

Oregon Tourism Commission Briefing

June 12, 2023

Lakeview Elks Club
Broadcasted via YouTube Live

Tourism Commissioners virtually present included: Chair Boyles, Vice-Chair DiNovo, and Commissioners David Gremmels, David Penilton, Maria Ponzi, Erin Stephenson, Greg Willitts and Scott Youngblood.

Welcome and Introductions

Chair Boyles opens the meeting at 2:00 p.m. and welcomes everyone to the June 12, 2023, Oregon Tourism Commission meeting.

Chair Boyles thanks everyone that has joined us today in Lakeview, and to those joining through Travel Oregon's Industry YouTube channel.

Chair Boyles acknowledges that in holding a meeting today, all Public Meeting notice requirements were met and states that today's meeting materials, including the agenda and supplemental material can be found on the Travel Oregon Industry website.

The Oregon Tourism Commissioners and Todd Davidson, CEO of Travel Oregon, introduce themselves.

Chair Remarks

Chair Boyles expresses his gratitude to Vice-Chair DiNovo for filling in for him during the April 3, 2023, Tourism Commission meeting.

Chair Boyles also thanks the Commission for their review and input on the Travel Oregon 2023-25 draft Strategic Plan prior to it being shared out for industry comment.

Chair Boyles acknowledges that several comments on the plan have been received – which Todd will speak to – and that he believes the recommendations provided are generally in support of the major themes included in the draft and that only modest modifications may need to be made.

Chair Boyles states that today's briefing provides us with some extended time to hear from and engage with staff regarding topics that are focus areas for Travel Oregon and Oregon's tourism industry.

Dark Sky Tourism Briefing

Todd states he's excited for the opportunity to hear about Dark Skies tourism. The panel that will speak is made up of both staff and external partners, showing the collaborative nature of how we truly see our work moving forward with our 10-Year Vision. This work checks every strategy under our objective of "Oregon delivers remarkable experiences."

- Supports the stewardship and development of new and existing tourism experiences and amenities.
- Stimulate and bolster regenerative tourism business and product development opportunities in urban, rural and tribal lands, providing visitors with immersive Oregon experiences.
- Reduce high visitation pressures and increase community livability by investing in the development of niche tourism products that is based on growing visitor demand and Oregon's competitive advantage.
- Provide resources and assistance to tourism-related businesses, organizations and communities that are experiencing, or have experienced crises.
- Utilize partnerships to advance educational and career opportunities to develop, attract and retain Oregon's tourism workforce.

Todd discusses that we heard last week during a meeting with our Governor, that dark skies is of particular interest to their family, so we are even more thrilled to be working on an effort showcasing and highlighting a unique and hidden gem of the beauty of Oregon.

We will have an opportunity for questions between each panel.

Why Dark Skies

Hilary Sager, Destination Development Manager introduces Bob Hackett, Exec. Director of Travel Southern Oregon and Jill Nishball, Oregon Parks & Recreation Department (OPRD).

Hilary states that Bob was an early adopter of Dark Sky tourism and that he was part of the effort in 2018 to help tourism in Lake Country.

Bob walks the Commission through a PPT informing the Commission of Dark Sky tourism.

- Eighty percent of the people in the U.S. can't see the milky way.
- International Dark Sky Places Program
- Most Dark Sky Places are in the West
- Why tourism is at the table –
 - Cites Colorado Plateau 2019 Tourism data when \$5.8B is projected to be spent in the next 10 years
 - Dark Sky visitors spend 3 times more than day travelers

Hilary continues with a PowerPoint presentation discussing:

- How Dark Sky tourism work is aligned with both internal and external work.
- Explains how this work is rooted in conservation practices
- Creation of Dark Sky tourism toolkit
- Creation of Dark Sky Tourism Workgroup with goals of:
 - Enhancing Oregon's dark sky visitor experiences
 - Elevate Oregon's reputation as a top-tier destination for night sky viewing
 - Support rural economic development and improve local livability
 - Protect and preserve Oregon's dark skies
- Creation of Oregon's Dark Sky destinations
- Review of places in Oregon seeking International Dark Sky Association (IDA) designation
- Review of those places in Oregon for future considering of Dark Sky designation

Jill continues with PowerPoint and discusses that the Prineville Reservoir in Oregon was the first park to seek and get designated. Jill discusses the rigorous process to get the International Dark Sky designation. Cottonwood Canyon and Wallowa Lake are also seeking Dark Sky designation, as is Stubb Stewart State Park. Jill discusses Star Parties that are being offered at several state parks throughout Oregon this summer. In late April – the first park ranger training happened with 21 rangers at Cottonwood Canyon.

