

# An Assessment for the Oregon Department of Forestry

## Salmonberry Corridor Project – A Reality Check on Progress to Date



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# INTRODUCTION

The core leadership group for the Salmonberry rails and trails project, including the Oregon Department of Forestry, the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, the Port of Tillamook Bay, Tillamook County, and Washington County recognized that with the final draft [Salmonberry Corridor Concept Plan](#) release in November 2014, the related efforts were at a critical juncture. In working with the Salmonberry Coalition to prepare for the next round of public meetings and for the upcoming 2015 Oregon legislative session, key opportunities and needs exist to refine the project identity and arrive at an initial governance structure.

In January, 2015, Oregon Solutions (OS) was engaged by the Oregon Department of Forestry to conduct interviews of key stakeholders as part of a “reality check” on the progress to date.

OS staff conducted interviews with close to 40 project stakeholders during January and February 2015. Stakeholders identified for the interviews were those with an ownership, operational, liability and/or direct funding interest in the development of the rails and trails project. In the course of these interviews, over 30 additional stakeholders were suggested for including in the interviews, particularly in relation to discussing the governance structure. Unfortunately we weren't able to interview all of them within the short time that we had to complete this task.

The questions asked in the interviews can be grouped into three themes:

- Reality check on the rails and trails efforts to date including the final draft [Salmonberry Corridor Concept Plan](#) prepared by Walker Macy in November 2014;
- Discussion of the proposed trail governance structure (Governing Council and Local Governance Boards) circulated following

the trail leadership group meeting on November 13, 2014, and identification of possible alternatives. This was done recognizing the leadership group quickly needs to arrive at a transparent, nimble and effective decision making process with high enough authority to “get it done”; and

- Naming and branding for the trail.

## A REALITY CHECK

The Phase I report provided a general summary of the answers and opinions offered to the questions. For the most part, interviewees were optimistic, but also realistic, about the plan. We found little to no pessimism about the project's chances of eventually being successful, at least at some level of eventual connectivity. A few did suggest more discussion is needed about the pragmatism of the plan. There is shared desire that the next steps with the draft Concept Plan are transparent and clearly communicated, including identification of contact points for existing and new Coalition stakeholders. A commonly shared theme further suggests OPRD and ODF are two of the most capable organizations in state government and that their combined resources should be able to get this project off the ground.

The final draft Concept Plan leaves open the possibility of a win-win for most all of the anticipated recreational user groups. Many recognize this trail can be an enormous regional amenity with international appeal though also a balancing act with those Oregonians who inevitably will resist real or perceived impacts to their specific interests and past uses of the rail and trail Right Of Way and surrounding territory. Mentioned were the need for more focused diplomacy including more frequent and transparent two-way communication to build and maintain trust, along with “the patience of a saint” that will be required for project management and effective implementation. In this regard, some also raised a concern that there may be a need to “curb some of the enthusiasm” at least initially rather than risk

burning some stakeholders out early on with process-related activities rather than project-related activities that will come later.

Additional key takeaways from the interviews include:

### **Reality Check - Involvement & Perceptions**

- Almost uniformly, those interviewed were familiar with the draft Concept Plan, were enthusiastic, had participated in the public forums and understood both the opportunities and challenges.
- Continued involvement and interest stems from the desire to see their vision of the project realized within a reasonable timeframe (usually expressed as 15-30 years or “in their lifetime”). A number of people commented that the common response they get from conversations with other interested parties is “how do I get more information” and “how can we get involved?”
- A large number of interviewees are particularly motivated by the vision for this project to potentially connect between Highway 101 and other trail systems, including to existing systems such as the Banks to Vernonia Trail and various trails now in the planning stage, especially a number of planned trail systems in Washington County and throughout the Portland metropolitan area.
- There is not a universally shared vision for the trail. Individual stakeholder visions’ for the trail vary, as do the “best outcome” for their specific organization. There is broad agreement that the full benefits of the trail cannot be realized until all of the connections are made resulting in what many describe as a “world-class” trail system that will have great appeal and significant economic and recreational benefits across the region. Participants seem to agree that those benefits become exponentially higher after marketing can

take place for the entire route from the Metro region to Tillamook.

- There is broad based support for a natural surface trail from the Salmonberry/Nehalem River confluence east to the vicinity of Stub Stewart State Park.
- There are widespread concerns about the viability of the rails with trails opportunities in the coastal section. These concerns include the practicality of constructing a multi-use trail along an operating rail line especially where construction would be required in estuaries and other sensitive locations, and doubts about the long-term economic viability of any active rail use due to deferred capital maintenance needs and other financial concerns.
- Funding and ultimate trail ownership are obvious concerns. A number of organizations have made financial commitments and helped secure grants thus far including Cycle Oregon, Tillamook Forest Heritage Trust, Tillamook and Washington Counties, Department of Environmental Quality. Likely additional key partners for both these concerns include Oregon Department of Transportation, Metro.
- The North Coast Regional Solutions Team and related State agencies expressed a high level of willingness to participate in active partnerships with other entities to achieve the vision over a longer period of time.

