

# Willamette Restoration Initiative Aimed at Saving the River's Entire Basin

By Chris Mercier

Can too many cooks spoil broth? That question will be justly answered in the near future after Governor John Kitzhaber and Oregon legislators review the Willamette Restoration Strategy handed to them last month.

The broth in this case would be none other than the Willamette River Basin, and the cooks the Willamette Restoration Initiative (WRI) — a board of stakeholders from all sections of Oregon citizenry bent on one unifying goal: *Saving the Willamette Basin*.

"Any time a group like that gets together, there is going to be a tremendous amount of compromising," said Tribal Environmental Specialist and Grand Ronde Tribal member Kathleen Feehan.

The group Feehan referred to, the WRI, was established through a state executive order in 1998.

The purpose: as Kitzhaber advised them at a meeting last year, develop a "bold and specific" strategy to protect and restore wildlife and habitat in the Willamette River Basin, and at the same time enhance water quality and implement proper floodplain management.

Given the composition of the WRI Board of Directors — representatives of environmental groups, Tribes, industry, agriculture and both state and federal lawmakers — anything but a compromise seems impossible. But still, Feehan noted, a starting point must evolve from somewhere.

"My hope is that this strategy is an opportunity for people who have not been working together, who clash over river issues, to cooperate," she said. "If we aren't willing to do these things, then we don't have a chance."

That chance she refers to, of course, is a one-shot. Feehan's concerns are understandable. As elsewhere on the planet but especially in the Willamette Basin, water is life.

And life in the basin is truly unique.

Aside from the infamous "century floods" that manifest periodically in the basin, the region experiences few calamities. Few droughts, few floods, no terrible winters or parching summers — the basin is a veritable haven of and for plant and animal life. Such a hospitable climate attracted settlers long before Europeans even knew of Oregon. Indigenous people immediately saw the value of the basin and its plethora of natural resources. Thus historians are not surprised that Native Americans had flourished in the Willamette Valley for thousands of years.

Yet like other natural Meccas, the basin has fallen upon hard times recently because the source of life, water, has been overexploited and polluted in numerous areas. During the last ten years, 1,500 miles of waterways have violated Federal Clean Water Act standards.

Hundreds of thousands of Chinook used to make runs in the basin, and that number has declined to a few thousand at best. The Oregon Health Division has issued repeated warnings against consuming fish caught in the

Willamette. Likewise, 16 species of plants and animals that inhabit the basin are officially Endangered Species. Add to that the ever-increasing shortage of rainfall, the appropriation of nearly all surface water through the state water rights system, and the key role of the Willamette River in the basin's economy and panic looms on the horizon.

Thus the WRI, and its goal to keep the Willamette River from becoming the West's New Jersey River. But members are faced with an enor-

ests to aid drainage, on the Grand Ronde Reservation. The Tribe became aware that many culverts, being too high or not draining enough, impede salmon during spawning runs. Replacing them is not a cheap endeavor. Yet it's the perfect example of unfore-

seen problems, and expenses in the eyes of businesses, that can materialize unexpectedly.

As word gets out on problem culverts a collective groan issues forth from other Tribes and some timber companies, particularly in the State



## RESTORING *A River of Life*

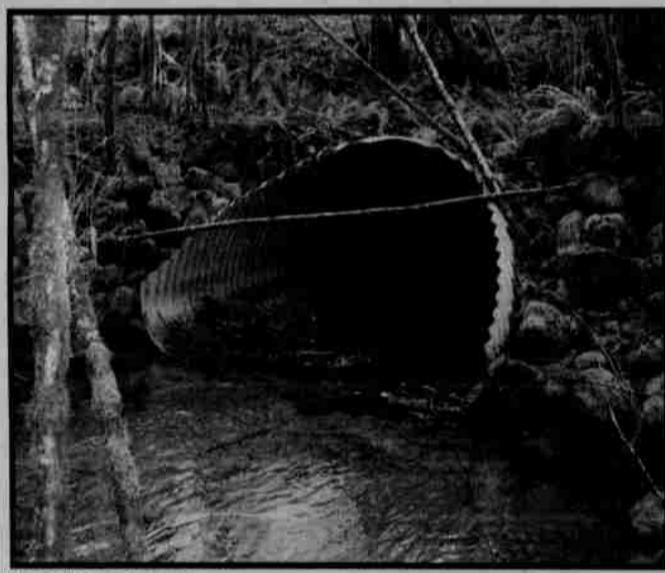


Photo by Chris Mercier

*"This could change the course of history in the Willamette Basin. This could change people's lives."*

~ Rick Bastasch, WRI representative

mous task in trying to sell a plan that incorporates at the same time financial, ecological and political interests intermixed with the inherent unpredictability of Mother Nature.

