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Fish & Fertilizer RESCUE OREGON'S RIVERS

AN EMERALD EDITORIAL



CHRIS HUTCHINSON/Emerald

Both the Willamette and Columbia rivers will require comprehensive and coordinated regional efforts to save them

The old adage typically goes, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." In Oregon environmental politics, however, there seem to be a few people who feel, "If it's already broke, it ain't worth fixing."

This approach is evident in the ongoing debate over how to preserve and restore the Willamette and Columbia rivers. Both are in grave danger, yet local and regional officials have failed to develop effective and well-coordinated strategies for dealing with the problem.

For years, dwindling fish runs and high pollution levels have indicated the Columbia River was suffering from a variety of factors including commercial fishing, agriculture, industry, logging and especially hydropower.

Saving native salmon runs in the Columbia will take serious and drastic measures, yet many groups continue to push for permission to continue and even expand destructive practices. For example, the federal government continues to experiment with barges designed to move fish around dams.

The barges are designed to avoid the practice of having water spill over dams, but they have proven expensive and ineffective. Nevertheless, despite being faced with piles of evidence that anything short of removing several dams from the Columbia and Snake rivers will continue to pose a risk to salmon, the government is wasting millions on absurd measures such as giant fish taxis.

Leaders from other states have also shown an irrational indifference to the problems. Idaho has declined to participate in a forum to discuss the region's approach to fish issues, and Montana's governor has hinted he has similar reservations.

Politicians from both states indicated they were worried about losing control over the waterways; in reality, the rivers are not ours to control and any influence we do exert will be lost if federal regulators are forced to impose drastic action to save fish runs.

Of course, this assumes the federal government will prove willing to act when state politicians have failed. The Environmental Protection Agency has such an opportunity, offered by Portland International Airport officials.

The airport is seeking permission to dump glycol, the chemical used to de-ice planes, into the Columbia River. Numerous studies have shown that glycol is a health risk and kills fish.

While PDX needs to cut runoff into the Columbia Slough and federal mandates require some kind of de-icing program, dumping toxic chemicals directly into an already polluted river is not the best option.

Many years ago, a massive effort to clean up the Willamette River was undertaken by communities throughout the valley, particularly Portland. For a time, the river was clean enough to swim in even at its confluence

with the Columbia. Now, sewage spills and pesticide runoff make water sports a questionable practice once again.

It will take another, more intense effort to clean up both the Willamette and the Columbia. Fundamental attitudes about how we view and treat the rivers must change; dumping antifreeze into the Columbia is not a practice that fits with that attitudinal change.

Similar to the Columbia, the Willamette faces a number of damaging factors. While the Columbia has received more attention, the Willamette may well be in worse shape; a recent study by the U.S. Geological Survey indicates the river is among the least healthy for fish in the nation.

Problems include toxic pollutants from agricultural and industrial use, including paper processing. In December, a task force formed by Gov. Kitzhaber made a number of suggestions, as did the federal survey team. While some of these suggestions — such as removing development from flood planes, restoring a more natural flow to the river and drastically reducing fertilizer and pesticide use — may seem extreme, they should be viewed as necessities.

Perhaps the most important observation made by the governor's task force is that billions are already being spent by local agencies who are wasting much of their money on unnecessary or redundant efforts. Just as on the Columbia, the Willamette is plagued not by a lack of concern but by a lack of coordination.

Everyone in the region is immediately affected by the health of the watershed in which they live, and the Columbia and Willamette are components of a very large watershed. We need to take efforts to save them seriously, and this means ensuring the participation of all officials and blocking approval of proposals that would continue to damage the rivers.

Perhaps there is no better example of the failure of politicians to deal with the river problems than the recent protest raised by state Sen. Gordon Smith and others against the potential listing of the Willamette in a federal rivers program. The listing would have meant increased research dollars but no specific regulations.

Nevertheless, Smith opposed the move because he feared federal regulation would destroy local autonomy over the waterway. What he should really fear is that local leaders will continue to provide inadequate leadership for dealing with the crisis.

It may take federal control or it may simply take better local coordination, but river preservation, management and improvement need to be among the highest priorities for area leaders. The cost of fixing a dying river may seem impossibly high, but the cost of a dead river is even higher.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses may be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Medical birth control

It was stated in the "thumbs down" column (ODE, June 1) that the anti-impotence pill for males is covered by insurance, while birth-control pills for women are not. Then it was stated, "birth control ... may not 'treat' medical conditions, but it is an important tool women use to maintain their physical, mental and emotional well-being."

I want to clarify that birth control is indeed used to treat a wealth of medical conditions. Many women take birth control to alleviate the painful symptoms

of endometriosis and polycystic fibrosis. Both diseases cause severe menstrual cramps, heavy bleeding, bowel irregularities, irregular periods, anemia and, if left untreated, infertility. Birth control is also used to treat women who fail to menstruate (amenorrhea).

I take birth control pills for endometriosis. I used to have to stay in bed the first two days of my period because of severe pain, but because of birth control, I can go to classes and work. My regimen of treatment costs \$175 a year and is not covered by insurance because it also

happens to be a contraceptive.

Gender inequality in health care? It's \$175 I'd like to spend on something else.

Angie Barrick
Psychology

Flag honors nationalism

As members of the Eugene chapter of the Society for the Universal Human, an organization dedicated to honoring all humans who share this planet, we disagree with the placement of an American flag on Skinner Butte as a war memorial. Let us not forget that wars occur due to overt nationalism. Having a large

American flag as a war memorial is a blatant symbol of nationalism and only honors Americans, not the millions of other people in the world who have died in wars. Just as the large cross honored only Christians, a large flag honors deaths of only Americans.

In the spirit of world peace, we would respectfully submit that a universal symbol should be considered as a monument. Possibilities might be a dedication plaque to all those in the world who have lost their lives in a war, a dedication to the innocent children of the world who have been lost, or a model of our planet as seen

from space. Perhaps we could engage the creativity of the local citizens in a contest to develop a symbol that would more accurately express Eugene's sympathies and hopes for the future.

We believe that war is a destructive option; it is time to switch our focus to promoting peace. Let's create a symbol that is inclusive of all people and engenders feelings of global unity that can help promote peaceful solutions to conflict for all children and future generations.

Charlotte and Carl Peterson
Society for the Universal Human
and Five Cosigners