Helens Visitor Center at Silver Lake to the Washington State Parks and Recreation was completed in spring 2007.

What are we doing currently?

First of all, I am committed, at a minimum, to stabilize funding for the Monument, and I have aspirations to see it grow.

Chief Kimbell and Deputy Chief Hoeltrop have committed to \$1.2 million for improvement of facilities and programs throughout the entire Monument in FY10.

The Regional Director of Recreation, Claire Lavendel (who was the Gifford Pinchot Forest Supervisor for many years) is working with a group of "imagineers" to brainstorm ideas for the Coldwater Ridge Visitor Center facility and other opportunities on the Monument. Perhaps we can develop an adventure center where we can make the connection between youth, urban populations, and this incredible mountain that we all value.

There are some additional things that you, as the advisory committee, could consider as possibilities that would support our common interests in the Monument:

- Support the FLAME Act, the Federal Land Assistance, Management, and Enhancement Act, which would separate wildland fire suppression funding from other resource funding for the Forest Service and the Interior Department.
- Ensure long-term, stable funding for road and structure maintenance, including State-provided services such as snowplowing for Road 504.
- Support a 504 powerline/utility transfer to an appropriate entity.
- Improve roads in order to explore transferring road jurisdiction to the counties or other appropriate entities.
- Continue support of the important work of the Recreation Resource Advisory Committee.

- Help establish an endowment fund for the Monument/Institute.
- Explore options in the next Federal Highway bill to enhance transportation access.
- Explore funding Spirit Lake Tunnel (or management) through the Army Corps of Engineers.
- Invest in gateway community planning and development. Kudos to Cowlitz County for refurbishing Hoffstadt Bluffs, and kudos to Lewis County on Hwy 12 Scenic Byway planning.

These are just a few options. I'm looking forward to hearing what additional ideas you might have.

Closing

Gifford Pinchot, our first Chief of the Forest Service, laid out the maxim by which the National Forest Service would be managed – “Provide the greatest good, for the greater number, for the long run.” Gifford would be proud of his namesake National Forest.

1) We believe the Forest Service is the appropriate agency to continue to manage the Monument.

For one hundred years, we have managed Mount St. Helens and surrounding lands, first as a sylvan retreat highlighted by Spirit Lake with lodges, campgrounds, hiking, boating, swimming, and mountain climbing, and later as a worldwide center of scientific and public interest.

Since its designation as a National Monument in 1982, we have done many fabulous things. We have:

- Connected people with this volcanic landscape.
- Protected its special features.
- Fostered research which is recognized around the world.
- Taken aggressive action to remove noxious weeds.
- Provided a full spectrum of recreation opportunities including climbing this active volcano, exploring Ape Cave, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, or enjoying an interpretive talk at the world-class Johnston Ridge Visitor Center.

MSH is a resource that's used and valued **year around**.

2) We love this mountain!

It's beautiful and it makes memories. I bet most of you remember the first time that you laid eyes on this majestic mountain. I know it took my breath away the first time I saw it.

Because we love the Monument, we want to continue to care for it, and when you love something, you want the very best for it.

3) Other people love the mountain, too!

This is evidenced by the sheer number of people who visit the Monument, coupled with all the partnership activity I talked about earlier.

We have many partners, such as your committee, who want to ensure the Monument will be around for future generations to enjoy and protect.

4) I know that with the help of our many diverse partners, we can make a go of it.

We're proud of the stewardship and tremendous amount of good things we have accomplished with our partners.

The expression that "it takes a village" can also apply to managing this national treasure.

We need the ideas and resources that partners bring to the table in order to be successful.

As your new Regional Forester, I promise to work closely with the Monument, the Forest, and our Washington Office to ensure we meet the Monument mission in an ever-changing world.

Thank you, again, for inviting me to speak this evening, and thank you for your continued support. I look forward to getting to know you and working with you in the future.
