



Board of Commissioners

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COMMISSIONERS

January 8, 2020

Arne Mortensen
District 1

Dennis P. Weber
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Joe Gardner
District 3

Responsible Official
Gifford Pinchot Forest Supervisor
987 McClellan Road
Vancouver, WA 98661

CLERK OF THE BOARD
Tiffany Ostreim

Subject: Cowlitz County Support for Alternative B: Windy Ridge to Pump Station, Spirit Lake Tunnel Intake Gate Replacement and Geotechnical Drilling Project

Dear Reviewing Officer:

On behalf of the tens of thousands of citizens we represent downstream from the Spirit Lake Tunnel, the Board of County Commissioners is writing to convey our support for Alternative B: Windy Ridge to Pump Station. In April of this year, the Forest Service delayed a decision to re-establish an access road to Spirit Lake, a project that started in 2017. Reestablishment of that roadway would have allowed for core sampling and critical data collection so that we can better understand the debris blockage characterization and maintain a safe lake level into the future. The road would also have allowed for better access to the tunnel intake gate during emergencies. The Board of County Commissioners supported the reestablishment of that roadway then and we support the tunnel intake gate replacement and core sampling project now.

As you know from your own project documentation, thousands of "people live within the projected impact area (inundation area) if a Spirit Lake outburst flood were to occur (USGS 1983). An outburst flood of the lake could generate 2.4 billion cubic yards of sediment to downstream communities, producing a catastrophic event on par with the 1980s eruption. A flood of this magnitude would likely completely inundate the Port of Longview and close the ports of Portland, Vancouver, and Kalama for over a month."

In our view, Alternative B: Windy Ridge to Pump Station, seeks to prevent such a catastrophic flood by completing three tasks. First, this alternative reestablishes critical roadway infrastructure so that equipment and personnel can get to the site quickly and efficiently. Second, the alternative will allow us to obtain core samples to better understand the debris blockage characterization and maintain a safe lake level into the future; and finally, the alternative seeks to replace the aging tunnel intake gate. All of these things are important to the safety of citizens living downstream from Spirit Lake.

As it relates specifically to the reestablishment of the access road, we feel strongly that it should not be "temporary." The proposed access route for core sampling follows an existing road bed from previous projects and work. The fact that a road already exists should limit the idea that re-establishing that route is going to dramatically impact ongoing scientific studies.

While the Board of Commissioners has a deep appreciation for scientific research at Mt. St. Helens, we feel that it is our job to speak in favor of this project for the safety of our constituents living below Spirit Lake. While we can certainly sympathize with any impact the project may have to studies in the area, we can hardly side with those concerns over the consequences of not being able to access the lake, understand the debris blockage, and maintain long-term safe lake levels.

Some past objections point out that no crisis exists today and so no action is needed. Anyone who has worked through a disaster or worked in emergency management understands that this couldn't be farther from the truth. The time to act is now. We need to be prepared before a crisis arrives. The Forest Service can hardly be expected to build an access road in the middle of a severe weather, volcanic, or seismic event.

We thank you very much for your consideration of our comments and perspective and we hope you decide to get to work on this project very soon.

Sincerely,

**Board of County Commissioners
of Cowlitz County, Washington**


Joe Gardner, Chairman


Dennis P. Weber, Commissioner


Arne Mortensen, Commissioner