

STATE OF OREGON

HOST OF PROBLEMS THREATEN ENVIRONMENT. by Alan Pittman

As Earth Day rolls around again this year, the state of the environment in Oregon isn't pretty, according to a recent report by the Oregon League of Conservation Voters (OLCV).

The *Environmental Handbook* was written with the help of dozens of environmental groups from throughout the state and showcases many of the worst problems Oregon faces. Here's a rundown:

DIRTY WATER — The state has identified 30 lakes and 1,067 rivers and streams that fail to meet water quality standards. The lower 187 miles of the Willamette are polluted with 48 different pesticides. Fish in the Newberg pool suffer unexplained deformities. In 1999, tests showed 10 percent of Oregonians drank public water that did not meet safe standards.

SOOT — An estimated 100 Eugene-Springfield residents, 300 Portland residents and 100 people from Medford die prematurely each year because of sooty air, according to a 1996 study. Diesel trucks and buses kick out 65 percent of the dirty air, although they make up only 6 percent of the traffic on Oregon's roads. EPA found that 16 toxic chemicals are present in Oregon air at unsafe levels.

DRY RUNS — Oregonians use twice as much water per person as Californians. Agriculture slurps about 80 percent of the water taken from rivers. Archaic state laws allow farmers to legally suck rivers dry, leaving nothing for recreation, wildlife or fish. Last September, 33,000 salmon died in the Klamath River after the Bush administration increased water for irrigators.

SNARL — Cars and trucks produce more than half of Oregon's air pollution and threaten community livability with urban sprawl.

Oregonians pay car-related taxes at half the rates of Washington and California. State "pork" freeway projects like the West Eugene Parkway encourage even more driving and sprawl.

SPRAWL — The state's nationally recognized system of urban growth boundaries is under constant attack. Counties approve hundreds of new houses a year in supposedly exclusive farming areas. Under newly weakened rules, more than 500 new homes a year are built in prime forest land.

TAKINGS — Last October, the Oregon Supreme Court overturned Measure 7, an initiative that could have required paying property owners \$1 billion a year for the impact of environmental laws and other regulations on land values. Some legislators are pushing to pass a new version of the "takings" measure, but environmentalists are fighting back, pointing to the huge costs and threats to the environment, community livability and even other land owners.

LOGGING — Forests cover nearly one-half of Oregon but the landscape is scarred by clearcuts with only about 10 percent of the region's old growth left standing. The Bush administration is threatening what few big trees remain with weakened roadless area protections and logging of big fire-resistant trees under the guise of fire prevention. The state is doing its part by targeting the state Tillamook

and Clatsop forests for clearcuts. On private lands, federal regulators say state forestry rules provide inadequate protections for endangered salmon.

SALMON — Salmon runs in the Columbia River basin numbered 10 to 16 million before settlers arrived. Now just 2 percent of the fish populations remain. Poorly regulated logging, irrigation, grazing, dredging, mining, faulty roads and competition with hatchery fish all threaten salmon. The region has spent \$4 billion on failed efforts to barge and truck fish while refusing to remove the least economical dams that could do the most to help endangered salmon.

COAST — Oregon is the only coastal state in the nation without a statewide ocean water quality monitoring program. One small test by the state showed that 11 of 26 beaches sampled had high levels of fecal coliform and E. coli bacteria. Oregon's scenic coast is also threatened by development rip rap, urban sprawl, non-native weeds and over-fishing.

JUSTICE — Pollution isn't color blind. According to a 1988 study, African American Oregonians are twice as likely to live near factories releasing hazardous chemicals as white state residents. Hispanic farm workers are at frequent risk from pesticides. OLCV is pushing for better pesticide tracking, lead paint testing and public information on contaminated fish to protect minorities.

WASTE — From 1995 to 2000 spending on Oregon energy conservation programs was cut by 75 percent and investment in clean power was cut by 90 percent. The lost conservation and clean power is enough to serve 75,000 households.

TOXICS — Oregon industrial facilities release more than 82 million pounds of toxic chemicals a year, according to EPA data. It takes only about 1 gram of mercury to make the fish in a 20-acre lake unsafe to eat. An estimated 4,500 lbs. of mercury are released into Oregon's environment every year.

TRASH — The Legislature recently delayed requiring 50 percent recycling until 2009 and state regulators have started to count incineration as recycling. With the nickel bottle deposit stuck at its 1971 value, an estimated 160 to 190 million bottles end up in landfills each year.

PARKS — State parks funding is in crisis with a maintenance backlog of \$80 million. The state hasn't bought land for a new campground in 25 years. In 1998, Measure 66 was supposed to solve the funding problem by dedicating lottery proceeds to parks. But the Legislature pulled a "bait and switch" and diverted \$30 million of other money away from parks, violating the will of voters, according to OLCV.

OLCV has proposed a host of specific solutions to the state's environmental woes (see www.olcveducationfund.org). But in prior years, the Republican-dominated Legislature has forced environmentalists to focus on defending existing laws.

This year, budget cuts may be the biggest threat to Oregon's environment. Natural resource spending makes up just 1.5 percent of state discretionary spending, but the Legislature has already hit environmental programs with an 8 percent cut. While cutting money for regulation, the state continues to subsidize pollution. For example, the fees paid by water polluters for discharge permits cover only half of the cost of writing the permits.

Without money to monitor pollution or enforce what laws the state has, OLCV says, Oregon's environment is likely to be left only further impoverished. **EW**

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