Bob continues with PowerPoint presentation on the work that is happening in southern Oregon regarding Dark Sky designation including:

- The creation of a Dark Sky designation logo
- Nomination Components include:
 - Lighting inventory
 - Sky Quality Measurements
 - Photographs of horizons and sky glow
 - Light Management Plan
 - Outreach Plan and Materials
 - Letters of support
- Steering Committee & Project team in place since 2020
- GIS Mapping – which for this designation includes 11.5 million acres
- Light Management Plan which takes all partners to agree:
 - USFS
 - Lake County
 - Malheur wildlife refuge
 - Hart Mountain wildlife refuge
 - State Parks
 - Division of State Lands
 - ODOT

Hilary discusses that with Dark Sky tourism there is a wide spectrum of how to accomplish the work. There are many dark sky tourism opportunities including nighttime snow shoeing, kayaking or canoeing, bat walks – or nocturnal wildlife viewing. Hilary discusses the priority projects that the Dark Sky Tourism Workgroup identified:

- Dark Sky sessions at the 2023 Oregon Outdoor recreation Summit
- Dark Sky 101 printed pieces for visitor education
- Statewide industry communications and outreach strategy

For the future – the workgroup is exploring:

- Digital Dark Sky GIS map for visitors
- International Dark Sky Place designation opportunities
- Lighting inventory technical assistance program
- Continued Dark Sky itinerary development

Commissioner Stephenson states how amazing the Dark Sky effort is for bringing such a large group of folks together. Commissioner Stephenson asks if there is an opportunity to provide training for local community members to allow them to become guides in their areas.

Hilary states that it's extremely important to engage with local and Dark Sky gateway communities. She states that in the tourism space – it's important to message how to partake in an experience. Hilary states that there are opportunities to educate people to allow them Dark Sky entrepreneurial opportunities. Jill states that they are exploring ways to show the impact of lights in certain locations.

Commissioner Penilton asks what additional resources are needed for rural communities to engage in this work and if there are opportunities to create additional dark sky guides/packages.

Hilary states that Dark Sky tourism is now included in the Why Guides registry in order to understand how many operators are offering those tours, as well as to help provide training to those who may be interested in future opportunities.

Bob states that for a project like this, community engagement is paramount if there will be the support – then technical development – then finishing the work. Bob states that in the local libraries there are Dark Sky kits that people can check out to allow people to participate in a dark sky event. Bob states that they have been engaging with DMOs to get them the tools they need to engage in these efforts.

Katy Clair, Director of Marketing Services shares a PowerPoint presentation with the Commission on how they are engaging in Dark Sky in the consumer marketing space including:

- Dark Sky assets (photographs)
- Dark Sky consumer content – in preparation for the annular solar eclipse this fall
- Dark Sky social media
- Dark Sky Tourism Earned Media
- Dark Sky Industry Content (toolkits)

Katy discusses that they are excited about the upcoming campaign, how they are incorporating dark skies into that work and how they see seasonality being expanded because dark skies are available all year long.

Commissioner Youngblood asks if part of the impact of this upcoming campaign and the excitement about this work is due to the fact that so many young people have never had the opportunity to see the night sky.

Katy states that although they haven't considered it that way, they are certainly people seeking opportunities they haven't had a chance to experience yet. Even with Portland being a large metropolitan area, they still have some dark skies.

Commissioner Youngblood states that there seems to be immense potential to promote Dark Sky tourism with consumers being in those areas during the day, eating at restaurants or looking for daytime activities as well.

Commissioner Ponzi states that it is an incredible undertaking to do this work; showing the power of tourism; helping rural communities; protecting the environment and providing educational opportunities. This effort provides a great example for so many other states and state agencies to think bigger. Commissioner Ponzi states that responsible recreation is key – but preserving the pristine rural areas is a balance.

Chair Boyles asks about the current inventory and if there are any projects that are close to, or beyond the finish line for IDA designation.

Bob states that there are several projects that are close to or beyond the finish, indicating that Crater Lake National Park is very engaged and working towards a designation soon. Bob states that the conforming light inventory is the only hold up for the Oregon Outback designation across the finish line.

Todd asks if there is a known budget identified to get the designations completed.

Bob states that it's not necessarily the funding that this the issue, but just the effort of the folks to do the work.

Hilary provides an example on the coast where replacing current lights with conforming lights was actually cheaper than a normal light – but the effort to do the entire replacement can be lengthy given capacity and interest.

Vice Chair DiNovo states that from a City of Coos Bay perspective – they changed out their lights because not only were they better for light pollution, but they were cheaper. Vice Chair DiNovo confirms that reaching out to local governments is important. To see where this Dark Sky work is today, with just a few people, is very inspirational.

Commissioner Youngblood asks if Oregon DEQ and Energy Trust of Oregon are aware of the efforts happening to save energy and manage light pollution.

Bob states that Lake County is aware and working with the power companies as well.

Hilary states that working with those partner agencies and organizations is a great suggestion. She states that IDA is likely already partnering with, or will have ideas on how to partner, but she will follow up to make sure. There is certainly some precedent established, but more can be done.

Bob discusses that there was a bill introduced during this legislative session for all state agencies to have a lighting plan.

Commissioner Willitts asks about the private landowner buy in and if they are needed to get these designations.

Bob states that these designations do not apply to private property owners.

Commissioner Penilton states that being a business owner, he likes to see projects move a little quicker. Asks how from a strategic investment perspective, the private sector can come along and help communities without hindering the process.

Bob states that he is hearing from local businesses that they may be holding investments based on designations being complete and as well as seeing results from the upcoming marketing efforts.

Hilary explains that when they did their Dark Sky assessment, they asked communities about their "readiness" to differentiate between those places that were ready to be marketed and those who still needed help.

Commissioner Gremmels states his appreciation for the presentation today and how inspiring it is. Commissioner Gremmels asks if there could be an app that states what Dark Sky visitors may be able to experience on any given day in an area.

Hilary states that the spectrum of those interested is broad. A GIS map was created based on where the dark skies are, but not what other assets are available in those locations.

Chair Boyles thanks everyone for the input and time today and adjourns the meeting at 3:31 p.m.