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OSPIRG celebrates 30 years

■ The group, first established in 1971, temporarily lost funding in a 1998 student vote

By Beata Mostafavi
Oregon Daily Emerald

Ralph Nader's visit to the University in 1970 sparked the birth of one of the most controversial groups on campus.

The Oregon Student Public Interest Research Group — an environmental and consumer protection organization — has called the University home ever since Nader's swing through town more than 31 years ago.

OSPIRG has faced several struggles in the last decade, including going to court to fight for its right to receive student funding. The group's supporters describe the organization as one that fights for environmental concerns and consumer rights — issues they say affect all students.

But those who oppose the group's funding have continued to raise suspicions about OSPIRG's operations and where its money goes, causing the organization to close a couple of times in the past. Some have even called it a "troublesome" group that lobbies the government and uses student money to finance mainly off-campus work — a claim which opponents say it hides from students.

Despite a lawsuit and ongoing efforts to shut the group down, however, OSPIRG is celebrating its 30th anniversary, and organizers say they will continue to fight for student funding. The group currently receives \$144,426 a year at the University, which is about \$2.88 per student, per term.

"There will be people out there who will disagree with us," recently hired OSPIRG organizer Jo Voss said. "I'd like them to focus more on what we do. Students recognize how we are a part of the bigger picture."

Mac Court starts it all

OSPIRG's story began at McArthur Court, when Nader gave a speech to more than 3,000 students. Even though prosperity existed, he said then, people should be aware of the "paradox in the history of our nation." "There is still hunger, consumer fraud, government corruption, the deterioration of public services and the contamination of our government," he said Oct. 9, 1970.

Nader helped call for a referendum to raise student fees by \$1 per



Ralph Nader, pictured here speaking at McArthur Court in 1970, helped pave the way for the start of OSPIRG.

Timeline of events

October 9, 1970 — Ralph Nader visits the University and helps spark OSPIRG's creation.

November 1970 — Petitions are printed in the Emerald and distributed through campus by the University group called OPIRG. The petition is needed to call for a referendum that would increase student fees by \$1 per quarter to fund OSPIRG. About 3,000 signatures are collected.

November 13, 1970 — The ASUO Senate allocates \$250 to OSPIRG for start-up fees such as printing, travel and phone expenses.

November 16, 1970 — Nader visits again and calls for support of OSPIRG. Nader traveled to several campuses nationally.

November 23, 1970 — OSPIRG petition drive officially ends with 7,744 names.

March 9, 1971 — State Board of Higher Education approves OSPIRG being funded through traditional incidental fee process in a 5-4 vote.

A few members suggested voluntary funding instead.

Late 1971 — OSPIRG gets final approval and opens first chapter.

1995 — Former Oregon Commentator Editor Owen Brennan Rounds and other students file a lawsuit challenging constitutionality of OSPIRG's funding. A series of articles in the publication on OSPIRG's funding that year raises suspicion throughout campus and OSPIRG is questioned by the ASUO Senate.

1998 — Former Commentator writer Jonathan Collegio heads the Honesty Campaign, which encourages voting "no" on OSPIRG. The campaign succeeds and OSPIRG loses the student vote in the ASUO election. The chapter is forced to close down, but wins the election the next year and returns to campus.

1999 — The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals rules that OSPIRG's funding is legal.

2000 — Rounds drops his case.

2001 — OSPIRG goes back on the ballot and wins 808 votes over 752.

term to start OSPIRG at the University. The money would help finance professionals, such as lawyers and scientists, to study problem areas defined by the student board. Students would then disseminate this information to other students and community members.

In this way, the group could help legally challenge "illicit and negligent" operations on behalf of students, he said.

Petitions were printed in the Emerald, and eventually the referendum was approved by students and the State Board of Higher Education. The ASUO Senate allocated \$250 to the group, and the first OSPIRG chapter opened at the University in 1971.

The group gained momentum throughout the years and expanded from its first chapter on the University to 75 PIRG chapters nationally in 32 different states. The four Oregon chapters are active at the University, Lane Community College, Southern Oregon University and Portland State University.

One of OSPIRG's most successful campaigns, according to members, was the National Forest Campaign in 1997, which helped convince the Clinton administration to preserve 58.5 million acres of land nationally, including 2 million acres in Oregon.

On the consumer rights end, a recent OSPIRG study examined what members called "deceptive" practices credit-card companies use on campuses and provided tips for students. The report was distributed on campus this year.

Other OSPIRG fights have included renters' rights, homelessness and the fight to keep the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge closed to drilling.

Former ASUO Vice President Ben Unger, Class of 1998, is now the OSPIRG campus program director. He said the group has developed through the years.

"We've grown quite a ways since the old days," he said. "It was just a simple, unique idea that showed how students as consumers shared common interests and could make a difference. It just took off like wildfire."

Students challenge OSPIRG's budget

The first big debate began about five years ago when former Oregon Commentator editor Owen Brennan Rounds and several other students filed a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of OSPIRG's funding.

Rounds, Class of '95, began searching through OSPIRG's budget, and found that it presented only one line item. Other student groups showed where budget money was spent dollar-for-dollar under areas such as printing and phone costs. OSPIRG's chunk of more than

Turn to OSPIRG, page 9B

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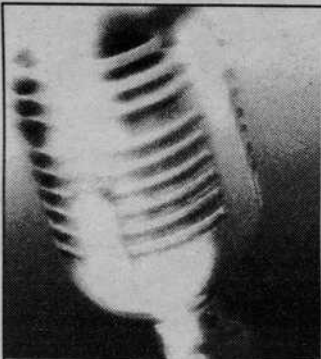
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