

South Lincoln County: Oregon Coast Gravel Epic

THEME: Two small communities collaborate with a private company to create an unusual, elite bicycling event that immediately creates a buzz. A strong grassroots network of local organizations and volunteers ensures a good fit with the communities' character and builds genuine local support.

PROJECT IMPACT: New visitor attraction achieving national recognition, drawing primarily from outside the region; increased local capacity for fundraising and event planning, increased overnight visitation by cyclists who typically [spend more](#) than [average overnight travelers](#) in Oregon.

PLACE: South Lincoln County is located between the Coast Range and the Pacific Ocean along the central coast of Oregon. With an approximate area of 300 square miles, the landscape is diverse, from the steep 800 foot high Cape Perpetua headlands on its southern coast to wide flat beaches, estuaries and off-shore haystack rock formations to the north. The Alsea and Yachats Rivers create bays in Waldport and Yachats. Inland, the land rises swiftly into the Coast Range. While most known for its extraordinary coastline, the most dominant feature of the landscape may in fact be its forested nature. The vast majority of land is forested and contained within the Siuslaw National Forest. Given regular coastal storms and steep topography, landslides and prolonged road closures have left South Lincoln County especially isolated at times.

South Lincoln County includes two incorporated cities: Waldport and Yachats, and well as two unincorporated communities, Seal Rock on the coast, and Tidewater inland. The total population of this area in the 2010 was 8,313. Tourism is a major driver of the regional economy in Lincoln County, and particularly in South County's smallest incorporated community, Yachats (population 690), where 87% of the municipal budget depends on revenue from local lodging tax. In larger Waldport (population 2033), tourism supports just a half of a percent of the municipal budget, primarily because its tax base is more diverse and there are relatively few places to stay overnight in the community. Historically and today, the two communities have different relationships with the tourism sector as a result. However, through the Rural Tourism Studio, the communities are actively collaborating around tourism.

STORY: As the Rural Tourism Studio program began early in 2012, a separate effort had recently launched to bring a signature bicycle event to South Lincoln County as an economic development project. Specifically, a member of the Alsea Watershed Council had invited a friend and Eugene-based bike event company to meet with several local leaders and discuss the potential for an unusual style bicycling event—an epic, physically demanding ride taking advantage of the many gravel roads slicing through the steep hillsides and valleys sides of the Coast Range. Steve Cash, the company owner of dark30sports, aimed to develop a "Triple Crown" series of diverse bicycle races in and around the Willamette Valley. Based on these early conversations, several local leaders suggested the race as a priority project during the Rural Tourism Studio, and despite most people never having heard of gravel racing before, the group was on board. Concurrent with the RTS, work began in earnest to prepare for the first Oregon Coast Gravel Epic.

↗ Mile 156

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The type of bicycle event was a complex undertaking for the small communities of Yachats and Waldport, and few locals had any deep experience with a large scale sporting event. The project was thus structured as a partnership between dark30sports as event organizer and mentor, and local leaders from the public, private and nonprofit sectors as recruiters for volunteers and sponsors. As described in the budget section that follows, the community paid a flat fee to Cash to guarantee the event, and funds raised beyond that amount in terms of sponsorships were split 50/50 between the private company and the community. Oregon Coast Bank was the title sponsor, and the Port of Alsea served as fiscal agent for fundraising.

While the most active community volunteers estimate they put in close to 100 hours each planning for the 2013 inaugural event, no one

knew quite what to expect in terms of attendance for the first ride. The experience of another long distance annual event, the Yaquina Lighthouse Century Ride based in nearby Newport, OR suggested modest expectations. That event attracted 20 riders the first year, 75 the second and 150-170 the third year. In contrast, the Gravel Epic ride attracted 86 registered riders for the inaugural 2013 event, and 160 in 2014.

People attribute this fast start to having a professional organizer and mentor, as well as strong community support evidenced by a veritable army of over fifty community volunteers on event day. As Rick Hill, a local promoter for the Yaquina ride observes, “The community didn’t come around to that ride as its own priority. This is the opposite- the community is driving and promoting the event.” In addition to the main event, there were complementary draws organized locally such as a bike rodeo for children emphasizing safety. The third annual Gravel Epic is scheduled for September 26, 2015.

It is worth noting that while the original plan was to have the course start on one community and end in the other, this was not practical given the terrain, so Waldport was selected as the start and end point.

But planning committee members worked diligently to ensure that benefits would accrue to both communities and their businesses, through collaborative promotion and lodging packages.

There has not been a formal economic impact analysis, but the results of a 2014 exit survey (reaching approximately 40% of participants) revealed evidence of impact, because so many participants stayed overnight in paid lodging in the area.

- Nearly all respondents came from at least 50 miles away, giving them official status as “tourists”
- Nearly 10% were from out of state.
- Nearly 75% of them stayed in paid lodging: of those, the majority (61%) stayed in hotels; 26% in rented houses, and 13% camping/RVs.



With this project, South Lincoln County is on the cutting edge of a trend. Gravel biking, or “gravel grinding” as it is known, is growing in popularity nationally, and the Oregon Coast Gravel Epic has recently been recognized by GranfondoGuide.com as one of the top (a.k.a. [toughest](#)) Gravel Grinders in the West. Who knew that creating something really difficult and really hard would be such a draw?!

TIMELINE



LESSONS LEARNED:

- Having professional support and guidance can speed up the process of launching a new initiative, and give local volunteers the confidence that they can succeed.
- While the event was not designed as a community fundraiser, the community has been able to raise cash due to revenue sharing that creates good incentives for follow through. Half of the funds secured for event sponsorship (and raised by its volunteers) were returned to the community for future projects as prioritized locally. For the 2014 event, this amount was \$2,175.

- To ensure that local businesses get maximum exposure and revenue opportunities, start the process of developing promotions and packages early. The first year, each registrant received a book of coupons from local businesses in their “swag bag” the day of the race. Businesses paid \$25 each to be included. However, most of the coupons went unused, and probably undetected until the tired bicyclists finally unpacked back home.
- There’s no reason a small community can’t be on the cutting edge of product development!

BUDGET:

Cash Revenue:	Cash
Part of Travel Oregon Matching Grant for RTS projects	\$2,500
Local match (Cities of Waldport and Yachats, Port of Alsea, Waldport Chamber of Commerce	\$2,500
Local sponsorship revenue (for 2014 event)	\$4,350
Total	\$9,450
Expenses	
Management fee for dark30sports	\$5,000
50% of Sponsorship revenue for other event cash expenses	\$2,175
Total	\$7,175
Revenue-Expenses (Net income for future community projects)	\$2,175

In addition to cash, there were many in-kind sponsors, such as Rogue Brewery, Columbia Distributing, Rays Market, Samaritan Communities Pacific Hospital, Emergency services, and community volunteers who provided food, drink, labor and more on event day worth at least \$3,000. Travel Oregon also provided in-kind support in the form of graphic design and marketing.

TOOLS/RESOURCES:

- No specific tools identified.

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