

alternative will cost about \$746 million and take 7 years of construction in the river.

As of 2013, the Lower Willamette Group had spent more than \$100 million testing polluted sediments from the river and preparing reports related to its clean-up.

On May 16, United Methodist Women organized a Rally for Clean Water outside the Oregon Convention Center to draw attention to the destruction of water through global environmental racism – connecting the Willamette River to poisoned water in Flint, Mich., indigenous water rights in Honduras and the struggle for food and water security in Mindanao, Philippines, where an extended drought this year has pushed farmers into extreme hunger.

On April 1, Philippine state security forces fired on farmers and indigenous protesters in Mindanao who had blocked a highway to demand rice, leaving three dead, 116 wounded, and 87 missing. One woman who spoke at the Portland rally was a survivor of this protest, and shared her experience protesting “the plunderers of water,” saying “we indigenous peoples have, since time immemorial, believed that water is life. But today we are witness to what life is without water.”

She was followed by speakers Ibrahim Mubarak and Cassie Cohen of the Portland Harbor Community Coalition (PHCC), a coalition of environmental justice and community of color organizations that includes Groundwork Portland, Right 2 Survive, Wisdom of the Elders and the Portland chapter of the American Indian Movement.

“This city was built around the harbor, and it will be re-built around the harbor,” said PHCC founder Cassie Cohen. “Polluters have profited at the expense of people who have suffered from centuries of slow violence in the form of disease, dispossession and displacement. Euro-Americans settlers stole the river and surrounding lands from the Multnomah Indians, and thousands of other First Nations peoples who fished and traveled through the valley. Industry heads stole economic wealth and health from African American shipyard workers, whose families were segregated and forced to move and move and move again. All while being

exposed to air and water toxins, and being excluded from the right to unionize. Other working class groups have also paid dearly for their time working in the shipyards.”

“And now those who can’t afford food because of rising rent are eating toxic fish,” added Ibrahim Mubarak, founder of Dignity Village and Right 2 Survive. “And those who can’t afford rent are living on contaminated shorelines, and are at risk of being pushed even farther and farther to the margins of the cleanup as the process unfolds. Where can we go? Where do they push houseless people constantly? Into toxic land where they’re growing toxic vegetables and eating toxic vegetables, where they’re washing up in toxic water, where, as one young lady said, they’re getting rashes on their skin, and their pets are losing their fur. So what can we do about this, but stand up and fight for our rivers, together, as one?”

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– CASSIE COHEN
PHCC FOUNDER

In April, the Portland Harbor Community Coalition delivered a letter to City Hall with a list of demands, including full accountability for polluters, an end to the sweeps of riverside camps, permanent affordable housing for anyone displaced by clean-up activities, and Superfund job training for low-income Portlanders and minority and women-owned firms, along with agreements with impacted communities to guarantee such equity promises are fulfilled.

Rose Longoria, a Superfund Cleanup official with Yakama Nation fisheries, said that the Willamette is a major priority for the Yakama Nation, as it is one of the most important sources of fish contamination in the entire Columbia basin – from the Canadian border to the mouth of the river.

“This is a one-shot opportunity to get the clean-up done right, and done correctly,” Longoria said, adding “it is very evident now that EPA’s proposal is somewhat of a big-win for industry, and a big loss for the general public, the tribes, and the

resources.”

Longoria said the Willamette is the most industrialized tributary to the Columbia River, and has been a long-standing concern for local tribal fishermen who rely on the Columbia as a major source of food. In the mid-1990s, the Yakama Nation’s tribal council even traveled to Washington, D.C. to pressure the EPA to prioritize the river. Several years ago the Yakama Nation launched an even more aggressive effort, cataloguing all hazardous waste sites in the Columbia Basin within a half mile from the

riverbank, then prioritizing clean-up plans for those sites with the greatest impact on marine habitat. The Portland Harbor, Longoria said, was one of the largest they identified.

One fish of particular concern for local tribes is

lamprey – an important cultural and ceremonial food which has been used by local tribes for thousands of years.

“Willamette Falls is one of the last few remaining sites to collect lamprey, and Yakama members often travel there to collect lamprey to bring back to long-houses and feed the families, long-houses, at ceremonial events and so forth.”

“There’s a lot of concern about lamprey,” Longoria said, “because lamprey live in the sediments for many years before they migrate out to the ocean, and then come back basically to migrate through that Superfund Site on their way to Willamette Falls. So there’s a lot of concern, and it’s not very well understood how those contaminants impact lamprey.”

A video produced by the Columbia River Intertribal Fish Commission paints an even more dire picture:

“The decline in these animals over the past 20 years is astronomical,” said Elmer Crow. “How do we let something that’s 450, 500 million years old go extinct? Shame on us, the whole bunch of us, for not paying attention to what was going on.”

Based on recent meetings with EPA officials, Longoria said she is disappointed with what they’re putting in the clean-up

plan, and Yakama Nation is requesting high-level consultation to insist on a more thorough clean-up. Currently, she said, EPA is looking to dredge just 8 percent of the Superfund Site, which means it is largely hoping that substances break down over the next few centuries, or slowly become covered by cleaner sediments from upstream. The only other option is a concrete “cap”, which PHCC leader Ibrahim Mubarak has called “a very heavy band-aid.”

Another elder, Wilson Wewa, adds “They’ve been here for hundreds of millions of years, but it’s only gonna take a hundred years to wipe them out.”

Longoria said she is disappointed with the clean-up plan put out by the EPA, and that the Yakama Nation is requesting high-level consultation to insist on a more thorough clean-up.

And Jim Robison, chair of the Portland Harbor Community Advisory Group, said that a thoroughly cleaned up river would not only address the injustice of poor families (and a significant number of communities of color) feeding themselves with toxic fish – it would also allow for a much greater fishery on the Willamette that could serve local restaurants – a definite boon to the local economy.

The Willamette River is a repository of our past – first filled with fish and abundant life, now filled with poison and over 200 contaminants. In the last century the two rivers that defined Portland represented a hopeful future of industrial might and global empire. In our current age of drought, water scarcity and climate change, the city is hoping for something much different – a home rather than empire. Re-learning our own history, and listening to those who were most harmed by it, will be the key to unlearning those mistakes, and learning to live with the people who have always called this place home.

Rose Longoria said she is hopeful that people will learn more about what is happening to the Willamette, and decide for themselves what should be done. “People have one bite at the apple to get it right, to get the site cleaned up.”

“Somebody needs to be accountable for it,” said Art McConville, a Umatilla elder with the PHCC. “People can be healed; rivers can be healed.”



PHOTO BY G. H. THORN