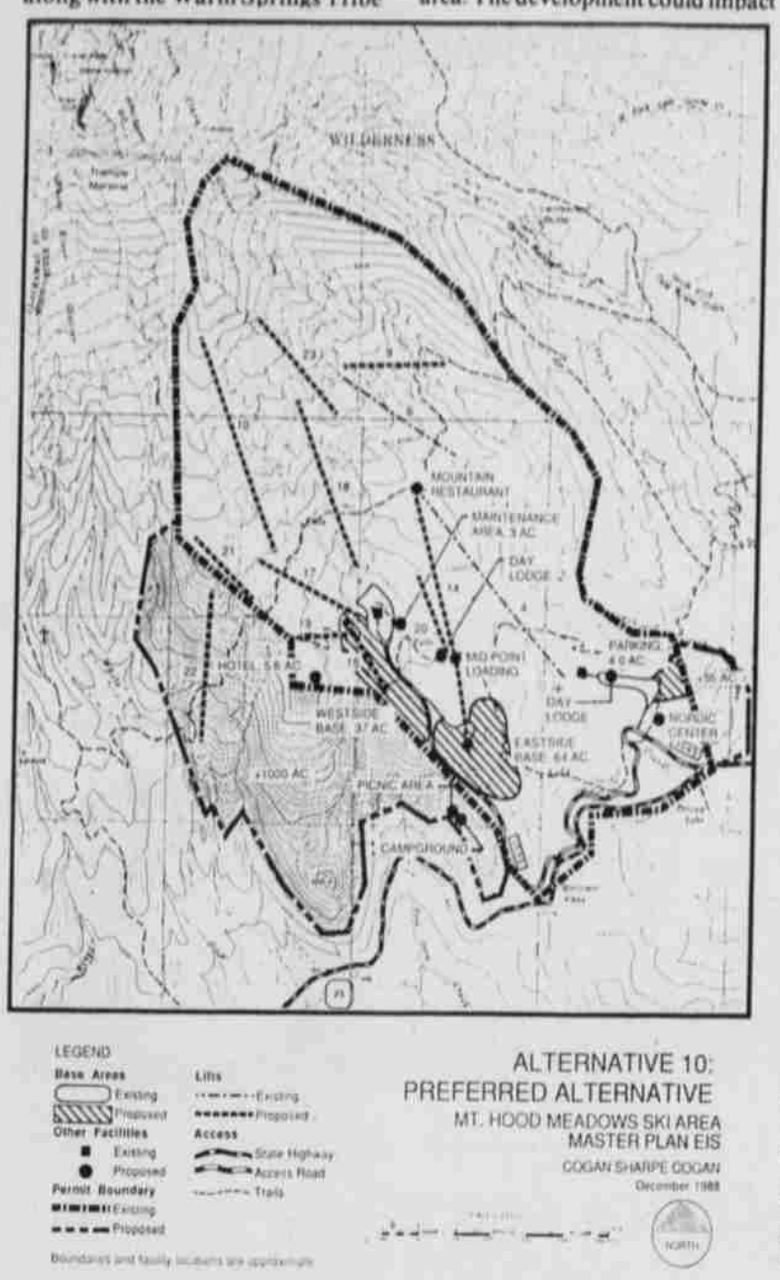
Proposed Mt. Hood development may impact natural, cultural resources

Fisheries and wildlife biologists from state and federal agencies along with the Warm Springs Tribe are questioning the proposal to develop Mt. Hood Meadows ski area. The development could impact sensitive wetlands, fisheries and wildlife populations.



The Mt. Hood Meadows Corporation has asked the U.S. Forest Service, supervisory agency for the public landholding, to approve a 20-year master plan to build and expand the resort area in phases of 250 units at a time. The result would be 1,320 units of overnight housing, 12 to 13 lifts, a Nordic day lodge, a handicapped skier's center, an environmental learning center and summer facilities for camping and picnicking.

With this expansion the Mt. Hood Meadows ski area could potentially accomodate 10,000 to 12,500 skiers per day within the permit area, and 15,000 to 17,500 skiers within the expanded permit area. Current facilities accomodate 7,575 skiers per day.

Eleven alternatives are offered in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement prepared by the U.S. Forest Service, Mt. Hood National Forest. Alternatives range from no change to a full-season resort with expansion of 96 areas at Hood River Meadows and 1,000 acres in the White River drainage in which the White River is designated a Wild and Scenic River.

