

RE: Comment on the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail Draft Comprehensive Plan.

Dear Whatcom County Council Member,

I am writing with the request for council to provide a comment on the draft comprehensive plan for the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail.

On March 14th Regional Forester Glenn P. Casamassa emailed Whatcom County Council to provide information and notice of the 30 day comment period on the draft plan that will close on April 17th. I have included this letter.

As the project lead for the Bellingham Mt. Baker trail, I believe this opens an opportunity to collaborate with the forest service and other stakeholders on a potential overlap of Bellingham-Mt. Baker trail and Pacific Northwest Trail in our county.

Jeff Kish, Executive Director of the Pacific Northwest Trail Association has written to the council in the past regarding a potential reroute and the challenges in planning we have encountered with the state. I have provided his letter for reference. With the forest service working to finalize a comprehensive management plan, this opens a door for Whatcom county to collaborate with the forest service and other stakeholders to overcome these hurdles.

I am providing you with a sample draft comment to be submitted by Whatcom County Council on this subject. As the comment period will close shortly, I ask that this topic be added to the April 11th Council Climate Action and Natural Resources Committee agenda for discussion and forwarded for a vote.

I will provide additional information via email and I look forward to answering any question you may have on this subject.

Thank you for your time and commitment to providing outstanding recreational opportunities for our community.

Daniel Probst

Project Lead - Bellingham-Mt. Baker trail
Cascademountainrunners@gmail.com
360 595 7361

RECEIVED
APR 04 2023
**WHATCOM COUNTY
COUNCIL**

File Code: 2350
Date: March 13, 2023

Whatcom County
County Council
311 Grand Ave., Suite 105
Bellingham, Washington 98225

Dear Whatcom County Commissioners:

The Forest Service is preparing the statutorily required comprehensive plan for the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail, a route of approximately 1,200 miles that provides opportunities for long-distance hiking and other non-motorized recreation between the Continental Divide and the Pacific Ocean in Montana, Idaho, and Washington. (16 U.S.C. 1244(a)(30), (e)).

As the lead Forest Service official for this congressionally designated trail, I have been working closely with Northern Regional Forester Leanne Marten and her staff on development of this plan. I am writing to you at this time to inform you of the upcoming opportunity for public review and comment on the draft comprehensive plan for the trail and associated draft environmental assessment (EA). This 30-day public comment period will start the day legal notice is published in *The Seattle Times*, anticipated on March 16, 2023. Supplementary notifications will be published in other newspapers across the trail. Information about this project, including maps of the trail route, may be found at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=52259>. I encourage you and relevant Whatcom County agencies to review and submit comments on these documents during the comment period. I also encourage you to share this opportunity to comment with stakeholders and the public in Whatcom County.

The comprehensive plan will provide high-level programmatic guidance for the Forest Service, National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management as an additional layer of coordination in their management of the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail on federally administered lands. The comprehensive plan will harmonize with and complement existing federal land management plans, which will continue to guide land and resource management along the trail. Though the comprehensive plan is only binding on these federal land management agencies, it will provide shared vision to facilitate cooperation with other counties and other governments, as well as non-governmental organizations, private landowners, and volunteers. Per a court order, the Forest Service must complete the comprehensive plan and submit it to Congress by December 31, 2023.

I welcome further coordination with Whatcom County regarding development of the comprehensive plan and how the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail can benefit recreationists and communities in Whatcom County. If you and/or members of your staff would like to meet and discuss the plan, please call 503-808-2468 for scheduling assistance.



Or you may reach out to Northern Regional Forester Leanne Marten and her staff to set up some time to meet by calling 406-329-3315.

For more information about this project, contact Becky Blanchard, Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail Administrator for the Forest Service, at becky.blanchard@usda.gov.

