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### **WHISTLER CANYON... *Trail to a special place!***

Rising from the Okanogan Valley, three miles south of Oroville, Washington along US Highway 97, the historic Whistler Canyon trail climbs east onto BLM and National Forest lands on Mt. Hull. The trail, part of the **Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail**, traverses the west face of Mt. Hull, with its steep, rugged terrain and rock bluffs, cliffs, and canyons. As the trail climbs higher, the unfolding views of the Okanogan Valley and the Cascade Mountains are breathtaking, (see attached photos). These views are taken from Windy Point, a viewpoint about five miles up the trail from Highway 97.

#### **History:**

Whistler Canyon Trail is currently shown as a road in the Okanogan-Wenatchee NF road inventory (forest road 3525-100). The road was constructed in the 1940s for logging access. Millions of board feet of timber were hauled down the road to Highway 97 on their way to local mills. Near Highway 97 the road crossed approximately 1/3 mile of private land. Use of the road was controlled by who entered into an agreement with the local mill for use of the road to haul logs. A search of the records shows that the public and the Forest Service never did develop an easement for use of the road across private land. From the 1950s through the 1980s the road slowly reverted to use as a trail, with the public landowner continuing to control the access from Highway 97. In the 1980s the Forest Service blocked vehicle access to the road on National Forest, but continued to permit its use as a trail for non-motorized use. In the late 1990s the private land along Highway 97 changed ownership. The new owner developed a commercial rock pit and became more restrictive of public access to the trail. Access was limited to people who had a personal relationship with the new land owner. As the rock pit was developed, public access across this property became unsafe.

Historic public use of the trail included hikers, hunters, rock climbers, horseback riders, and mountain bikers. The Okanogan Valley Chapter of the Backcountry Horsemen developed a special interest in the trail and held annual group rides on it. Others used the trail to enjoy the wildflowers in the spring, and the Washington State Fish and Wildlife used it as an access route to place saltlicks for the herds of mountain sheep that inhabit the area. The Pacific Northwest Trail Association identified Whistler Canyon trail as the route for the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail. Due to the wide popularity of the Whistler Canyon trail by such a wide variety of user groups, the Pacific Northwest Trail Association (PNTA), The Okanogan Valley Chapter of the Backcountry Horsemen

(OVC-BCH), and the Okanogan Trails Coalition (OTC) expressed interest in regaining access to the trail.

### **Acquisition Activity:**

- In 2007, in response to a request from Backcountry Horsemen, Okanogan Trails Coalition and the Pacific Northwest Trail Association, the Tonasket Ranger District worked with Forest and Regional Lands staff and determined that the agency does not have a right-of-way for the trail across private lands.
- Tonasket District Ranger Mark Morris contacted several private landowners near the bottom of the historic trail to determine if there was any interest in making an arrangement to regain public access to the National Forest and the Whistler Canyon Trail.
- Fall 2007, one landowner expressed interest in working with the Forest Service and discussions started with “Gold Digger Corporation” about a land acquisition.
- November 2007, Gold Digger informed Ranger Morris that they probably had a buyer from Canada that was interested in obtaining the property for sub division purposes.
- January 2008, Gold Digger informed Ranger Morris that the deal with the Canadian firm had gone away, but the property was still listed for sale.
- Ranger Morris informed the PNTA, OVC-BCH, and OTC about the status of the Gold Digger property and that it was not likely that the Forest Service would be able to purchase the property in a timely manner. Word spread rapidly throughout Okanogan County and elsewhere about the opportunity to acquire the Whistler Canyon property. A wide variety of groups asked the Okanogan County Commissioners to purchase the property and hold it until the Forest Service could acquire the property at some later date.
- Spring 2008, Okanogan County Commissioners agreed to pursue a purchase of the property with Gold Digger.
- August 2008, the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest submitted a budget request for Land and Water Conservation Funds (LWCF) for Fiscal Year 2010 to secure funding to buy the Whistler Canyon trailhead and trail property. This request was for \$250,000 and was sent to the Regional Office.
- August 2008, the OVC-BCH sent a letter to Okanogan-Wenatchee Forest Supervisor Becki Heath asking to be financial partners with the USDA Forest Service and help buy the property.
- September 2008, Forest Supervisor Becki Heath replied in support of the partnership with OVC-BCH.
- November 2008, the Pacific Northwest Region of the Forest Service proposed Whistler Canyon Trailhead as a Regional budget request for LWCF funding for FY 2010. (5420-3 memo of November 17, 2008 to the National Director of Lands in Washington DC, signed by Claire Lavendel, Director of Recreation, Lands, and Mineral Resources for the Pacific Northwest Region.)
- Fall 2008, the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest sent a briefing letter to Senators Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell and Representative Cathy McMorris-Rogers to inform them of the potential for the forest to acquire some private land using LWCF funds (if appropriated).

