

## Web of Water

The Lost Creek watershed is comprised of 270 miles of streams. Lost Creek winds its way down Lost Valley, skirts past the steep slopes of Parvin Butte, then meanders the final four miles before it spills into the Middle Fork of the Willamette River. The creek is home to several threatened species: Spring Chinook, cutthroat trout and steelhead. Another threatened fish, the Oregon chub, is found in the water near the confluence of Lost Creek and the river. People who live along Lost Creek have also found red-legged frogs and western pond turtles basking on half-submerged logs; both are listed as “critical species of concern.”

According to the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, over a half million dollars have been invested in restoration projects within the Lost Creek watershed since 1999. Fish counts conducted by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife have documented the success of these projects.

The creek flows through the property of Lost Creek Rock Products but slightly outside the permit boundary of the quarry. The quarry owners have been granted permission to modify the riparian zone in order to construct a bridge across Lost Creek. Letters written to county officials by fish and wildlife biologists concerning the negative impact of bridge construction and mining activity on fish habitat have not resulted in any modification of the permits or the mining activity.

## The Mining Begins

Lost Creek Rock Products has managed to maximize its profits by exploiting what Lane County hearings official Gary Darnielle has called a “poorly written” county regulation that exempts a quarry owner from negotiating with neighbors. If a 200-foot buffer of trees is left between the quarry and the neighbors, the code suggests that a site review may not be required. Lost Creek Rock Products stated on their application to DOGAMI that they would leave a 200-foot buffer of trees to help mitigate the effect of noise and pollution. With this assurance, DOGAMI issued the mining permit. Lost Creek Rock Products then used a forestry permit to cut the trees right to the property line. After what remained of the vegetation in this buffer zone was scraped into piles and burned, the quarry owners planted ten-inch seedlings in order to remain technically in compliance with the mining permit.

Mining produces a tremendous amount of noise. A quarter of a stick of dynamite can generate 177 decibels. Rock crushers also produce sound levels well over the 85 decibels level known to damage human hearing. Ten-inch trees, of course, do not provide an effective sound barrier. Nevertheless, Commissioner Faye Stewart, a mining and timber advocate who once wrote a letter in support of awarding Lost Creek Rock Products a half million dollars in public funds, points out that such activity is “perfectly legal.”

Lost Creek Rock Products (ironically named for the bucolic stream that will bear the company’s impacts) intends to dynamite and strip mine the butte to extract more than 60 million tons of aggregate — crushed stone, sand and gravel. Over the next twenty years these rock products will be transported over county roads from Dexter, through Eugene, to a loading facility in west Eugene. At the end of twenty years, Parvin Butte, which rises twice as tall as Skinner Butte, will be scraped away to a level ten feet lower than the adjacent railroad track.

## Battling for the Butte

As the noise and environmental destruction began to unfold without official oversight, Dexter neighbors fought back. Rural citizens from various walks of life — retirees, loggers, farmers, artists, school teachers — banded together as Dexter-Lost Valley Community Association. They hired an attorney with money raised in bits and pieces from bake sales and small donations to fight a multi-million dollar corporation that had been profiting from logging, mining and land sales for years.

When Dexter residents brought their concerns to a wider audience, they faced the misconception that the Parvin Butte quarry was a “not in my backyard” issue. Some industry advocates tried to paint Dexter residents as people who had built houses next to a quarry, only to complain about mining noise. However, it is important to remember that when the land was zoned for mining in 1973, Parvin Butte was surrounded by small family farms. These people didn’t move in next to a property zoned for quarry mining; the quarry moved in next to them.

Everyone in Dexter understands that our transportation system is dependent on rock. The trick is to identify those areas that are less environmentally — and culturally — sensitive to mining activity. In the case of Parvin Butte, the quarry not only poses environmental threats to Lost Creek, it also disrupts the lives of over 800 people residing within a mile of the quarry. Dexter residents are being forced to live out the consequences of a decision made almost 40 years ago.

Other momentous decisions loom just around the corner. Some of the rock from Parvin Butte is intended for use on the Coos Bay rail link, according to an ODOT grant application filed by Lost Creek Rock Products. Not only would Parvin Butte be devastated, its rock would be used to upgrade the railroad tracks to facilitate the transport of dirty coal through the Willamette Valley, causing widespread environmental damage far beyond the valley’s borders.

Lost Creek Rock Products is owned by Greg Demers and Norman and Melvin McDougal — men who have long been in the business of using land for profit, manipulating the system to their advantage and passing on the costs to the public and the environment. A judge recently ruled against another of their ventures, Willamette Water Company, saying that they were “speculating” on water as they tried to gain control of 22 million gallons of water a day from the McKenzie River to sell to rural communities. County Commissioners Jay Bozievich, Sid Leiken and Faye Stewart had voted in support of the company.

‘When we see land as a community to which we belong,  
we may begin to use it with love and respect.’

- Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac