

DEQ resurfacing

Oregon's agency responsible for monitoring water polluters hopes added positions will help it catch up on expired permits

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

Oregon's Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) grabbed the lifeline it sorely needed when legislators approved a \$1.5 million package to restore its wastewater permitting functions in June as part of the water quality program's \$63.2 million budget for 2015-17 — a \$5.5 million increase over the previous biennium.

In addition to restoring six positions and replacing an antiquated software system, DEQ's Water Quality Program will add two new water quality permit writing specialists to help with the agency's staggering backlog of expired permits. Water Quality Program Manager Jennifer Wigal says she feels her department "fared pretty well" this legislative session.

As first reported by Street Roots earlier this year ("Underwater," Street Roots, Feb. 20), DEQ is the most backlogged state agency in the country when it comes to keeping industrial wastewater permits up to date.

Since the initial report, DEQ has fallen even further behind in re-issuing permits to both major and minor industrial facilities discharging waste into Oregon waterways. In some cases, facilities are operating under permits that were issued decades ago, when environmental standards were more relaxed. This means that while Oregon has the stiffest water pollution regulations in the U.S., many permits have not been updated

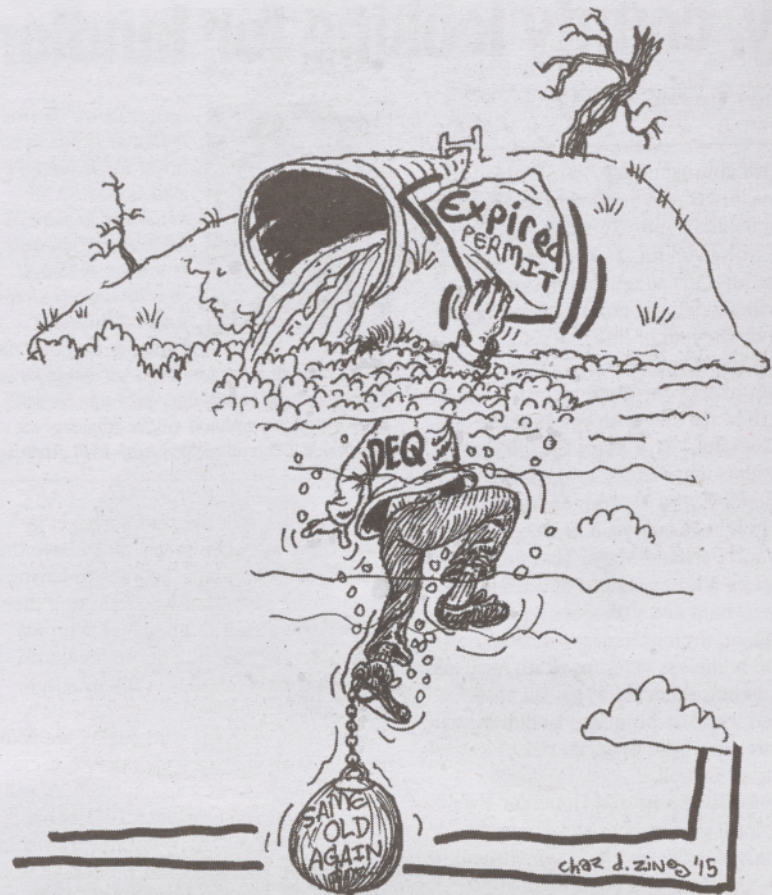
to reflect current environmental standards.

In October, 69 percent of DEQ's major wastewater permits had passed their original expiration date, in some cases by 20 years or more. Facilities with more than 1 million gallons of wastewater flowing through their treatment plants are considered major facilities. As of mid-2015, that percentage had grown to 73 percent. Facilities with current minor wastewater permits have also fallen further, with 164 of them operating on expired permits that have been extended indefinitely.

DEQ's excessive backlog caught the attention of legislators reviewing its budget request this session. They directed the agency to hire an outside consultant to evaluate its permitting program and then make recommendations focused on improving the quality and timeliness of its wastewater permits. DEQ will be required to report to legislature on or before December and again by December 2016 with an update of its progress toward completing the evaluation and implementing recommendations.

The Legislature also approved a bill allowing DEQ to raise water quality permit fees by more than the anticipated increase in cost of administering the program. This change is expected to generate approximately \$724,000 in revenue. DEQ's water quality program is far less reliant on fees than its air and land quality programs, which are not experiencing backlogs.

DEQ Policy and Analysis Manager Greg



DRAWING BY CHUCK DOBSON

Aldrich says increased funding to the water quality department will help the agency get caught up, but "it's not going to happen over night." Wigal says the new permit writers should be hired as soon as October, and it will be a matter of taking a "heads down, methodical approach" to getting caught up on the backlog.

DEQ received an overall 3 percent increase in funding over the last biennium

bringing its 2015-17 budget up to \$343.2 million, pending a final audit.

A budget package of \$550,000 will pay for a new wastewater permitting software module to replace the current, antiquated system, which Wigal says has many quirks and breakdowns that slow down operations. The new system also comes with an added full-time employee tasked with the transition.

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