

Oregon's reputation questioned

(AP) — An anti-gay rights initiative is drawing international media attention to Oregon with stories and editorials that say a state known for its liberal traditions risks earning a reputation for intolerance.

In an informal survey of newspapers and broadcasters, *The Register-Guard* found a wealth of material about Measure 9 and opinions about the state that produced it.

If approved by voters Nov. 3, Measure 9 would amend the Oregon Constitution to declare homosexuality "abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse."

Reaction has been building nationally along with media coverage.

On the morning of Sept. 3, any of the 1 million readers of *The New York Times* could find a guest column in the editorial section headlined "Behind the Hate in Oregon."

Illustrated by a stark, uncaptioned drawing of a dagger-toothed demon, the article by gay-rights advocate Michelangelo Signorile wasted no time making its main point.

"In Oregon, something similar to an 'ethnic cleansing' is under way," the column began. "It has transformed a once tolerant, progressive state into a repressive, frightful place."

Little more than a week earlier, nearly 600,000 British readers could find a story in London's *Sunday Telegraph Limited* headlined "Gay-bashers ride the Oregon Trail," focusing on the city of Springfield, Eugene's conservative next-door neighbor.

"An Oregon mill town has become a fierce battleground in the backlash against homosexuals," the story began. "Leaflets calling for the release of cannibalistic murderer Jeffrey Dahmer 'because all he did was kill homosexuals' have even been distributed in Springfield."

On Aug. 16, more than 600,000 East Coast readers of *Newsday* were treated to a guest article by Jim Leinfelder, who described leaving Minneapolis last year to take a job as senior producer with Oregon Public Broadcasting.

Headlined "Letter from Portland: Oregon's Sparkling Image As A Liberal State Is All Wet," the article began:

"'You'll love it out there,' my friends assured me when I left Minneapolis to start a new job in Portland 10 months ago. 'Oh, sure, it rains almost constantly. But we hear it's a very liberal, progressive state. Just like Minnesota.' They were wrong on both counts."

The author went on to note that Springfield voters in May approved an anti-gay rights city ordinance that, like Measure 9, was sponsored by the Oregon Citizens Alliance, based in Wilsonville.

The OCA, the *Newsday* article stated, "preys on economically depressed areas of the state, like Springfield, where desperate men and women are eager to lash out at the demons conjured by the citizens alliance."

Newsweek's Sept. 14 cover story, "Gays under fire," read, in part: "The most bitter battleground is Oregon, where a movement heavily financed by Christian fundamentalists is attempting to all but codify gays and lesbians out of existence."

Even conservative columnist William F. Buckley Jr. got in a

dignified lick in his Sept. 15 column. "Are Oregonians really prepared to ask the state to codify all capital sins? If so, why not throw in sloth and greed?" Buckley wrote.

On television, syndicated talk show host Phil Donahue questioned Springfield City Councilman Ralf Walters about the town's version of Measure 9, which Walters supported.

At one point in the show, Donahue said: "Oregon, your liberal and longtime tradition of compassion and freedom for all is in jeopardy this November. How will Oregon vote? I want to know. Inquiring minds want to know."

National media critic Norman Solomon, a former Oregonian who now lives in the San Francisco area, says he expects many people would be shocked to see how their state has been portrayed in the national and international media.

"We often don't recognize ourselves in such coverage," Solomon said.

As might be expected, each

side in the Measure 9 debate places full blame for all the media coverage at the other's doorstep.

Measure 9 opponents point their fingers at the OCA and its chairman, Lon Mabon.

Martin Hiraga, a spokesman for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, says Mabon has made Oregon into a testing ground for a more sweeping national movement against gay rights.

Mabon replies that homosexuals are working overtime with the "liberal" media to foster negative images about Oregon.

He notes that Measure 9 has gotten positive reviews only on conservative Christian programs such as televangelist Pat Robertson's *700 Club*.

Still he agrees with Hiraga about the national scope of Measure 9.

"Hundreds of thousands of people across the country are looking on Oregon as a bellwether state — a place where Christians are taking a stand for them," Mabon said.

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