

Harvest: ‘This is very rare on the Oregon Coast to own your own watershed’

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The watershed, the source of Astoria’s drinking water, is easy to find on a map. Surrounded by private timberland 10 miles southeast of Astoria, it is a rare, solid swath of emerald in a landscape that is otherwise a patchwork of brown clearcut and green forest.

The water here once fed the city’s booming canneries and now supplies its breweries. And the city owns the entire thing: about 3,700 densely forested acres, 32 miles of stream and tributaries, Bear Creek Reservoir, Middle Lake and Wickiup Lake.

“This is very rare on the Oregon Coast to own your own watershed,” Hayes said as he stopped his truck and looked around.

Full ownership provides a host of benefits, but also poses unique challenges. While the city doesn’t need to worry about activities upstream contaminating drinking water, it does have to be extra cautious when pursuing any road maintenance or forestry work.

Ownership

Some Astoria residents criticized the city after a solicitation for bids for this year’s harvest appeared on the City Council’s consent calendar in March, rather than as an item on the regular agenda. Items on the consent calendar are considered routine — adopted by a single motion — and are usually not discussed in detail by city councilors. Items on the regular agenda, however, receive more of an airing and are open for public comment.

In response, the City Council asked city staff to hold a public meeting to provide people with more information.

The harvest is routine, staff would later emphasize, and necessary to building and maintaining a healthy watershed. The city harvests at the watershed every year under high standards set by the Forest Stewardship Council, of which Astoria has been a member for at least a dozen years. Astoria harvests less than 25 percent of the growth in the watershed, staff said, a very low percentage.

Astoria has enjoyed full ownership of its watershed since the 1950s and began acquiring pieces of it as early as the 1890s. Other coastal towns and cities in Oregon are trying to achieve the same feat of full ownership, but it’s a difficult and expensive undertaking.

Earlier this year, Oregon Public Broadcasting reported that the state Department of Environmental Quality scrapped a report that linked private industrial forests and activities on such lands to risks for drinking water quality on the Oregon Coast, following pushback by the Oregon Department of Forestry and the timber industry.

Rockaway Beach, a small town of just over 1,300 people south of Manzanita, struggles with water quality. Jetty Creek, the town’s primary source of water, flows through industrial timberland. Most of the watershed has been logged in recent years and clearcut hills rear up behind the town. Sediment and debris tied to logging operations often clog up the water and can interfere with the disinfection process. Residents receive frequent alerts about harmful chemicals in their water, OPB found.

Changes to come

Water quality, by necessity, is at the heart of every management action taken in the Bear Creek watershed, said Astoria Public Works Superintendent Ken Nelson.

“A lot of the tools in the normal forestry toolkit don’t work here,” Hayes said. Log

truck drivers take corners slow when they’re hauling logs out and contractors know they’re working within a different set of parameters.

“We’re making sure that the logging that we do does not affect water quality,” Nelson said. “In a normal forestry situation, they don’t shut down when it’s raining hard and we do that. We don’t let them haul or do any kind of logging in the wintertime.”

Astoria also entered a carbon-credit program two years ago — the city was essentially paid to not aggressively harvest for the next 20 years. Cook said the city received

\$2.2 million and has since sold an additional \$40,000 worth of carbon credits. The city is still able to harvest at its normal rate, and already harvests less than it could. This money helped pay for a new ladder truck for the Astoria Fire Department. The rest of it, along with money from this year’s timber harvest, went into the city’s capital improvement fund, which is available for an city department.

Though it looks somewhat like a traditional clearcut now, Astoria Public Works will soon plant new trees in the thinned parcels.

The city isn’t logging for the money, Hayes said after the thinning harvest was completed in August. He stood on the road above where the thinning occurred: A parcel now open, dominated by piles of snags, smaller logs not worth hauling out and the remaining trees. Harvests like this are intended to open up the forest canopy and decrease the threat of fire, creating a more diverse — and, therefore, more resilient — forest.

It is important work, Hayes said. “Especially with climate change, because we don’t know what’s going to happen here.”

Coast Guard helps respond to Harvey

The Daily Astorian

Coast Guard personnel from Sector Columbia River in Warrenton, along with Air Station Port Angeles and Sector Puget Sound, have deployed in response to Hurricane Harvey.

An MH-60 Jayhawk helicopter from Sector Columbia River was sent to Air Station San Diego to help cover for aircraft deployed to Texas, where the Coast Guard has rescued more than 1,450 people. The Coast Guard has 20 helicopters in the region conducting rescues, along

with crews on land and water.

“This is an all-hands response that involves personnel and support from across the country,” Capt. Sean Cross, incident management chief of the Coast Guard’s 13th District, said in a release. “Our crews train using standardized procedures on identical assets regardless of their home unit. This facilitates response flexibility by allowing us to mix and match crews and assets from different locations in time of crisis such as this.”

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