



The Oregonian

Circling Mount Hood

The two Oregon congressmen set to backpack around the mountain this week are searching for common ground

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The glossy peak of Mount Hood that members of Congress see from airplane windows on their regular flights between Oregon and Washington, D.C., is only the tip of an iceberg. Congressmen Greg Walden and Earl Blumenauer are now about to discover all that lies below the green treeline of the mountain visited by 41/2 million people every year.

The Hood River Republican and the Portland Democrat, whose districts meet in the middle of Mount Hood National Forest, will leave Monday for a four-day, 41-mile trek around the mountain on the Timberline Trail. The two will carry 35-pound backpacks and the burden of crafting a plan to protect Hood while more and more people flock there to ski, sightsee, hike, mountain bike, camp and fish.

Mount Hood may be more important to more people than any other inland natural feature in Oregon. It provides clean water to millions of people in dozens of communities, including Portland. It is a winter ski destination and home to premier summer hiking and mountain biking trails. The huckleberry fields that dot some of its lower slopes are sacred to the Warm Springs tribes.

Mount Hood's proximity to Oregon's large urban population is a particular challenge. A few places on the mountain are regularly overwhelmed with visitors. The main highway up the mountain is overused, unsafe and hard to reach.

Still, Walden and Blumenauer are optimistic about the mountain's future. They believe they can agree to expand wilderness areas, protect watersheds and find new land designations that will protect forests, but still provide space for popular activities such as mountain bikes.

They see a bright future for Government Camp, now a small, poorly planned community that could become a recreation hub. They see future federal highway bills as opportunities to invest in the highway up to Mount Hood.

There is another reason for their optimism. After more than a year of mediation, the Mt. Hood Meadows corporation has reached an agreement with Hood River Valley residents and conservation groups. The ski corporation agreed to give up its development plans for the north side of Mount Hood, while conservation groups would support the company's proposal to build 480 housing units near Government Camp.

Walden and Blumenauer should fold this promising settlement -- including its request for more congressionally designated wilderness -- into a broader Mount Hood bill. The two lawmakers hope to emerge from the woods Thursday with the outlines of a Mount Hood management plan to present to the next Congress.

The pair deserve credit for their work, including the annual summit meetings they have held at Timberline Lodge. They have done more than any other elected officials ever to understand and resolve the issues on Mount Hood.

But the going gets harder now. Walden and Blumenauer must navigate a lot of social and political differences -- including their own -- while drafting a plan to guide use, development and protection of Mount Hood.

The trail will get even steeper when it leads back to Washington, where special-interest groups are lurking and Republican leaders in the House are reluctant to approve any new wilderness.

The two congressmen should heed advice useful to anyone who heads into the woods of Oregon, or the

halls of Congress.

Stick together.

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