

OPINION



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BEHIND THE NEWS

‘It’s really important to have a watchdog group’

Behind the familiar red T-shirts and the protest signs of local activists, Columbia Riverkeeper provided important organizational, policy and legal framework in the long fight against liquefied natural gas projects on the North Coast.

The grassroots campaigns painted the LNG projects in Warrenton and at Bradwood Landing as threats to the environment, fishing and safety and undermined claims of economic benefit.

While the projects faced considerable financial and regulatory pressures, Brett VandenHeuvel, the executive director of Columbia Riverkeeper, credited the activism.

“The projects were marching forward. Every politician at the time was in favor of them,” he said. “It wasn’t until the activists and — specifically, the people of Clatsop County, some of which probably wouldn’t have called themselves activists at first, people who cared deeply about their community, about their family, about their health — stood up and protected their community.

“Only then did people start paying attention.”

VandenHeuvel, who has served as executive director of Columbia Riverkeeper since 2009, is stepping away in August to work as a national consultant on climate and clean water strategies. Lauren Goldberg, the environmental group’s legal and program director, will take on the leadership role.

In an interview via Zoom from Hood River, VandenHeuvel discussed public attitudes toward the environment and climate change, the victories over LNG and the prospects for other large industrial projects along the river.

Q: How have public attitudes on the environment changed over your time at Columbia Riverkeeper?

A: There’s a lot more interest in clean water and, certainly, climate. I think we’ve seen the effects of how polluted rivers, how toxic drinking water has harmed our communities.

I see more and more people valuing the importance of protecting that.

And then, on the climate front, it’s hitting us in the face — the impacts of climate change, from droughts and heat domes and wildfires. Any debate about whether we need to address climate change, I think, is done.

It’s just how quickly, and how aggressively, are we going to take action and make some real change.

Q: How do you raise awareness about climate change among people who are facing more immediate economic and social struggles?

A: First, as a society, addressing those immediate economic and social struggles is a huge priority.

Climate impacts are a major problem for a lot of people. Environmental justice communities, low-income communities, are hit first and worst by the impacts of climate change across our nation and in our world.

We’ve seen people — low-income people — dying from extreme heat, even here in the Pacific Northwest. And, of course, it’s much, much worse in other parts of our nation and the world.

So I see them all intertwined. If we’re going to achieve



Brett VandenHeuvel is stepping away as executive director of Columbia Riverkeeper.

real impacts on social justice, which we need to do, we need to have a clean, healthy environment that all people can use.

Q: Columbia Riverkeeper was instrumental in working with local residents on the North Coast to oppose LNG projects in Warrenton and at Bradwood Landing. How much weight do you give to the role activism played, as opposed to the financial and regulatory challenges these projects faced.

A: I put almost all of the weight of those victories over LNG on activism.

The projects were marching forward. Every politician at the time was in favor of them. It wasn’t until the activists and — specifically, the people of Clatsop County, some of which probably wouldn’t have called themselves activists at first, people who cared deeply about their community, about their family, about their health — stood up and protected their community.

Only then did people start paying attention.

And it was a multiyear process, that’s one of the things people forget about. Ultimately, you see several politicians oppose LNG, or you see a regulatory agency deny it, but that takes many years of community effort.

And Columbia Riverkeeper is really proud to play a role on the legal side of things. When state and federal agencies weren’t following the law, the public process, when they were rubber-stamping permits and moving too fast, we were able to win lawsuits and balance that along

the way in a way that allowed for greater public participation and allowed for that activism to grow and to eventually prevail.

Q: Columbia Riverkeeper is challenging the \$2 billion project by NEXT Renewable Fuels at Port Westward in Columbia County. The project is focused on renewable diesel, which the company claims would help reduce greenhouse gas emissions. What is your main objection?

A: There’s a long history of fossil fuel projects at Port Westward, from coal and oil and fracked gas proposals, including projects that have switched from ethanol to shipping oil.

So we have concerns about the uncertainty of that project, some of the backers of it, who have flipped to fossil fuel projects in the past.

And, in addition, some of the feedstocks — if it’s clearcutting rainforest to grow palm oil for a feedstock, that’s not a step in the right direction.

So we’ve been asking a lot of questions and raising concerns about it and trying to get answers. We’re certainly in favor of moving to clean energy and renewable fuels, but there’s a lot of outstanding concerns at Port Westward, including concerns from many of the community around Port Westward and Clatskanie and the farmers in that area, too.

Part of our effort has been trying to stop a rezoning of 800 acres of agricultural land to switching to industrial land, which would literally pave the way for more dirty fossil fuel and industrial projects.

That rezoning isn’t specifically about any one project, but that’s really important salmon habitat, and we’re working with the local community to try to keep that in agricultural use.

Q: Do you see a political risk that people might tune Columbia Riverkeeper and other environmental interests out if the perception is that you will oppose any big industrial project along the river?

A: For many of the large, fossil fuel projects we’ve seen threaten the Columbia, absolutely we’re going to oppose every one of those.

And I’m proud of that, and that’s the right thing to do. We cannot allow increased infrastructure that will be dependent on for decades for fossil fuels.

There are many, many, many other industrial projects that move forward on the Columbia. You look at the history over the last 50 years, or even the last 20 years since Riverkeeper has been an organization, many projects go unchallenged.

There are some that rise to the level of threat and danger and risk to the river and to the communities that it’s really important to have a watchdog group like Riverkeeper partner with local communities to stand up to these projects.

I think our influence has grown. I think it’s grown stronger as we’ve been successful in defeating large industrial projects and protecting the river.

There are very strong corporate interests, there are very strong fossil fuel interests, pushing these projects forward. We’ve seen that communities want an organization that will help them stand up to those big corporate interests.

