

OSPIRG: helping the consumer against rip-offs

"It would be really nice if OSPIRG could make everyone aware of their rights and of what to do to avoid getting ripped off all the time," says the new Director for the Oregon Student Public Interest Research Group (OSPIRG), John Eliassen.

Eliassen explained OSPIRG's consumer-environmental complaint line this way:

"If you have what you think might be a violation of environmental law, such as excessive car exhaust or a stream that smells, or consumer rights, such as a store in violation of wage price controls or if you get a bad deal from the store, call us.

"If you have a valid claim, valid meaning you have legal rights to stand on, we'll talk to the businessman and get his story. We'll review it with our committee of investigators and law students, look up any laws or statutes that apply, decide who is in the right and advise both parties of the decision.

"In most cases that takes care of it. We can't take the case if it involves litigation, but if we can't handle it we can refer you to other agencies.

"Aside from writing persuasive letters telling what the law states, there is no legal way we can force the business to do anything. Many times businesses aren't aware of what happened, and sometimes it is the customer's fault for signing something without reading it."

Eliassen named some other things that OSPIRG will be working on this year or continuing from last year.

- trying to get OSPIRG-oriented classes so that students can get credit for working with OSPIRG.

- working with ASUO Housing Office concerning tenants' rights and deposits.

- trying to get an auto fraud study set up. OSPIRG couldn't get anyone to certify a car as mechanically sound last year, according to the new director.

- working on a water quality study on the Springfield Mill Race, which may be continued into the University's Mill Race and Amazon.

- working to continue internship programs to a full year this year.

- doing a land-use study using volunteers through urban planning classes.

- working on a forest practices study with the Sierra Club.

Eliassen also said that there is going to be some reorganization of the local board function this year. "We're trying to get the State Board more responsive to each individual campus and also the individual campus more responsive to individual students. We'd like to get more people involved in the organization, of course."

Eliassen explained that it was the intention of the originators of OSPIRG to band students together and through money to hire a professional staff.

"I think the director having all the power that he does have has hindered student involvement. That's one of the things we're trying to correct this summer. I hope we do it."

Eliassen said that the OSPIRG professional staff consists of lawyers and a newly hired individual whose only concern

is consumer problems. Other resources include "environmentalists, contacts through environmental agencies, faculty contacts, District Attorney's office, general information and hopefully a lot of volunteers."

OSPIRG will also be releasing a study of the fish kill problem on the McKenzie River in relation to EWEB's facilities there, which Eliassen conducted himself.

Last year two University students, Harold Fay and Dan Mulholland, conducted a study on the practice of bait and switch advertising by Portland car dealers which may be expanded upon this year.

OSPIRG also plans to set up a watchdog system this year by attending and keeping tabs on various meetings such as the City Council and Lane Council of Governments, "just to find out what's going on and if we think anything should be reviewed," Eliassen said.

He said that OSPIRG will be working closely with the Survival Center on French Pete and on the Intercept paper recycling project but that the two agencies differ basically in modes of action. Eliassen said that the Survival Center is more action oriented, while OSPIRG is mostly concerned with research. "We are receptive to student ideas for other projects," he said.

OSPIRG will have a booth at registration and at the street faire during registration week to hand out information.

Impact, the OSPIRG newsletter, has had some distribution problems in the past, but hopefully a better distribution system will be worked out this year, Eliassen said.

Survival Center also battling to save environment

"The Survival Center is an organization set up to work on environmental projects," said Tom Lockhart, a graduate student in an interdisciplinary graduate program in Public Administration and the Survival Center's director this year.

"We are a resource center for anyone who has an idea for a project that has anything to do with the environment. We have some funds to help pay expenses, and contacts with other people who may be interested in the same project. We can get people who may want to do things connected with people who have already tried. We want to encourage people to bring their ideas in and we'll help them meet their goals."

In addition to the Survival Center's flexibility in helping people with individual or class projects, they have a number of projects of their own underway.

Intercept, which is an attempt to intercept and recycle all kinds of paper on campus is one of these. At present only the EMU, the Library and the Computer Center are participating. "People were notified through mailings and the staff newsletter last fall but the program got a false start.

"Now we are broader in terms of the kinds of paper we can take because methods to recycle more kinds of paper have been developed. We will furnish anyone who calls in and wants their paper picked up with barrels or boxes and we will make pick-ups. It is more efficient to pick-up a whole building but we're responding to anyone who wants to participate. We don't want to discourage anyone, so we make individual pick-ups and then try to get the entire building involved."

