

Willamette Water Quality Myths and Reality

by Pete Lavigne, Mike Houck and Bill Hutchison.

Portland and the entire state of Oregon have long enjoyed a reputation for cutting edge action to protect and restore the environment. In 1938 concerned citizens and children marched on City Hall carrying signs that read "The Youth of Portland Demand Clean Rivers. In 1960 Governor Tom McCall launched a campaign to "clean-up the Willamette River." In the intervening years from the fabled National Geographic cover story of the cleanup of the Willamette in 1972 to the late 1980s many water quality issues regarding the Willamette in metropolitan Portland received little attention, but none so little as the overflow of raw sewage into the river.

In 1997, as Portland's Willamette River Task Force debated the design of a traditional 'big pipe' combined sewer overflow (CSO) program to eliminate discharges of sewage to the Willamette, the prospect of salmon going extinct in the Willamette River provided us with a wake up call that whatever solutions we came up with needed to address the ecosystem health of the river and its tributaries while responding to sewage contamination. It also served to remind us that we had rested on our environmental laurels far too long. Whatever solution we arrived at had to be developed in the context of a growing list of environmental challenges that face Portland today: ESA listings; virtually all of our streams have been listed as water quality limited by DEQ; loss of riparian and wetland habitat on all our streams; serious stormwater management impacts to our streams; and toxic sediments in Portland Harbor necessitating a possible Superfund listing. It became clear that there is a need to better integrate separate programs such as the Clean Water Act and Endangered Species Act to meet multiple social, economic and ecological objectives.

The Willamette River Task Force report to Council in September, 1999 explicitly stated that it is time for action to make Portland's reputation for excellence in environmental protection match reality in the river, its tributaries and the surrounding landscape-- the entire watershed in Portland. Key to this integrated watershed approach is the ecological reality that river protection and water quality restoration is as much about land management and restoration as it is about the river itself. Protecting and restoring rivers means addressing pollution and wildlife habitat problems in the entire watershed -- the entire land area that drains to tributary streams like Johnson, Fanno, Tryon, Balch and Stephens Creek as well as the river itself.

In the next few weeks the Portland City Council will act on the "Clean River Plan" proposed by Commissioner Dan Saltzman. We urge the City Council to adopt a program that achieves all of the goals outlined in the Task Force recommendations and in Commissioner Saltzman's Clean River Plan. We strongly agree with a phased approach to CSO control that allows Portland to reduce CSO discharges prior to designing a huge conveyance system. If such a phased approach, of necessity, means that adherence to existing negotiated timelines based upon a "pipes only" construction schedule is possible, then a schedule adjustment can be considered at an appropriate time. The Task Force recommended that schedule extensions occur only if justified based on the results of integrated watershed strategies, a specific need for Clean River Plan results in system design decisions, or there is major risk to Portland posed by the absence of DEQ's TMDLs.

We agree that it is extremely important that Portland clean up the Willamette River on time and under budget. However, if the task force criteria for an extension are met, a specific and arbitrary date is not as important as implementing a plan that restores the health of the Willamette, its tributaries, and the watershed. If this plan is implemented as recommended, Portland will be pursuing a cutting edge urban watershed ecosystem restoration effort which meets and goes far beyond the narrow requirements of the Clean Water and Endangered Species Acts. It will dramatically change and strengthen the way the City works to protect and restore our urban environment and will serve as a model for the rest of the United States. In short, our actions will be substantial and beneficial for the entire ecosystem.

We recommend that City Council strengthen the Clean River Plan in three ways:

1. As the Task Force recommended, ensure that all city bureaus accept responsibility for their program impacts on the Willamette and its tributaries. It is no longer acceptable for the Portland Development Commission, Portland Department of Transportation or the Bureau of Design and Review to take the position that cleaning up the Willamette is BES's mission and they have no role. Every city bureau should be compelled to conduct a Willamette Watershed Impact Statement on all their planning and infrastructure actions before those actions are taken. This process would require all city bureaus and employees to: a) evaluate their proposed actions for significant water quality and watershed ecosystem impacts, including cumulative impacts; b) publicize their findings and allow for citizen input and c) get the input of BES on all their planning and infrastructure actions while preparing the impact statement.

These steps accomplish two key goals. First, and most obvious, they mandate that agencies and employees evaluate their plans, actions and designs for their impacts on endangered species and on water quality in the Willamette and its tributaries. Implications of this evaluation include changes in road drain designs, greater attention to placement and design of parking lots, riparian buffer zones, and many other actions which are currently undertaken without regard to their impacts on water temperature, nutrient loads, or the creation of contaminated runoff. Second, BES is not placed in the position of being the 'cop' over other city agencies. BES' input and expertise is put to use and the real enforcement mechanism is the requirement for publication of the findings and for citizen input.

2. BES must design benchmarks for habitat restoration and other types of land based actions to reduce runoff and inflow and gather information on the results of these "green projects" as they progress. Designs for following efforts will be adapted according to the results that are measured each year. Achieving this kind of specific and accountable measuring along the way will require immediate and extensive expansion of the City's existing Water Pollution Control Lab, beyond that which is currently outlined in the proposed Clean River Plan. The new Watershed Health Lab should develop and measure benchmarks for the integrated watershed approach using scientifically based objective measures of success or failure.

3. We recommend that City Council, in partnership with Oregon's Congressional delegation, aggressively pursue new funding strategies that would ensure greater equity for ratepayers and allocate costs of flow prevention and treatment based on runoff contributions to the

sewer system. This means some funding may need to come from taxes on the transportation system which accounts for as much as 40% of the runoff entering Portland's combined sewer system. Portland and our delegation should also publicly support current bipartisan efforts in Congress to design and pass a new federal funding program for CSO abatement projects. The new chair of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, Senator Bob Smith of New Hampshire, is the lead sponsor of legislation which might include a low or no interest loan program. Such a loan would expedite more timely implementation of Portland's 94% target for removal of CSO's and ensure Portland would have adequate funds for broader watershed restoration and ESA-related work.

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