Pat Johnston speaking at the Hansen site

One industrial threat was the Hynix plant, which released hydrogen fluoride (HF) into the air as a byproduct and was located near the Willow Creek Preserve at the Wetlands. HF is potentially toxic to Kincaid's lupine, which is a food source for the endangered Fender's blue butterfly.

The Wetlands were once tended meticulously by the Kalapuya Indians, who regularly burned, planted, pruned and harvested. They seeded camas bulbs, an important staple food, and harvested them by digging far into the soil with special digging sticks. They removed branches from oak trees to encourage acorn growth and pruned willow, hazelnut, dogwood, tule, juncus and fern to activate shoots used to make baskets.

When the first Euro American settlers arrived in the Willamette Valley, it wasn't a pristine, "natural" landscape. For thousands of years, the Kalapuya had regularly burned wide swaths of land, creating an open environment better suited for hunting and for cultivating desirable plants. The result was an open, grassy, flourishing landscape of oak savannah and upland prairie. If not for the Kalapuya, the Willamette Valley would have been overgrown with dense stands of fir by the time the Euro Americans appeared on the scene.

"In our culture we created much of what you know as the Willamette Valley," says Lewis. "We burned off the land and created a rich environment for animals, plants and people. The whole Willamette Valley was domesticated by the Kalapuya. If it weren't for the fires and for harvesting certain plants and animals, the area wouldn't have been as rich."

What's Wrong with this Picture?

The ERAP project grew out of an increasing awareness by managers at the West Eugene Wetlands that local Native American tribes had not been involved in restoration planning activities at the Wetlands, says Jones.

"A few people said, it's really a shame that we're in this area that the Kalapuya lived in, and it was such an important area for them, and yet we have made no effort to involve them," says Jones.

Because the West Eugene Wetlands is the ancestral homeland of the Kalapuya Indians, it is considered ceded land of the Confederated Tribe of the Grand Ronde, into which the Kalapuya were assimilated. Ceded land is native homeland that was "given" to the U.S. government by tribes when they were forcibly removed to reservations in the 19th century. And on ceded land that is owned by federal agencies, tribes that claim original ownership are allowed to maintain traditional hunting and gathering rights; and therefore, at least theoretically, participate in land management planning decisions.

The West Eugene Wetlands itself began as a collaborative effort between a group of engineers, planners, environmental and ecological consultants and financial advisors to protect nearly 1,500 acres of wetlands slated for development. This group, organized by the City of Eugene and dubbed the "Wetheads," worked in conjunction with property owners, industrial groups, environmental groups and concerned citizens to develop the West Eugene Wetlands Plan in 1992. But from the beginning, no tribes were involved.

The ERAP project had hoped to change that, says Jones.

A Human Dilemma

Current restoration objectives for the West Eugene Wetlands tend to center around creating habitat for threatened and endangered species, such as Fender's blue butterfly. This often involves removing invasive plants like blackberry and ivy, and introducing native plants that are beneficial to species at risk.

For the most part, land managers and restoration ecologists — including those who oversee the Wetlands — tend to focus on restoring natural functions, not so much on returning a landscape to any particular previous state. Ecologists study the relationships between natural elements such as native species, soil quality and the ability of nutrients to flow through a system, and attempt to restore as many of these elements as possible to ensure biodiversity.

"What you're restoring a landscape to is a really important question," says Emily Steele, a restoration ecologist with the city of Eugene. "And you'll hear a lot of different things from different people. We're trying to get the habitat back to a state where it can be self sufficient and resilient, so that it will require less management from people."

But restoring land using traditional Native American methods involves preserving culturally important native plants with the intention of using them — for basketry, food or canoes.

Zybach, who is an expert in Indian burning patterns in the Willamette Valley, says that because ecosystems in the Willamette Valley evolved alongside human activity, they function best when people are using them."Restoration doesn't mean a return to natural functions; it means a return to a previous condition," he says. "Natural to people often means no humans. But if we're not interrelating with the environment, something's wrong. You have to have people tending the land."

