

## **Organization**

Oregon's Mt. Hood Territory

## **Project Title**

Federal, State and Local Collaboration for Visitor Safety: Clackamas River Corridor Wildfire Reopening

## **Project Description**

**Background:** In September of 2020 the Riverside Wildfire ravaged the southeastern area of the Mt. Hood National Forest, leaving many important recreation assets inaccessible in its wake for years to come. Chief among those was the Upper Clackamas River Corridor, a popular rafting and paddling recreation area including trails, cycling, camping and day use areas accessed by Hwy 224 Scenic Byway/Bikeway. The community of Estacada sits at the entrance to this recreation corridor and many of its businesses, from outfitters to restaurants rely on recreationists visiting the Upper Clackamas River Corridor. With the wildfire closures along Hwy 224, Estacada was at a literal dead end. Mt. Hood Territory had been working with Estacada since the fires to provide support during the closure, but we continued to hear from businesses and Visit Estacada how important Hwy 224 recreation was, with Visit Estacada describing it as a “lifeline.” In May 2022 Hwy 224 was set to reopen. Along with the highway, limited recreation areas were reopening, with many remaining closed. Traffic flows and parking areas had changed, and many areas remained hazardous with the danger of landslides and tree hazards.

Recreation areas in the affected area included land managed by the US Forest Service (USFS - Mt. Hood National Forest) and Portland General Electric (PGE), with the highway managed by the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT). Because of the patchwork quilt of management areas, there was concern around visitor safety and negative experiences caused by a lack of centralized access to information. Estacada’s reliance on recreation tourism only served to emphasize the importance of a successful reopening and a positive visitor experience to reestablish the city as a hub for recreation and restore ongoing visitation to the area and its newly available assets. Project In Spring 2022 the USFS Partnership Coordinator reached out to Mt. Hood Territory for help coordinating public listening sessions. The sessions were held in early April and focused on collecting input as part of the rebuilding process in areas affected by 2020 wildfires. Thanks to an already established relationship with the USFS, we were able to help facilitate this public process. It was during these sessions that Mt. Hood Territory realized there needed to be a centralized location for all information regarding the reopening of Hwy 224, which ODOT had scheduled for May 1, 2022.

Distributing timely, accurate and centralized information to potential visitors seemed like a natural way for Mt. Hood Territory to support land managers and local communities who were concerned about a safe and successful reopening of Hwy 224. Because of our established website with high Google rankings as well as our social media channels with over 200k followers, we were well positioned to serve as a one-stop shop for information on the Upper Clackamas River Corridor and Hwy 224. We worked extensively with USFS and PGE to ensure we had timely, accurate and relevant information about the status of recreation sites, day use areas, offerings and other features of the Upper Clackamas River Corridor that would be open to the public once Hwy 224 was reopened. We put together a list of FAQs on our web page influenced by topics that arose during listening sessions, for example, “Will ODOT still be doing work along the corridor?” and, “Where can I park?” For information that we knew would change rapidly, we worked with ODOT, USFS and PGE to link directly to specific pages of their websites so users could be sure they were getting accurate information, and not seeing different information in

different places. Recognizing the impact the wildfires had on local businesses, particularly guides and outfitters, we also included links and information on the nearby community of Estacada and a call to action to support local businesses/guided experiences. One major need that arose was for a user-friendly map including recreation sites from all of the different land managers. Mt. Hood Territory was able to use their resources to contract map design. Working closely with the USFS and PGE, we were able to designate confirmed open sites as well as campgrounds, roads and access points that were closed to the general public. Focusing on the positive rather than the negative, the map listed the available sites open, while leaving any trails, roads and campgrounds that were closed off the map to mitigate any confusion. Six rounds of collaborative edits were conducted, resulting in a comprehensive, yet easy to read map of confirmed open sites along the Upper Clackamas River, including QR codes and URLs that would link directly to Mt. Hood Territory's webpage as well as the USFS wildfire updates page. (Map included in attachments)

Recognizing that not all visitors would see our online content before arriving at the Upper Clackamas River Corridor, we also created an information hub in the community of Estacada, the access point to the reopening section of Hwy 224. Mt. Hood Territory worked with the Estacada Chamber of Commerce and PGE to reinvigorate an existing informational kiosk, printing large-scale versions of the recreation map along with local business and stewardship information from regional and state tourism partners (Mt. Hood & Columbia River Gorge Region and Travel Oregon). In addition, a large printed map was also provided to the USFS that was placed on an informational board at the newly opened section of Hwy 224. (Photos of on-site information in attachments) The final piece of the project was making sure that our centralized information reached visitors. Through a mix of PR, local and social media marketing and local partnerships we focused on driving visitors to our website page, [mthoodterritory.com/clackamas-river](https://mthoodterritory.com/clackamas-river) as well as sharing helpful tips and info. Knowing that much of our target audience was in-state, our largest promotion was a \$20,000 ad program with The Oregonian's Here Is Oregon, which included sponsored videos, articles, promotion and paid social ads. This is a 12-week campaign that began May 20, 2022 and is still running at the time of this application. Additionally, our PR team secured an article on Travel Oregon's website as well as segments on local KOIN AM television programming.

### **Project Effectiveness**

**Creating an Information Hub** The collaborative and well-informed creation of Mt. Hood Territory's Clackamas River web page served the community well as an information hub that could be promoted around the reopening of Hwy 224. Land management partners noted the quality of content presented on the page, stating, " [Mt. Hood Territory] not only provided a detailed, accurate map of the area showing exactly which recreation sites would be open and with what amenities, but also crafted FAQs that helped all of the partners involved share concise, unified messaging with the public."