- December 2008, Okanogan County Commissioners completed the purchase of the Whistler Canyon property from Gold Digger.
- January 2009, the OVC-BCH started their fundraising effort by sending letters requesting financial contributions and publishing an article in their magazine. They reported that they quickly collected over \$30,000 in contributions.
- March 2009, Okanogan County Commissioners met with the PNTA and OVC-BCH to discuss possible development of a trail across the Whistler Canyon County owned property in the summers of 2009/2010.
- The Pacific Northwest Trail became a National Scenic Trail under Public Law 111-11, signed by President Obama on March 30<sup>th</sup>.
- April 2009, the PNTA, OVC-BCH, Tonasket Ranger District, and Okanogan County entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with regards to the Whistler Canyon Trail and trailhead. Okanogan County received Title II monies to develop the Whistler Canyon Trailhead and Trail for FY 2010.
- May 2009, members of the OVC-BCH laid out and brushed the proposed trailhead and trail across the County owned property.

### **What Makes Whistler Canyon a Special Place?**

- The trail will regain access to the **Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail**.
- Breathtaking mountain and valley views from various locations are inspirational and outstanding.
- Whistler Canyon would be the only location along Highway 97 north of Wenatchee where the public would have direct access to the National Forest off the highway.
- Whistler Canyon trailhead would regain public access to the National Forest and the historic Whistler Canyon Trail.
- The early season of use for the Whistler Canyon Trail is unique for Eastern Washington. Due to the western exposure the snow melts on Mt. Hull in early March; making the Whistler Canyon Trail available to the recreating public three months earlier than any other hiking and equestrian trails on National Forests in Eastern Washington.
- The trail will provide recreational access for a wide variety of user groups and individuals: hikers, hunters, horseback riders, mountain bikers, mountain/rock climbers, wildlife viewing, wildflower viewing, etc.
- Highway 97 is a designated scenic byway and one of the routes of the 2010 Olympics in British Columbia.
- The Whistler Canyon Trailhead property serves as habitat for a variety of wildlife including: deer, bear, California Big Horned Sheep, Wild Turkey, grouse, quail, partridge, etc. The area will provide an excellent opportunity for “watchable wildlife”.
- Due to its proximity to the Communities of Oroville and Tonasket, as well as ease of access off Highway 97, the Whistler Canyon property will be an ideal location for Environmental Education and Interpretive activities, especially for local schools.

- The Whistler Canyon property is a natural wildlife corridor between the National Forest and BLM lands on Mt. Hull and the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife Driscoll Island management area to the west of Whistler Canyon property. Forest Service ownership will preserve this corridor.
- The Forest Service has a financial partner for the purchase of the property in the Okanogan Valley Chapter of the Backcountry Horsemen. In addition the OVC-BCH and the Pacific Northwest Trail Association are committed to help develop and maintain the trailhead and trail.
- Whistler Canyon trailhead and trail will help meet recreational demands from areas such as Seattle and Spokane, as well as through hikers on the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail, especially due to its easy access and earlier/longer season of use. This will help meet needs identified in the Recreation facilities planning process.