"When you restore a landscape, that would include cultural use," says Lewis. "There's an assumption that plants, animals and humans are separate, but in ecology we know that they're interrelated. That traditional landscape is almost gone, and you want to preserve what's endangered. It's a cultural landscape; people were involved in it, therefore, you want people to come back in."

To Mow or to Burn?

Hansen/See-Sil, which is owned by BLM, is one of the most intact sites at the Wetlands. Here, an open expanse of prairie grass gives way to old stands of black and white oak, and in May camas blooms in swaths of blue across the meadow. The site isn't overgrown with invasive species, and it's rich in culturally important native plants, including hazel, juncus, oak and camas. Both Jones and Zybach say that many of these plants predate the arrival of Euro American farmers to the area.

In 2009, BLM approved a restoration project at Hansen/See-Sil that would have masticated (mowed) the meadow. Mowing is a common restoration technique at the Wetlands that helps discourage encroaching invasive plants. It's used in place of controlled burns, a traditional Indian technique that is also widely implemented throughout the Willamette Valley today, when fire isn't possible or is considered too expensive. But ERAP and WREN project staff saw that large-scale mowing at the Hansen site would have disrupted any potential ethnobotanical activities and spoiled the unique cultural landscape.

"Three or four years ago there was some talk about mowing down fields without any kind of consideration for the growing season of various native plants," says Lewis. "Members of the WREN board were concerned about that; they knew that was wrong for the resource. There are other ways of managing that are a little more labor intensive, using fire management or management through various types of harvesting of resources. It's just a matter of the administrative bodies in charge of various lands out there being on board with that."

In the spring of 2009, Johnston was able to stop the project when she discovered an administrative error in the planning process, Jones says.

Just a few months later, Johnston's superior, Bill Hatton, removed her from the Wetlands and assigned BLM botanist Chuck Fairchild to take over some of her duties. "The change came without warning and the new BLM project contact had little knowledge of the project. The lack of a strong and active agency partner was certainly a major contributor to the collapse of the project," says Jones.

We're a Little Process Oriented

Fairchild cites resource and process constraints as primary factors in the decision to stop funding a full-time project manager at the Wetlands. The BLM's land management expertise is traditionally with larger landscapes, rather than special, high-use spaces within urban areas, he explains. "The needs of (these spaces) are much higher than can be supported long-term from a budget focused primarily on more distant, less accessible landscapes," he says.

Also, he says, "We (needed) to begin an inclusive process to formally dialogue with all of the tribes that had traditional use of the Wetlands. BLM needs to comply with all federal regulations and policies concerning the appropriate procedures for interacting with the federally recognized tribes." He adds, "The BLM moves slowly."

Jones admits that the ERAP project began moving forward without an existing Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), a formal government-to-government agreement, in place between interested tribes and the BLM. He also says that the ERAP project didn't attract enough involvement by local tribal members, especially at first, because of funding limitations and the time-intensive nature of building trust.

Trevor Taylor, wetlands program supervisor for Eugene, speculates that BLM decided to take a step back and rethink its approach. "It wasn't always clear (during the ERAP project) what the process should be or who was representing the tribes. Some local individuals were very involved who were not leaders or formal representatives of the tribes, and I think the BLM evolved into understanding that in order for this to be a legitimate process they needed to work with the tribes more formally."

In July of this year, the Eugene BLM office released a proposal for a Resource Management Plan (RMP) on the land it owns at the West Eugene Wetlands. The planning process for the RMP should take about three years, says Richard Hardt, BLM ecologist and RMP coordinator. "The role that the tribes can play in the planning process is really very flexible. They can have as much involvement as they want to. They can be formal cooperators in the development of the plan, and we would certainly welcome as much involvement as they think is appropriate," he says.

Grand Ronde tribal elder Bob Tom takes a long view. "It's a growth period of understanding each other's language and timeframe. This back and forth and getting to know each other; it takes time," he chuckles. "A positive thing is that the managers of the Wetlands have encouraged and invited Indian people to get involved, and now it's in a process of developing."