The following web performance statistics are for the period between May 1, 2022 - August 11, 2022 at the time of this submission. In that time, there have been 6,373 visitors to the page, making it the second-most popular page on our [mthoodterritory.com](https://mthoodterritory.com) website. The goals of the page are twofold: give users basic information on the page itself; and direct them to land management agency pages for more specific details. The average time that users spend on the Clackamas River Page is 5:24, showing a deep engagement with the content provided there (for reference, Hubspot cites the average time on site for the travel industry at :60). We have also monitored clicks on the page using HotJar which shows that a sample of 682 sessions generated 1.1k taps, illustrating engagement with content on the page - especially the map and FAQs - as well as clicks to external partner pages and other pages on the Mt.

Hood Territory website. The USFS reported that since the launch of [mthoodterritory.com/clackamas-river](http://mthoodterritory.com/clackamas-river), there have been 309 visits to the Mt. Hood National Forest information page referred by Mt. Hood Territory. Mt. Hood Territory ranks fourth on their non-search engine referring sites, illustrating the success of our external linking strategy. A significant number of USFS Mt. Hood National Forest site visitors also came from [traveloregon.com](http://traveloregon.com)'s article that was a result of our PR efforts. Building Strong Partnerships This project arose because of the existing relationship that Mt. Hood Territory has worked to maintain with our local, state and federal land managers, and succeeded because of the ways we were able to provide support to our partners where they were most needed, recognizing our strengths as a Destination Organization. The thoughtful work on this project has strengthened our relationships with land managers and local community organizations.

The USFS praised the way that Mt. Hood Territory supported their engagement needs, using our partnerships to help this federal land management organization, which can often seem inaccessible to local groups/public, to connect with their community. Public Affairs Officer Heather Ibsen stated, "After a devastating wildfire disrupted recreation and public access to part of Mt. Hood National Forest, we wanted to connect to as many people as possible during our steps to reopen fire-damaged areas. Oregon's Mt. Hood Territory was invaluable in helping the national forest reach more of our community members during this important transition. Their flexibility, tourism connections, and use of creative tools extended our public reach and more firmly anchored us into the local community." Partners also noted an appreciation for Mt. Hood Territory's proactive and solution-oriented approach at a time when their work was focused on the on-the-ground logistics of a major reopening event. Dorothy Brown-Kwaiser, Park Education Specialist for PGE said, "Their timing was crucial because we were so busy at the time, working to physically reopen the sites after a nearly 20-month closure, that we did not have the bandwidth to create a webpage with a map and talking points ourselves. PGE's Parks and Recreation team is grateful for the collaboration with Mt. Hood Territory during that significant time." In addition to land managers, Mt. Hood Territory ensured that local communities and businesses were represented in the project.

We worked with Visit Estacada to ensure that messaging included promoting local businesses and guides, having been in communication with them as they struggled through closures to many of their key tourism assets. Visit Estacada said, "Visit Estacada's partnership with Oregon's Mt. Hood Territory is proactive and incredibly vital to our rural town. Through the 22 month closure of the lifeline [Hwy 224] to the upper Clackamas River recreation area, we were able to communicate and collaborate with them on a variety of needs." This project was effective because it met partners specifically where their needs were at, offering community-driven solutions. Because Mt. Hood Territory was able to demonstrate its value as a partner to these organizations, our relationships will continue to strengthen and grow into the future. Total federal, state and local organizations involved in this project: 7 US Forest Service (USFS) - Federal Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) - State Portland General Electric (PGE) - State Visit Estacada/Estacada Chamber of Commerce - Local City of Estacada - Local Mt. Hood & Columbia River Gorge Region RDMO - Regional Travel Oregon - State

### **Return on Investment**

This project has seen returns in two ways: visitor consumption of this important and timely safety information in an accessible format; and the continued growth of our relationships with partners, especially state and federal management organizations. Analytics for [mthoodterritory.com/clackamas-river](http://mthoodterritory.com/clackamas-river) show that users are engaging with our content (see project effectiveness and attachments for

engagement metrics). The most-clicked resource is the map, a small monetary investment on our part but a hugely important resource identified by land management partners that we were able to take the lead on. Marketing and PR efforts effectively delivered safety messaging to an Oregon audience. Our \$20,000 investment included value-adds totaling \$28,355. The campaign so far has resulted in 1.8M total impressions. Nearly 119,000 people viewed our Upper Clackamas River information via sponsored content on the Oregonian's website. (Promotions samples included in attachments). The strategy around creating an information hub for the Upper Clackamas River Corridor was so successful that we have already expanded this tactic to other recreation assets in the area. Currently, the lower Clackamas River is being added to the Clackamas River page, focusing on its own set of critical issues of seasonal overuse and safety and with added collaboration from Clackamas County Parks. We also have plans to create pages for the Sandy and Molalla Rivers. Seeing the effectiveness of this work, the Oregon Marine Board has reached out to us to collaborate on this and future pages, reinforcing our value placed on partnerships and creating more opportunity for future projects and collaboration.

### **Project Costs**

Total project cost: \$21,680 Includes: Custom map design for open assets in identified target area: Upper Clackamas River Map (creation, design, 6 rounds of collaborative edits) - \$300 Printed posters for Estacada kiosk - \$480 Social Media paid internal promotion - \$900 Promotion through The Oregonian/OregonLive - \$20,000