Sincerely,

ROBERT SANCHEZ Digitally signed by ROBERT
SANCHEZ
Date: 2023.03.13 15:41:28 -07'00'

GLENN P. CASAMASSA
Regional Forester

cc: council@co.whatcom.wa.us, Leanne Marten, Melany Glossa, Robert Sanchez, Joe Alexander, Kent Wellner, Sally Butts, Tracy Calizon, Becky Blanchard, Joe David, Kristin Bail, Jody Weil, Christopher Furr, Louis Neff

DRAFT

RE: Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan

Dear Regional Forester Casamassa,

Thank you for reaching out to the Whatcom County Council. We appreciate the opportunity to review and comment on the draft comprehensive plan and draft environmental assessment for the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail. We recognize the significance of developing a comprehensive plan that will guide land management decisions along the length of the trail. Whatcom County Council supports the work that has gone into creating the plan and is eager to work with the Forest Service, the Pacific Northwest Trail Association, stakeholders and land managers in the development of this trail.

Whatcom county spans a diverse ecosystem, extending from the crest of the Cascade Mountains to the Salish Sea. A significant portion of the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail, traverses 170 miles through Whatcom county, from the alpine environment to the river valleys and coastal region. These breathtaking landscapes not only lend themselves to exceptional recreational experiences but foster a sense of unity among people, culture, and communities. Whatcom County Council recognizes the significance of maintaining a balance between recreational opportunities and preserving and restoring our natural environment. We believe that these values are reflected in the comprehensive plan. In addition, we would like to reinforce the importance of collaborating with tribal nations to incorporate their traditional knowledge and practices into the development of the plan and implementation of the trail.

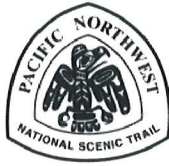
We are also aware that portions of the trail remain incomplete and sections within our region run through private timber lands, where permanent public access is not guaranteed. The Pacific Northwest Trail Association has reached out to Whatcom county and the Washington State Department of Natural Resources to collaborate on a reroute that would help remedy this issue. The proposal would create 50 additional miles of trail within Whatcom county and provide a permanent home and public access through a string of public lands. The proposal overlaps with the Bellingham-Mt. Baker trail corridor which is outlined in the recreation chapter of our comprehensive plan and in our Parks Recreation and Open Space Plan. These trails converge in the Mount Baker National Recreation area and descend to connect with Whatcom county and City of Bellingham trail systems. The route holds historic and cultural significance within our community and aligns with the vision layed out for the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail. Therefore we see immeasurable benefits in combining resources on these trails, which would reduce the footprint they have upon the land and greatly enhance the trail experience for its users.

We appreciate the efforts of the Forest Service and stakeholders to develop a comprehensive management plan, and we would like to request further coordination with the Forest Service in aligning elements of our comprehensive plan with the development of the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail.

Thank you for your willingness to coordinate with Whatcom County, and we look forward to working together to ensure the success of the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail.

Sincerely,

Whatcom County Council



PACIFIC NORTHWEST TRAIL ASSOCIATION

January 27, 2020

Whatcom County Council
311 Grand Avenue, Suite 105
Bellingham, WA 98225

RE: Bellingham-Mt. Baker Trail/Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail in Whatcom County

Dear Councilmembers,

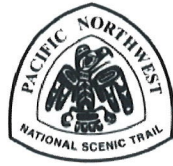
The Pacific Northwest Trail Association (PNTA) is a 501(c)(3) national nonprofit organization with a mission to protect and promote the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail (PNNST), and to enhance recreation and educational opportunities for the enjoyment of present and future generations. The PNTA has more than 14,000 supporters nationwide. Each year, the PNTA contributes over 30,000 hours of labor in service to the PNNST by employing youth and young adults from PNNST gateway communities on trail crews and by coordinating volunteer trail stewardship efforts. In addition to trail stewardship, the PNTA serves as the primary source of public information regarding the PNNST, by providing education digitally, in print, and through community events that promote safe and responsible enjoyment of the Trail and surrounding public lands. PNTA is the designated national nonprofit organization working in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service on behalf of the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail.

National Scenic Trails, such as the PNNST, are designated by the United States Congress to conserve nationally significant scenic, historic, natural and cultural qualities of the areas through which they pass. In addition, these trails are designed for recreation and the enjoyment of these very special places.

Of the Pacific Northwest Trail's 1200 miles, approximately 900 are currently where they need to be in order to meet the standards set for such trails in the National Trail System Act of 1968. **I'm writing to you today to discuss how you can help fix some of the other 300.**

Every summer, trail users come from all over the world to traverse from the Continental Divide to the Pacific Ocean on the Pacific Northwest Trail. The experience that they come to expect while traveling west from Montana is shaped by places such as the stunning backcountry of Glacier National Park, the jagged granite of Idaho's Selkirk Crest, the old growth inland rainforests of Eastern Washington's Salmo-Priest Wilderness, the rugged Okanogan highlands, and the moody glacier-fed drainages of the North Cascades.

It is because of these experiences, and the expectations set by the trail's enabling legislation, that the PNT's descent from Mount Baker in Whatcom and Skagit Counties is so jarring. Leaving public land behind, users are



PACIFIC NORTHWEST TRAIL ASSOCIATION

currently asked to navigate a patchwork of game trails, logging roads, and crosscountry bushwhacks -- where there is no tread at all -- on lands held by private timber companies such as Sierra Pacific and Weyerhaeuser. Permanent public access is not guaranteed on these lands, and although we are grateful that access is currently tolerated, recreation is not a management consideration on these lands, and the resulting user experience is so poor -- pushing through miles of overgrown blackberries and dodging loaded log trucks -- that many users choose to skip the section entirely.

The travelers, who miss out on the opportunity to see what makes western Whatcom so special, aren't the only losers here. The current alignment, whether it's endured by the hardest trail users, or skipped entirely, fails to deliver any of the PNT's economic benefit to Whatcom County communities. In addition, local residents are struggling to connect with the national treasure that's promised to be right there in their own backyards.

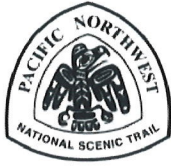
Fortunately, there is a solution.

The Washington Department of Natural Resources manages a continuous corridor of land between Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest and South Fork Park, which has all the desired qualities needed for the management of a world-class multi-use trail. Through the WA-DNR-facilitated "Baker to Bellingham" recreation planning process, a diverse group of stakeholders on the citizen advisory committee rallied to *unanimously* support the development of non-motorized recreation opportunities along this corridor. In addition, the corridor has already been identified for this express purpose in county and city plans. But so far, WA-DNR isn't interested.

The Washington State Constitution directs that all the public lands granted to the state are held in trust "for all the people." Given the broad support for this project, including a clear majority of local residents who attended the planning meetings with the expectation that DNR was listening and facilitating in good faith, a growing coalition of local nonprofit conservation and recreation organizations, and City of Bellingham and Whatcom County representatives, it's clear to me that the State's recently drafted plan for recreation in Whatcom county has fallen short of that objective.

The completion of the historic Bellingham-Mt. Baker Trail would provide immense benefit to local residents and visitors alike, but it needs your help to get there.

For this reason, I respectfully request that the Council pass a resolution to send a letter to Commissioner of Public Lands, Hilary Franz, expressing strong local support for this project and requesting that the state prepare an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement to fully examine the feasibility of the proposal and bring the decision making process regarding Whatcom County public lands into the light.



PACIFIC NORTHWEST TRAIL ASSOCIATION

With gratitude,

Jeff Kish /s/

Jeff Kish

Executive Director

Pacific Northwest Trail Association

209 Ferry Street Suite A
Sedro-Woolley, WA 98284
(360) 854-9415 ext. 5
jeffkish@pnta.org



In 2019, the Pacific Northwest Trail Association operated six youth and young adult trail crews across the state of Washington. Members are provided a living wage, all field based meals and transportation to job sites while acquiring valuable work skills and experience that can open doors to future careers in

public land management. This crew, including four Western Washington Huxley College of the Environment students, spent two months maintaining the Pacific Northwest Trail in Whatcom County in 2019. The Pacific Northwest Trail Association would utilize crews like these to contribute to the efforts of a coalition of local trails organizations to complete construction of the Bellingham-Mt. Baker Trail at little to no cost to the county.



Tri-Composite Map

Non-motorized singletrack

Suitability Color Key

- Moderate Suitability
- Low Suitability
- Not Suitable

The entire length of the proposed Mount Baker to Bellingham Trail/ Pacific Northwest Trail realignment between SR-9 and Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest falls within areas DNR has highlighted as having the highest suitability rating for non-motorized recreation identified in this report, after taking into account biology, geology, and management suitability studies.

Ridley Creek Trail



Current PNT alignment

Proposed Realignment