The strategy presents four focus areas: Clean Water, Water Quantity, Habitats and Hydrological Processes, and Institutions. The four areas are further broken up into 27 actions; suggestions for what lawmakers can do to ensure the preservation of the Willamette Basin. To Feehan, some of the actions are indeed specific, and others alarmingly vague, giving rise to certain questions.

Many of Feehan's concerns stem from the fact that as environmental legislation, many laws potentially put forth from the strategy run the risk of constant fluctuation, which for many businesses wanting to comply, can be extremely frustrating.

"There's a lot of people making a lot of money doing what they're doing," she said. "And they're not going to want to change."

To use a recent example, Feehan points to the problem culverts, those metal tubes found in ditches or in for-

of Washington, who claim not to have the money to replace them.

Thus another contentious issue of the Willamette Restoration Strategy: Enforcement. To Feehan, enforcement can be "a dirty word," not only because it may involve money, but also conflict.

"If you want to live here, to work here, then you're going to have to find a way to do it that protects the river," she said.

It's not a pleasant scenario for Feehan, because while the strategy allows for water pollution permits, businesses that have already polluted waterways get away scott-free.

"People who allowed themselves to pollute a public resource broke the law," she said. "They're the ones who should be cleaning it up."

Ironically, although Feehan still has more misgivings about the strategy, she adamantly endorses it. Why? Because it's better than nothing.

"The last thing the Willamette needs is more rhetoric," she said, adding that strategy marks the start of an important dialogue.

WRI representative Rick Bastasch

agrees whole-heartedly.

"We've put up a platform for discussion," he said. "And yeah, it's imperfect but it's better than what we had before — nothing."

Bastasch has been at the forefront of the development process for the strategy most of the last two years. He reluctantly admitted that when the WRI was first formed, it took a few meetings before the group really started to click (Feehan, for the record, said the same thing). And he has also been pleasantly surprised by the cooperative efforts, particularly from the industry section that includes representatives from Weyerhaeuser and the Oregon Business Council.

"These businesses want to maintain Oregon's high quality of life," he said. "They live here, and they know how unique Oregon is."

But at the same time, Bastasch understands why some people may be cynical of business in ecological issues, as stereotypically it is irresponsible industry that ultimately begets environmentalism — example: the

spotted owl controversy of the late '80s. Bastasch however doesn't buy the oversimplified "business vs. ecology" viewpoint, adding that a clean Willamette River Basin affects everyone.

"We depend on the environment, and the environment depends on us," he said. "We've a common interest, believe it or not."

Bastasch admires the WRI board; mainly because it is composed entirely of "real" citizens, not exclusively company fat cats, politicians or heads of environmental groups. And what's more, he appreciates the strategy.

"I'm confident in this strategy," he said. "Because it's very holistic and solid."

He estimates the cost of the strategy to weigh in around \$10 million for the first two to three years. And that cost is liable to change, for reasons mentioned before. Is it worth it? Bastasch doesn't doubt it is.

"This could change the course of history in the Willamette Basin," he said. "This could change people's lives."

Gov. John Kitzhaber himself appeared equally optimistic when the strategy was finally handed to him in late February.

"I can't tell you how fortunate I feel to be here and see this come down the pipe," he said before a crowded room in Willamette's University Center.

"This board recognizes the interdependence of the environment and the community," he later added.

If anything, Kitzhaber's vote of confidence was a relief, as previous speakers, some of them WRI board members, fondly recounted the bickering and disagreements that seemed an early hallmark of sessions. But there was a new confidence in the room and few would dare to think dark days for the Willamette basin lay ahead.

And nobody would dispute, that for all its imperfections, the Willamette Restoration Strategy is a much-needed step in the right direction.