

American Whitewater • The Mountaineers

January 21st, 2021

Christy Ann Cheyne, Acting Forest Supervisor/Area Manager

Miki Fujikawa, Acting Deputy Area Manager

Forest Service

Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area

902 Wasco Ave., Ste. 200

Hood River, OR 97031

Dear Ms. Cheyne and Mr. Fujikawa:

We write on behalf of American Whitewater and The Mountaineers regarding our interest in Eagle Creek that provides unique opportunities for whitewater paddlers and canyoneers in the Columbia River Gorge. Current Forest Orders limit access to these opportunities. Forest Order 06-22-01-20-02 Area Closure including “all NFS lands surrounding Punchbowl Falls,”¹ a feature that is midway through the run, could be interpreted to limit use by whitewater kayakers and canyoneers who have historically traveled through this section. Forest Order 06-22-01-21-03 Area and Trails Closure prohibits “going into or being upon an area closed for the protection of health or safety” that includes Eagle Creek; the Order opens the Eagle Creek Trail #440 and a corridor of “25 feet to either side of the trail center line,”² noting that “the closure is necessary to provide protection for forest users from hazards present in the area following the Eagle Creek Fire.”³ We request that the Forest Service revisit these closure Orders with a goal of restoring access and use of Eagle Creek for whitewater recreation and canyoning.

American Whitewater is a national non-profit 501(c)(3) river conservation organization founded in 1954 with approximately 50,000 supporters, 6,000 dues-paying members, and 100 local-based affiliate clubs, representing whitewater enthusiasts across the nation. American Whitewater’s mission is to protect and restore America’s whitewater rivers and to enhance opportunities to enjoy them safely. The organization is the primary advocate for the preservation and protection of whitewater rivers throughout the United States, and connects the interests of human-powered recreational river users with ecological and science-based data to achieve the goals within its mission. Our vision is that our nation’s remaining wild and

¹ USDA Forest Service, Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area, Forest Order 06-22-01-20-02 Area Closure, November 4th, 2019, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd680690.pdf>.

² USDA Forest Service, Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area, Forest Order 06-22-01-21-03 Area and Trails Closure, December 31st, 2020, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd872158.pdf>.

³ Ibid.

free-flowing rivers stay that way, our developed rivers are restored to function and flourish, that the public has access to rivers for recreation, and that river enthusiasts are active and effective river advocates.

The Mountaineers is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization founded in 1906 with more than 20,000 supporters and 14,000 dues-paying members. Our mission is to help people explore, conserve, learn about, and enjoy the lands and waters of the Pacific Northwest and beyond. Our volunteers lead trips in many outdoor pursuits, including canyoning.

Eagle Creek is a documented whitewater reach in the National Whitewater Inventory that has been enjoyed by expert whitewater paddlers who live in the Columbia River Gorge as well as those who visit the region.⁴ Additionally, Eagle Creek is a high quality classic canyon route with great educational value for intermediate canyoneers. The recreational opportunity this creek provides is unique among the rivers and creeks that flow into the Columbia Gorge.

In contrast to other runs such as those on Multnomah Creek or Oneonta Creek that are primarily a single waterfall that is run, the run on Eagle Creek is approximately 5 miles of high-challenge class V whitewater with several runnable waterfalls that include Grand Union Falls, Skoonichuk Falls, Punchbowl Falls, and Metlako Falls. Many of the world's best whitewater paddlers live in the Columbia River Gorge and access to unique resources such as Eagle Creek is one of the regional assets that is valued by this community. It is a unique and spectacular waterfall run that is regionally significant and internationally known among whitewater paddlers.

Eagle Creek is a unique canyoning resource in the Columbia River Gorge in that it provides opportunities for a range of abilities from beginner to advanced. It is an important "destination" canyon for those traveling to experience the best Oregon canyons, and has become even more of a critical resource to the community as many classic Oregon canyons burned in the 2020 fires.

We understand there will be future opportunities to revisit the closure order as opportunities for public use and enjoyment of the area impacted by the Eagle Creek fire is further evaluated. We request an opportunity to participate in any conversations that include user groups or a process that would consider revision of the closure order; our specific request is that the 25' corridor be widened to accommodate our community's interest.

⁴ Eagle Creek, Twister Falls to Hatchery Weir, American Whitewater National Whitewater Inventory, <<https://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/view/river-detail/10437/main>>.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T O'Keefe', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Thomas O'Keefe, PhD
Pacific Northwest Stewardship Director
American Whitewater

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Betsy Robblee', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Betsy Robblee
Conservation & Advocacy Director
The Mountaineers