Most alternatives include development of Hood River Meadows and Stringer Meadows which present a major objection from the involved agencies. The wetlands contained in Stringer Meadows are fragile habitats. The area is an important deer and elk summer range where calf rearing occurs. Hood River Meadows is also a critical wetlands area.

Because of the high elevation of the Mt. Hood Meadows area, damage to any part of it is slow to repair itself. It has a short growing season and fragile soils. Development may take a heavy toll.

Increasing the number of skiers that will be accomodated at Mt. Hood Meadows will also increase traffic on Highway 26. Traffic congestion currently exceeds acceptable levels at peak weekend times. The Oregon Department of Transpotation and the USFS have agreed that additional ski area development is contingent upon the ability of the transportation system to accommodate traffic generated by development

The four separate permit area boundary expansions included in the proposed alternatives will produce some impacts. The proposed expansion of 96 acres in conjuction with expansion of the center facilities at Hood River Meadows and expansion into the White River Canyon adversely impacts both forest and wildlife and includes displacement of wildlife populations, loss of old growth forest, loss of wildlife habitat, loss to segment base at the Timberline Trail, increased noise, scenic intrusions, vegetation and wetlands disturbance. Positive impacts listed include increased recreational opportunities and increased revenues.

The DEIS prepared for the development fails to address several issues including the impact of the proposed resort community on anadromous fisheries of the East Fork of the Hood River. Neither does it speak to the protection of forest habitat necessary for water quality.

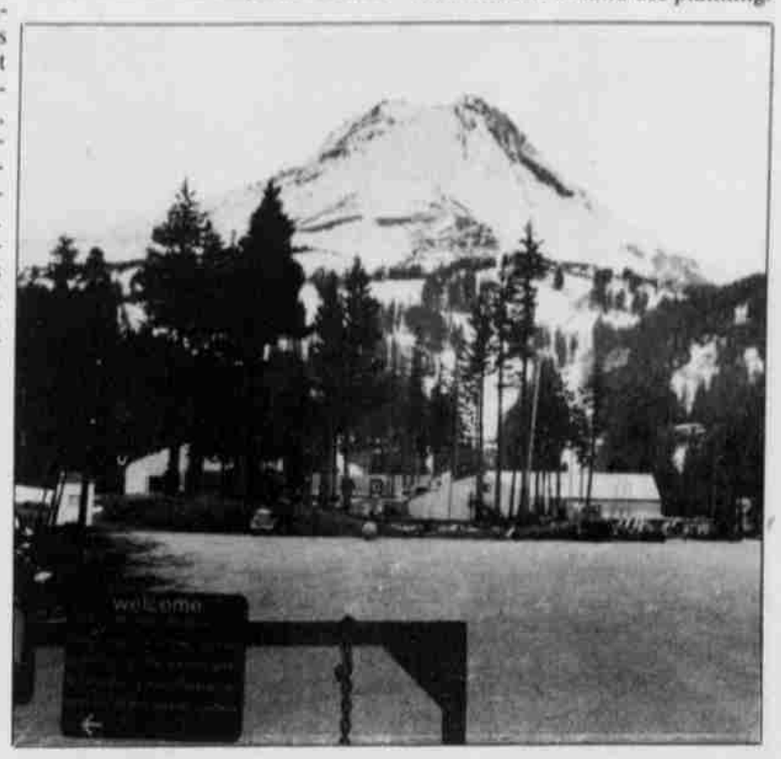
Warm Springs tribal fisheries biologist Mark Fritsch stated in a letter regarding the development, "The proposed expansion...will negatively impact and result in long-term consequences to the hydrology and acquatic resources of Hood and White Rivers. The headwater and wetlands of the two rivers are very limited, and are critical components to the viability of their acquatic ecosystems."

Wildlife too may be impacted. Development of Stringer Meadows will result in the loss of productive elk and deer forage and rearing areas as well as wetland habitat. The resort center "will also block movements of elk and deer between forage and cover areas, and eliminate old growth habitat which will adversely affect big game cover and old growth dependent wildlife species," according to comments by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Also forgotten in the DEIS for development of Mt. Hood Meadows is the Native American use of the land. A letter from Warm Springs tribal secretary-treasurer Ken Smith states, "It is apparent that a complete cultural resource assessment of the area has not been conducted, making it not possible to determine the impacts of those resources." No mention has been made of the importance of the area resources in religions, economies and traditions.

The tribal letter also questions the need to build overnight accomodations on public land when private land is available nearby.

