

SHE WHO WATCHES BY KAYLA GODOWA-TUFTI

Water for Warm Springs

MRG FOUNDATION FUNDRAISES FOR TRIBE AS WATER ISSUES CONTINUE

Water is life, *Chúushiwa Waqishwit* in the Sahaptin language commonly spoken in Warm Springs. A motto that many tribal people have adopted takes on new meaning when water issues hit home.

The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs Indian Reservation of Oregon is home to the largest Native reservation in the state. With a land base of 1,019 square miles, the reservation also has the largest community water system operated by a tribe in the Pacific Northwest. Through my father's side of my family I've been enrolled with the Confederated Tribes since 1989.

In a statement to OPB in April, Bobby Brunoe, general manager of natural resources for the tribe, said, "To this day people are very aware of water and how important it is to us, because it's in all our ceremonies and embedded in our culture."

He told OPB that Warm Springs has the "oldest water right" in the Deschutes basin, "back to time immemorial."

Last summer Oregon's largest reservation went three months with boil notices and water outages. The tribal community was without safe drinking water the entire season. Some were left with no running water.

The Environmental Protection Agency threatened to fine the tribe nearly \$60,000 a day if it didn't make repairs by October.

Aug. 14 was when the 81-day "boil-water notice," in effect since May, was lifted. Normal water consumption of treated water continued at that time. Though the water system was operational, the Tribes face an estimated \$13 million in repairs to keep the water infrastructure working long-term.

In July the Legislature approved \$7.8 million from

state lottery funds for three water projects on the reservation. The state plans to issue the bond, known as House Bill 5030, in 2021. In rare cases some funding could be available before the bond is issued.

On Oct. 21 the Water and Wastewater Division of the Public Utilities Branch started working with the contractor, GELCO, to finish the replacement and upgrade of the pressure reducing valves on the agency water system main lines, according to KWSO Warm Springs Radio.

Another boil notice was issued Oct. 24 in compliance with EPA requirements, due to loss of pressure in the agency water system. The boil notice is a precautionary measure to provide safe drinking water for those affected.

According to the boil notice, "Boiled or bottled water should be used for drinking, making ice, washing dishes, brushing teeth and preparing food until further notice."

Public Utilities staff worked to fill reservoirs; however, the Kah-Nee-Ta tank ran out of water Oct. 22, and the West Hills tank ran out Oct. 23. Fifteen portable toilets were placed at the Community Center on Oct. 24 for those without running water.

Some residents reported damaged water heaters due to the outage. At this time there is no known source of assistance for those whose water heaters were affected, according to tribal members.

The water department was required to submit two rounds of BacT testing and chlorine residual values to EPA to have the notice lifted. These tests are standard requirements by the EPA to determine drinking water sanitary quality.

On Oct. 31 the boil notice was yet again lifted. Whether issues will persist through the winter remains to be seen.

It's alarming that Oregon's largest reservation could have water issues through the winter. More than 3,300 tribal members reside on reservation. The things we often take for granted — like drinking water — are challenges tribal members have been forced to face daily. The central Oregon winter frequently brings hazardous weather to the reservation that could make an already difficult situation even worse if permanent repairs are not made.

In response to the current crisis, the McKenzie River Gathering Foundation (MRG), in partnership with the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, established The Chúush Fund: Water for Warm Springs.

MRG says the Chúush Fund was established in full partnership with the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs of Oregon. They say, "This means every cent of every dollar donated is directly assisting with the infrastructure challenges that have led to the current water crisis and is providing the Tribes with unrestricted dollars to ensure the health and safety of their tribal citizens."

Se-ah-dom Edmo, executive director of the MRG Foundation, an affiliated member of the Shoshone-Bannock, Nez Perce and Yakama tribes, says, "Mainstream foundations are not, in any way, obligated to give to tribes and tribal people." That, Edmo says, is "particularly poignant considering the wealth gained in this country and the state of Oregon by dispossessing tribes and tribal people of that form of their wealth."

MRG says it is committed to disrupting that practice. To learn more or to donate, go to mrgfoundation.org.

Kayla Godowa-Tufti is a member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs and descendant of the Klamath Tribes. A writer, lyricist and Indigenous rights advocate, she has been a resident of Eugene for more than 20 years.

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