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Comments: 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 laid 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.