Other unknowns brought out by review agencies include overall cumulative impacts on the area due to development, the effect of collected pollutants from parking areas on water quality, the use of drainfields for sewage treatment, the impact of sediment loading on water quality in impacted watersheds, mitigation for disruption of plant and animal communities and migration patterns and seeming contradiction of the entire development scheme to land use planning.



The preferred alternative for Mt. Hood Meadows development would accommodate up to 17,500 recreationalists.

Deschutes "is not a commodity"

The Deschutes River Management Committee is continuing work to develop a plan for Central Oregon's Deschutes River but with a new Warm Springs tribal representative.

Warm Springs tribal fisheries technician Louis Pitt, Jr. has accepted the nomination by Tribal Council to act as tribal representative in efforts to protect and preserve the treaty rights in the Deschutes River basin and formulate a management plan as a participant in the DRMC.

A change in the role of the Tribe in the creation of management policy for the river has recently occurred with the designation of the Deschutes River as a Federal Scenic Waterway. The Tribe "is a major player now," says Pitt, rather than merely a land owner. It now has approval power.

Both state and federal laws currently apply on the Dechutes River as a result of the federal designation. Involved federal agencies are in the process of writing an Environmental Impact Statement for use in managing the river area. The state DRMC will be used as "a major part of the process," says Pitt.

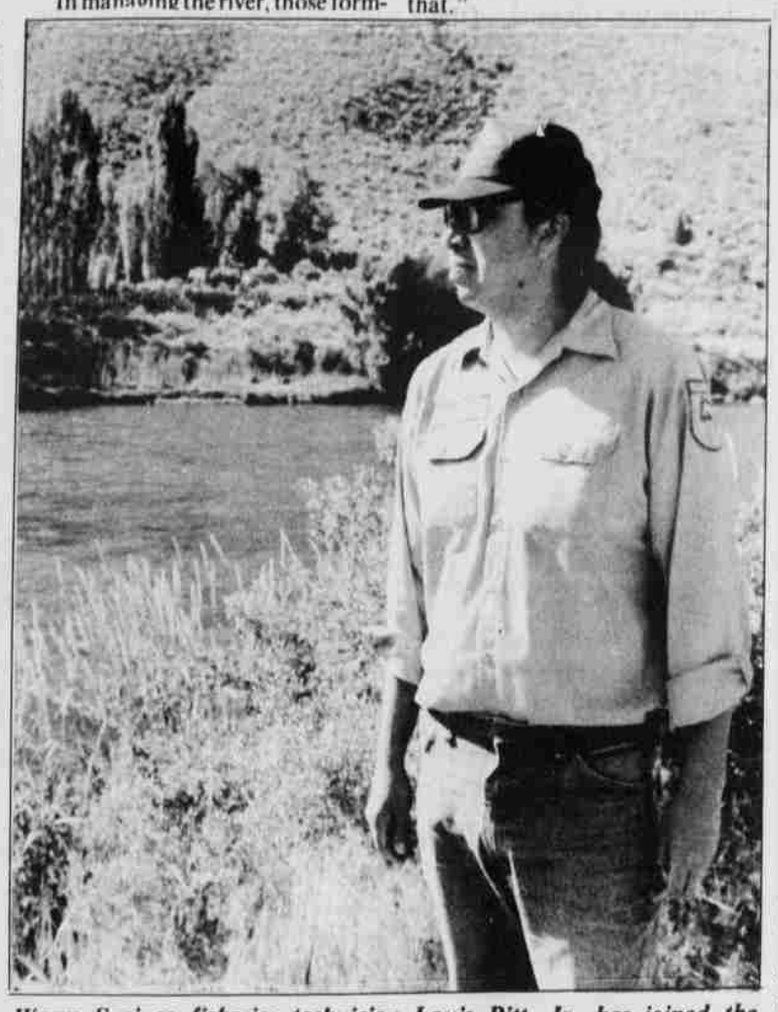
The Deschutes River, says the new committee member, is primarily "a recreation type river." Many people on the DRMC discuss the social aspects of developing the river but "I speak for the resource." We have to protect the river first," says Pitt. "It is not a commodity, it is a living, dynamic system." It can be used to its maximum potential, Pitt adds, "but with limits." It is "something needing protection."

The Tribe wants the Deschutes River to be thought of as more than just a commodity. It is valuable for more than economic and social reasons. "It is the blood of the land," emphasizes Pitt.

