

ODOT and partners win federal environmental excellence award

ODOT and its partners in a forest highway enhancement program won a prestigious national environmental excellence award — one of 12 Federal Highway Administration 2003 Environmental Excellence Awards.

Ten years ago, ODOT, the FHWA's Western Federal Lands Highway Division, the Pacific Northwest Region of the USDA Forest Service and the Association of Oregon Counties established the Oregon Forest Highway Enhancement Program. The program's goal was to plan, develop, design and implement forest highway enhancement projects, such as improved signing, interpretive sites, trailheads and roadside facilities, to help the increasing number of recreational highway users. Before the program was created, relatively small-scale improvements such as these generally did not fare well against major safety and reconstruction needs on higher-volume roads.

The program has been especially responsive to enhancement needs along Oregon Scenic Byways that are also designated Forest Highways. Most of these facilities were in need of improvements because of increased visitor use and outdated or deteriorating accommodations. The owner-agencies of these public forest highways needed funding for projects that enhanced travelers' experiences, education or understanding of the area and that provided more functional roadside facilities.

The forest highway enhancement program is both simple and efficient. The agencies annually set aside up to 10 percent of authorized Oregon Forest Highway funds. Project requests are submitted every two or three years and are rated by the agency members following established criteria. The rating system emphasizes planning, national significance and visitor

Vista House Restoration Project

The Vista House sits on a spectacular viewpoint on the Historic Columbia River Highway at Crown Point, a very prominent feature in the Columbia River Gorge. Since its construction 85 years ago, time, the elements and repairs have taken a heavy toll on the granite and



Vista House, Crown Point



The undercrossing of Interstate 84 on the Eagle Creek Campground to Cascade Locks bike and pedestrian path.

needs. The agency sponsoring the project receives the funding through a reimbursement agreement and designs and constructs the project using its own expertise. Since 1993 approximately \$10,000,000 has funded 26 projects, including:

concrete structure. Some of the original features have been hidden or destroyed in efforts to maintain the structure. The enhancement program has provided approximately half of the funding for exterior restoration.

Restoration of abandoned segments of the Historic Columbia River Highway

The first modern highway constructed in the Pacific Northwest and the first scenic highway constructed in the United States. This project restored the original route of the HCRH for 2.5 miles from the Eagle Creek Campground to Cascade Locks for use as a bike and pedestrian

path. The project restored original bridge railings, uncovered original pavement and constructed an undercrossing of Interstate 84 and a trailhead under the historic Bridge of the Gods in Cascade Locks.

The McKenzie Visitor Portal

Located in the McKenzie River District office on the Willamette National Forest, the portal features 1,400 square feet of new customer service space dedicated to educating, orienting and informing visitors of the West Cascades and

McKenzie Pass-Santiam Pass scenic byways. The primary objective of the project was to establish and formalize the facility as a gateway to the two scenic byways.

2003 Environmental Excellence Award

The FHWA presented a 2003 Environmental Excellence Award to the Oregon Forest Highway Enhancement Program last month on Earth Day — an ideal day to demonstrate a commitment to environmental awareness. The FHWA selected 12 winning programs from 134 entries nominated by 38 states.

“These winners exemplify what it means to be good environmental stewards,” Federal Highway Administrator Mary E. Peters said. “They demonstrate how we can make needed transportation improvements while protecting and enhancing the environment.”

Since it began in 1995, the biennial environmental excellence awards program has recognized partners, projects and processes that use FHWA funding sources to go beyond environmental compliance to achieve environmental excellence. This is the second time ODOT has shared an award. In 1997, the FHWA awarded the “Excellence in Historic and Archeological Preservation” award to ODOT, N-B Hatch Company, HNTB, Woodward-Clyde Consultants and the Historic Columbia River Highway Advisory Committee for their work in restoring the Historic Columbia River Highway near Mosier.

(The Hood River-Mosier connection project reopened the Mosier Twin Tunnels to the public for the first time in almost half a century. The tunnels were abandoned in 1954 because of falling rock and unstable slopes. Today the tunnels sport windows overlooking the Columbia River, and almost five miles of the HCRH form a hiking and biking trail, with a one-of-a-kind catchment to protect hikers from rockfall.)

“These models of excellence inspire commitment to environmental stewardship,” U.S. Transportation Secretary Norman Y. Mineta said. “Each defined in new ways how we in transportation are architects of the future — visionaries for what can be achieved by working together to promote methods, processes and projects that protect and enhance the environment.”

“This is a big deal,” said David Sell, Western Federal Lands Highway Division, FHWA.

Sell coordinated the forest enhancement program’s nomination.

“This demonstrates you don’t have to choose between the environment and the highway,” Sell said. “You really can have both.”