Lockhart says he hopes to get PLC and Emerald Hall participating after school starts this fall. He said they have been getting cooperation from the janitors and the physical plant but there are two problems that remain. One is having a truck to go to Northwest Paper Fibers to turn in the recycled paper, and the other is storage space. They don't like to make a trip until they have one or two tons of paper and it is difficult to find a place to store that much bulk.

Lockhart said that the Survival Center has not been involved in recycling Emeralds and other newspapers because the Eugene Mission has been doing that for a long time. They have a box behind the EMU "in a not too prominent place" says Lockhart, "and if any newspaper comes to us we give it to them."

Lockhart said that two men working with Intercept this summer are largely responsible for its current success. "Steve Trimmel and Bill Lingele have built it

up from almost nothing in May to over a ton a week now," he said.

Another of the Centers projects, Ridestop, has 31 locations throughout the most heavily travelled areas of Eugene and Springfield where cars can stop to give people rides. Lockhart said that this project has been developed by graduate students in the urban planning department who have designed booths for the locations so that people can wait for rides out of the rain. "We've got permission to build the booths, our major problem now is to get money or donated materials."

"We also hope to eventually conduct studies on other kinds of solid waste problems. We are going to look at the University campus as a closed system or community. We want to find ways to channel its solid wastes into directions other than sanitary landfills.

"This would help the University with their garbage disposal problems and generate new revenue for them. It would cut costs and cut down on the use of raw materials such as trees. There are markets for tin cans, glass, food scraps and plastics. Plastics, for example, are being used as reinforcement in cement.

"We will also be trying to set up a system of car pools, with the Survival Center as the intermediate agency." Lockhart explained that people who commute to and from campus that wish to form car pools can contact Survival Center to find out if anyone else in their area is in need of a ride or has a ride to offer. He said the program will probably be in contact with Switchboard also.

A French Pete Hike-In was sponsored by the Survival Center recently. All congressional and senate representatives and local and state politicians were invited. Wayne Morse, Robert Straub, and Charles Porter participated in the hike, along with Oregon Environmental Council Director Larry Williams and OSPIRG Director Steve McCarthy.

The need for a drive to collect old phone directories when they are replaced by new ones was brought to the Survival Center's attention by an administrative assistant in the Political Science Department. "If we bring it to the attention of the public and further to the attention of Pacific Northwest Bell we might get a favorable response." According to Lockhart, Pacific Northwest Bell has been contacted about the problem of the outdated directories, which amount to tons of recyclable paper every year, but they have declined to accept any responsibility for collecting the old directories when new ones are delivered, or to set up

recycling centers where the old directories could be returned.

"A lot of people don't realize in day-to-day living how much waste passes through their lives. It really adds up and that's the point we'd like to bring up and have people think about and hopefully they'll do something about it," says Lockhart.

Lockhart said that the Survival Center has had contacts with BRING, a local recycling effort, and that they would like BRING to help them look at the campus as a closed community because the people at BRING know quite a bit about collecting cans and bottles.

There could possibly be some sharing of trucks and transportation between the two groups Lockhart said, and the Survival Center may be able to recruit some volunteers that are willing to work for BRING.

Lockhart explained that the Survival Center tries to be a link between the campus and the community, and also other organizations involved in environmental concerns, such as The Sierra Club, Oregon Environmental Council, Environmental Studies Center, BRING, and also the Man & His Environment class and other classes in the urban planning department.

"The Survival Center has a library of pamphlets and mailings from the Environmental Protection Agency, and from Senators and Congressmen. Between the Survival Center and the Environmental Studies Center there is a good selection of books and information on the environment." They also have local contacts with people from the Sierra Club, the French Pete Committee, etc., and although they're not promoting a speakers' bureau, they do have speakers available.

Working with Lockhart at the Survival Center this year will be his two assistant directors, Mike Dotten and Pete Sorenson. Dotten is a junior majoring in political science and he will be primarily concerned with the Intercept project. Sorenson is a junior majoring in geography. He has been traveling in Europe this summer and attended the Stockholm conference on the environment.

Lockhart said the Center will be hiring one more staff person for a job that has been clerical in the past but has been revised to a 'program aide' position.

"We've tried to move away from a stereotyped secretary," Lockhart explained. The job will be funded partially by work-study funds and partially by the Survival Center budget, and will involve working with the speakers bureau, publicity and Survival Center projects.