The Tribe is concerned about the number of users on the river. Increased use decreases tranquility and peace of mind for those visiting the river. With increased use, too, the Tribe has experienced increased fire danger, increased trespass violations, littering and environmental degradation.

In managing the river, those formulating the management policy for the river must consider the question, "What is a good experience on the river?" A limited number of users may be one answer.

As part of the DRMC, Pitt relates that "Council cares" about the river. They want this river to be protected and "it's an honor to assist in that."



Warm Springs fisheries technician Louis Pitt, Jr. has joined the Deschutes River Management Committee as the tribal representative.

Study begins on unique stock

"The Congress finds and declares the following: The stocks of salmon and steelhead...contribute to the food supply and economic health of the Pacific Northwest and the Nation as a whole, provide valuable recreational experiences for thousands of citizens from various parts of the United States, and represent a central element of the cultures and economies of Indian tribes and the citizens of the Pacific Northwest."

Public law 96-561

A person can almost set his clock by the return of the Fall and Summer chinook to the Deschutes River. But in the last two years chinook salmon are returning that don't seem to fit the characteristics of the standard runs of fish.

Coincidently, the discovery of this "different" stock of fish coincides with the signing of the U.S.-Canada Pacific Salmon Interception Treaty. The treaty, signed in 1986 is designed to prevent overfishing and provide for optimum production of migrating salmon. Efforts behind the treaty are aimed at rebuilding chinook stocks and promoting the conservation of Northwest coho. It also stresses the cooperative research of the U.S. and Canada on stocks important to both countries.

The treaty acknowledges that salmon which originate in the rivers of Oregon and Washington migrate northward and are intercepted by Canadian and Alaskan fisherman. Until the treaty, salmon management has been uncoordinated, competetive and destructive. Salmon have been overharvested and many chinook and coho stocks have been pushed to the edge of extinction. The treaty ensures international management of the stocks through the waters of both nations.

Consistent with the treaty's emphasis on research, data is currently being collected for the unusual stock of chinook returning to the Deschutes. Funding for a three-year study and tagging process originates from treaty appropriations distributed through the Columbia River Intertribal Fish Commission.

Warm Springs fisheries biologist Mark Fritsch has already started radio-tagging these special fish. Ten tags will be inserted in July and ten between September 1 and October 15. With the tags placed, biologists will be able to follow these chinook to spawning grounds and record their habits, looking to see if they differ from fall and summer runs.

Besides learning more about what could be a unique stock of fish, biologists may be able to "determine if the treaty is producing more fish to the area," says tribal biologist Terry Luther. He enthusiastically adds, "This is the type of information we're really looking for...It'll mean big things for the treaty."

Fish, aquatic life part of forest

Fish and other aquatic life are another component of the jigsaw puzzle that makes up the forest ecosystem. They, like other pieces previously discussed, are separate entities. But, without the rest of the puzzle, put together in proper order, they will not survive. They are one of the most sensitive indicators of the ecosystem's health.

The Deschutes River basin once supported a much larger population of anadromous and resident fish than exist today. This reduction was initially due to increased fishing pressure and dams. Watershed degradation has also contributed greatly to this reduced fish resource.

Spring and fall Chinook salmon, coho salmon, sockeye salmon, summer steelhead, rainbow trout, bull trout, brook trout, and mountain whitefish are salmonids that inhabit the lower 100 miles of the Deschutes River and its tributaries. Other species present are Pacific lamprey, northern squawfish, chiselmouth, suckers, sculpins, dace and redside shiner.

The Metolius River and its tributaries, and Lake Billy Chinook provide critical habitat for Kokanee (landlocked sockeye), chinook salmon (land locked bull trout, rainbow trout, brown trout, mountain whitefish, suckers, squawfish, chiselmouths, sculpin and dace).

The high lakes support populations of rainbow and brook trout and also supply streamflow to many reservation streams.

Many of the reservation's water-

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Pesticides—

A Growing Danger

It's been more than 25 years since scientists in the country discovered that pesticides are contaminating ground water supplies. As yet, neither Congress nor the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have developed programs addressing the issue despite the risks to wildlife and, even worse, human health.

Evidence that the problem is not going away by itself has continued to grow. EPA released a study last year that found 17 pesticides in the ground water of 23 states.

In California, more thorough monitoring indicates a far greater problem: 57 pesticides have been detected in more than 200 wells there. In addition, a 1982 study by the California Department of Health Services found a direct association between Fresno drinking water supplies contaminated with the DBCP and an increase in the number of deaths from stomach cancer and lymphoid leukemia between 1970 and 1979.