### **Governance Structure**

- There is a continuum of ideas about the possible governance structure, ranging from a highly centralized state agency model (most often mentioned as a linear state park) to a more de-centralized model similar to that represented in the draft governance structure (Governing Council and Local Boards) but with even more governing authority vested in the three regional entities.

- Almost uniformly, the local government representatives (as well as some of the state agency representatives) expressed a strong desire to have State Parks take the lead role in governance of entire trail. While highly supportive of the trail concept, local governments also consistently cite their lack of financial resources to participate in any meaningful way, especially in coming up with capital costs for trail development. They also face critical staff capacity constraints to participate fully in governance structures that might be ideal from a collaboration standpoint but which end up being highly process-oriented.
- State agency representatives prefer the Governing Council and Local Boards model represented by the diagram. They would prefer to work in relatively equal partnerships with local entities and other stakeholder groups to achieve implementation of the Concept Plan. State agency representatives indicated that they would not be able to manage the trail system without strong local advocates including those who can make significant ongoing commitments.
- Most of the private sector participants expressed a strong desire to have a centralized authority with strong political connections and leadership as the governing entity. This was expressed as a smaller, more nimble, and results-oriented governance entity that might exist within the structure of OPRD under the direction and encouragement of the State Parks Commission.
- Many pointed to the need to create a robust non-profit organization to work with a lead public agency or multiple public agencies. A non-profit could raise funds not normally available to governmental entities, recruit and train a cadre of dedicated volunteers, and serve as a good steward for the objectives of the corridor. One point made for consideration is the potential conflict that may arise in state vs. private funding opportunities for the trail if foundations and other potential donors see the trail as a state responsibility.
- The role for the political champions (for example, Sen. Johnson, Rep. Boone, the Governor's Office, and the Chairs of the Board of Forestry and State Parks Board) to elevate the Salmonberry profile and discussion is critical.
- Some suggested that the ultimate governance structure may need to evolve over time, perhaps starting off as segmented governance structures with some sort of coordinating body and then evolving into a more highly structured single entity.
- A number of interviewees also saw the logic in creating something more along the lines of the Coalition model represented by the governance diagram. The implied lead agencies for governance of the three sections were seen as Coastal Segment – POTB; Canyon Segment – ODF; and Foothills Segment – OPRD.
- Nearly all of the organizations we interviewed express some level of willingness to participate in at least an advisory capacity to a governance entity or entities. The greatest reservations about participation came from the coastal communities due to funding and capacity constraints.
- There were a variety of responses regarding how best the governance structure can accommodate the wide array of interested parties who would like some level of involvement in the project but who are not jurisdictional partners or otherwise financially committed to the project. Some felt that the governance structure should be kept very small (7-9 “movers and shakers”) to those who would prefer to see a much more inclusive and collaborative structure made up of nearly any organization that

demonstrates a strong interest in the project, including some who might otherwise attempt to subvert the objectives of the plan. A significant number of interviewees, however, suggested that participation in the governance structure should be limited to those who are willing to put significant “skin in the game” in the way of both direct and/or in-kind support.

- The use of advisory groups and other customary public processes were mentioned as ways to keep interested parties informed and engaged. The notion of a “Friends” group was mentioned several times, with some interested in hearing more about how this approach might work.

#### **Naming and Branding**

- While a formal name for the trail has not yet been selected, as discussion continues to establish an overall identity for the project most are moving away from inclusion of the word “corridor” in the name.
- Numerous other names were put forward in the interviews. There seems to be an emerging consensus around a name that includes “Salmonberry” and “Trail”. Many feel “Salmonberry” should be included in the name because it conveys Oregon and the Pacific Northwest, is unique, will prove intriguing to many and will be excellent for creating distinction for the trail, furthering branding and marketing of responsible tourism in the region. Some hold to including “coast” and “Portland” in the name. Still others felt that it would be important to select a name that reflects the historic use of the route as an active railway.
- The Salmonberry River drainage comprises only 1/3 of the trail. Use of “Salmonberry” will put a spotlight on this section that is the most remote, difficult part of the trail.
- The decision on the name is a governing decision and the governing group needs to

identify a process to finalize the name prior to a public roll-out strategy and funding campaign for the trail.

## **NEXT STEPS**

Following discussion of the Phase I report with the leadership group, OS staff will use the interview information and direction from the group to inform the next phases of work. Materials for the Governor’s designation of the Salmonberry trail project as an OS project have been prepared and are under consideration. OS will work to identify governance models used across the country for similar rails and trails projects, present a limited number of potential governance models to the leadership group for consideration, assist the leadership group and broader Coalition members in reaching consensus on a governance structure that seems most appropriate to successfully advancing the project at this time, and prepare a “Declaration of Cooperation” to document the governance agreement and identify specific stakeholder commitments for moving the chosen governance model and trail project forward.