



## Media Release

### **Skamania County votes to rescind Public Health Order closing recreational hiking to align with Gifford Pinchot National Forest reopening most developed recreation sites**

Skamania County Commissioners have been working closely with Tom Torres, Acting Forest Supervisor for the Gifford Pinchot National Forest to provide a greater degree of public access to recreational areas on the Forest set to take effect today May 15, 2020.

As a result of the rapidly spreading COVID-19 virus and to help in curbing the spread of this virus, both the County and the Forest took measures in late March to restrict public access. County Commissioners, in their role as the Board of Health, implemented a Public Health Order closing recreational hiking in the Columbia River Gorge.

The Skamania County Board of Health unanimously voted on Tuesday to rescind the Public Health Order closing recreational hiking. The effective date of this rescinding notice will coincide with efforts underway by the Forest Service to relax closures of trails and recreational sites on the Washington and Oregon sides of the Columbia River within the Gorge. **It is important to note that even though the County is moving to rescind the public health order, the Forest Service currently has an administrative closure order in place for lands in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area.** The Forest Service and County Officials are working with partners and are hopeful that a coordinated reopening of portions of the scenic area can occur within the next 2 weeks. Updates on the scenic area status can be found at: [www.fs.usda.gov/crgnsa](http://www.fs.usda.gov/crgnsa)

On March 26, 2020, to align with state and local measures directing people to stay home to save lives, all Gifford Pinchot National Forest campgrounds, day-use sites, trailheads, Sno-Parks, cabin rentals and other developed recreation sites were temporarily closed. Roads 81, 83, and 90 leading to high use developed camping areas were also closed to public access. Beginning today May 15, 2020, most trailheads and day use areas on the forest, as well as Forest Road 81, 83 and 90 will be re-opened to the general public for use. Several sites will remain closed including campgrounds, the Lower Falls Recreation Area, Ape Cave Interpretive Site and Forest Road 8303 leading to the site, and Johnston Ridge Observatory. Specific site information can be found on the Gifford Pinchot National Forest website: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/recmain/giffordpinchot/recreation>

As Skamania County moves into Phase 2 of the safe start plan, many businesses are working to reopen. Recreational fishing, golfing and construction opened under Phase 1 and in the next few days, those businesses identified in Phase 2 may start to open their doors again.

Officials recognize concerns exist among county residents, public health officials and first responders as it relates to the influx of visitors to the county and the potential for an increase in COVID-19 cases. It is firmly believed the ability to open sites where they can be safely opened will help immensely in



distributing visitor use. There is also a reality that visitors are already helping themselves to the abundance of recreational opportunities on the Gifford Pinchot National Forest regardless of current closures. Limited resources for managing the closures has been apparent since they were implemented and opening these areas up to the public could ease the concern over lack of enforcement and may lessen reports of violations that simply cannot be addressed.

Officials recognized the ability to provide public access coupled with the desire to return to economic viability are tied closely to one another. The easing of these restrictions will continue to be evaluated over the course of the days and weeks ahead in an effort monitor for new cases and ensure appropriate response to public health concerns.

It is our hope that residents and visitors will take responsibility in helping to spread the following message: Visitors should be courteous to one another, be mindful of the need for social distancing and respectful of residents, businesses and property. We suggest visitors come prepared with masks, water, hand sanitizer and TP, as much of it is in short supply! Public sanitation is a necessity. We've added many portable restroom units for the public.

The link below will direct visitors to a map on the County website showing the location of the portable restrooms.

<https://skamaniacogis.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=968aaf80f10d4c21aa694f5300872f06>

The communities throughout Skamania County along with the cities of Stevenson and North Bonneville remain focused on taking advantage of this opportunity to demonstrate how counties and cities can move forward but we also recognize we are under much scrutiny. All progress made in easing back toward something "normal" could be lost very quickly through thoughtless and irresponsible behaviors.

Because this Gorge and our communities are not what you are accustomed to visiting, perhaps consider allowing us a few days to get our feet back under us before coming to visit again. This could go a long way in advancing Skamania County toward a successful recovery!

End Media Release