DBCP is known to damage the human kidneys, lungs and liver and cause cancer, genetic mutations and male sterility.

The problem is not limited to misused pesticides. Studies indicate that some pesticides are leaching into ground water supplies from normal, routine use. Because of the potential for long-term and widespread public exposure to such pesticides, says George R. Hallberg from the Iowa department of Natural Resources, there is genuine concern about ground water polluted even with low concentrations of pesticides.

Given the growing amount of evidence, the issue is no longer going unnoticed in Congress. Legislation separate from bills to reform the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA) has been introduced by Rep. James Overstarr, D-Minn., in the House (H.R. 3174) and Senator Dave

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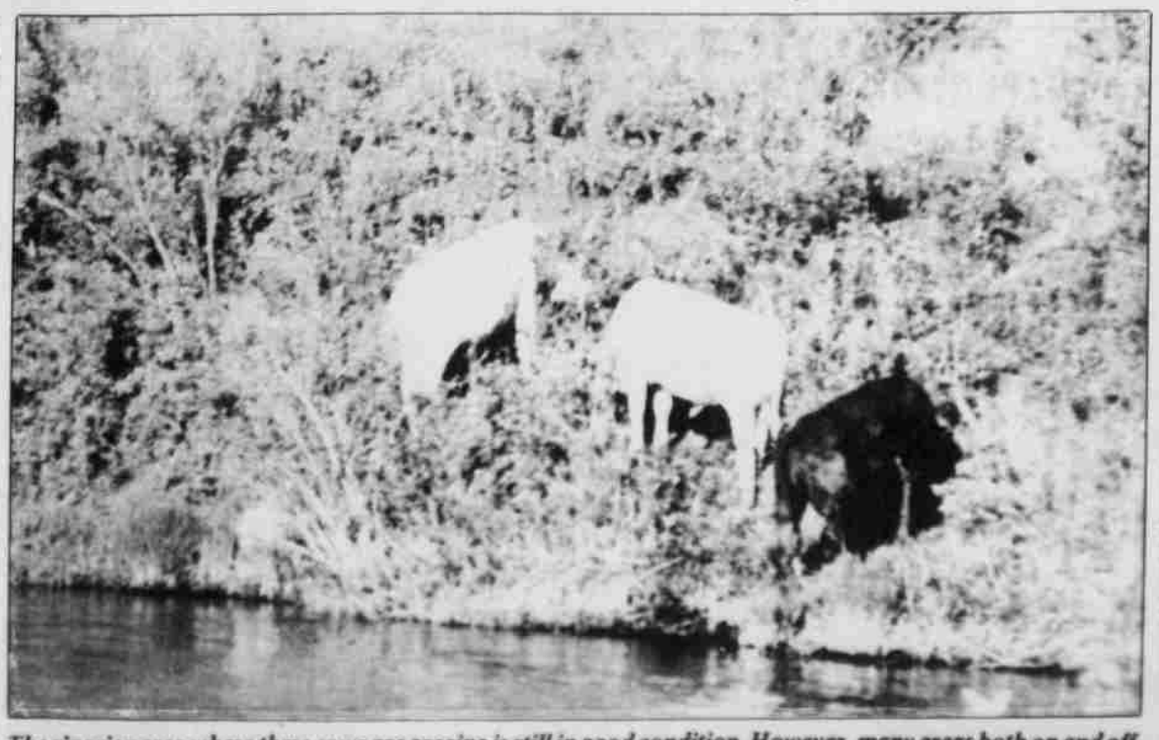
Riparian areas sensitive to use, abuse

Riparian areas are important and valuable in many ways. These areas which border streams and exist in wetlands provide space, shelter and food for plant and animal communities.

The riparian zone also serves as a buffer between the uplands and the water, cleaning flows before they enter the stream. The riparian area stores water during periods of high flow and releases this water into the stream during low-flow periods. Riparian vegetation helps to stabilize stream channels.

Many areas on the Warm Springs reservation are being fenced to protect riparian areas from degradation. Livestock can be particularly detrimental to these sensitive areas by compacting soil and destroying streamside vegetation. Even though the reservation has an open grazing policy the importance of streams for many species of wildlife and humans alike make fencing and the concern of citizens a valuable contribution to streams.



The riparian area where these cows are grazing is still in good condition. However, many areas both on and off the reservation have been severly degraded by livestock. Riparian areas are sensitive with a special significance for the acquatic ecosystem.