Derrick DePledge is editor of The Astorian.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Big trucks

Do you have a truck? Well if you do, you probably know how hard it is to find a parking spot in downtown Astoria. That’s why I think we should make a parking garage strictly for big trucks.

In downtown, there are little cars taking up bigger parking spots, instead of going to a compact parking spot. So there should be a parking garage just for bigger trucks!

TREVOR OGIER
Astoria

Serious threats

According to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Columbia River salmon and steelhead face serious threats from the California and Steller sea lions. Data shows that sea lions can consume up to 44% of our Columbia River spring Chinook run and up to 25% of the steelhead run.

As a fishing community, we need to do something about these sea lions in order to strengthen our fishing economy. The federal Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 specifies that states cannot take initiative to manage the California and Steller seals.

It’s time the government did something about reevaluating the MMPA so that we can have a somewhat sustainable fishing economy.

ADDISON PIETILA
Astoria

Vital

I want to thank Katie Frankowicz and Nicole Bales for the excellent article on abortion access in Clatsop County that ran in the May 14 edition of The Astorian.

As I prepare to march in the reproductive rights rally in Astoria today, I am encouraged by this timely and informative coverage of this important issue.

Abortion and reproductive health services are an integral part of health care for women. Maintaining these services, and the continued effort to provide education about reproductive health, is vital to the well-being of all in our community.

REBECCA READ
Seaside

Pick it up

While traveling through the logging roads in Clatsop County, there are so many beautiful sights to see, from creeks to waterfalls and clear views all the way to the Columbia.

There are so many things to enjoy, no matter who you are. Although once you look down, those views are ruined with litter, bottles, food garbage and even dangerous items, like needles. All that litter is not only an unpleasant sight to see, but it’s damaging our environment.

The litter will travel down waterways, reaching habitats of countless animals, leading animals to get stuck in, or even eat, garbage. The rule of “leave no trace” doesn’t just apply to national parks, and other destinations like that. It applies everywhere!

If you bring things in, pack them out. All around our community we can help by just picking up a few pieces of garbage when you go. A little help from each person in this community will go a long way, so next time you see garbage in our beautiful community, pick it up and throw it away.

ALEXIS WHITESIDE
Astoria

Screeching halt

Astoria has been a fishing town for generations, but that is coming to a screeching halt. The main reason for this rapid decline is dams. Dams have been killing salmon at an alarming rate.

According to the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, each dam can kill up to 15% of migrating fish. This is detrimental to the salmon population because the average salmon passes through seven dams, according to the council.

The coast relies on salmon to generate business. In reports about the economic generation of the industry, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife states, “The fisheries generated an estimated \$558 million income to the statewide economy in 2019, which is equivalent to about 9,200 jobs. Output is estimated to be \$1.2 billion.”

This is concerning because with salmon

on the decline, we are losing a valuable part of our economy. We can stop this decline by taking out the dams. Not only do dams kill salmon, they also block thousands of miles of spawning grounds.

If some of the dams in the Columbia River basin are removed, it will open up many miles of spawning grounds for future generations of salmon.

Earthjustice is an organization working with congressional leaders to remove dams in the Columbia River basin, which will take steps to save the salmon population.

Contact your congressman or congresswoman and tell them to vote in favor of striking down the dams.

ANDREW MILLER
Astoria

Pretty limited

One issue I know everyone who lives in Astoria has experienced is a lack of parking. Especially during summer, when tourists come to town, there is barely any place to park.

Parking in Astoria is already pretty limited, and tourists make it even more difficult to find a parking spot. I think more parking spaces should be made to fit the amount of tourists that come in every year.

I think many people would be on board with adding more parking spaces. This will allow more tourists to come, and bring more money to small businesses, especially during the hot summer days.

HAYDEN TORISTOJA
Astoria

Dumping ground

As I drive across the roads of Clatsop County, I become more aware of a growing issue at hand. It seems to me every day there’s more and more garbage appearing on the sides of our highways and streets.

It’s something that many people may not pay too much attention to. I think many of us have just gotten used to seeing the garbage pile up on the side of our roadways and trashing our county.

Living here all my life, the garbage

on the side of the roads was something I never really took notice of until recently. The increase of littering and illegal dumping is not only a danger to our ecosystem, but it makes the beautiful region look more like a dumping ground for the garbage people are too lazy to wait and throw away responsibly.

All I want to do is inform my community of this growing issue, and to hope we can take action against it. Just picking up and throwing away one piece of trash on the side of our roadways is a step to a healthier and better looking county. Let’s all try to keep our community clean, and help it show its true beauty.

ETHAN SMALLEY
Astoria

Robbing us

Robbing us of our right to reproductive choice has far-reaching implications. It strips us of privacy, autonomy and democratic rule — all of us.

This is a step toward establishing an invasive authoritarian government, where the rich and powerful will fully control our lives. Russia and North Korea are examples of such countries.

Taking away an established right has never been done in our country before. Never. Ever. This ruling will set the precedent for others to fall like dominoes.

This Supreme Court was “packed” by presidents who lost the popular vote.

If elected Republicans — and some Democrats — actually cared about children, we’d have Health Care For All.

The U.S. is now ranked 33rd in infant mortality; 32 other countries have lower child death rates than we do. Poorer countries, but with good universal health care.

It’s a sorry state of affairs. All we can do now is pay attention, protest (ugh!), kick Republicans (and others who don’t represent us) out of office — and elect honest secretaries of state to tally our votes!

But let’s not give up yet, let’s fight tooth and nail for our democracy, as the Ukrainians are fighting for theirs, now, under much harsher conditions!

KATE O’NEAL
South Bend, Washington