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OSPIRG pushes for right to know toxins

Many people fish and swim in the Willamette and don't realize the hazards, OSPIRG says

By Tricia Schwennesen
Oregon Daily Emerald

Oregon industries dumped more than 4 million pounds of toxic waste into the Willamette River, according to Grassroots Connection and the United States Public Interest Research Group in a report released Sept. 10.

The report, titled "Troubled Waters," says that the large amount of toxic chemicals released into the Willamette River over a 4-year time span from 1992 to 1996 make it the most polluted river in Oregon.

"Oregon is known as a clean and green state," said Ben Prochazka, an OSPIRG

spokesman. "I think the river has the potential to continue being on the nations top-10 list of most polluted waterways."

People fish and swim in the Willamette River every day and don't realize they could be ingesting lead or mercury or any other toxic chemical, he said.

"Many of the chemicals being discharged into our rivers and streams are known to cause cancer, birth defects, reproductive disorders and other serious health effects," Prochazka said.

The National Heritage Rivers Act redesignated the Willamette River as a river that needs federal funding to clean up the river, he said.

Wah Chang was the number one polluter, the report said. The Albany company unloaded more than 3 million pounds of toxic chemicals into the Willamette River, according to the report. The

number two and three polluters were Wacker Siltronic Corporation in Portland, which released 883,350 pounds of pollutant, and Pope & Talbot Inc. in Halsey, which released 254,431 pounds.

Oregon ranks 23rd for the most polluted waterways out of 55 states and districts, including Guam and American Samoa.

There are more than 72,000 chemicals on the market, but only about 600 have to be reported by companies to the Toxics Release Inventory, according to Prochazka.

"It's almost like we have one pound of chemicals per person in our state.

That's in the Willamette alone," Prochazka said.

OSPIRG is pushing for legislators to expand the 1986 Emergency Planning and Community Right to Know Act to

reduce pollution in Oregon waterways.

Prochazka said 21 state representatives in the legislature already support strengthening the Right to Know Act.

OSPIRG recommends four ways to expand the Right to Know:

- Information provided to the public should include an explanation of how toxic chemicals are used in the workplace, transported through communities and contained in consumer products.

- Companies should be required to report any use of highly toxic substances such as lead, dioxin and mercury.

- Sewage treatment facilities, medical and solid waste incinerators, and oil and gas industries should also be required to report their toxic waste.

- Strengthen the Clean Water Act.

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Ben Prochazka
OSPIRG spokesman



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