

# NATURAL RESOURCES PROGRAM IS BEST IN STATE

■ Tribe works with the Oregon Youth Conservation Corps to give local kids their first work opportunity.

By Ron Karten

From June through August each year since 1991, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde have worked with the Oregon Youth Conservation Corps (OYCC) to give kids a sometimes tough but valuable work experience. The program also puts a couple of bucks in participants' pockets.

Kelly Monk, a senior at Willamina High School, has been in the program for the last two summers, and he thought enough of the program to recommend it to three of his friends. Two got the job.

"It was pretty tough at times," he said. His crew was "making trails wheelchair accessible, and clearing around small trees so they could get sunlight."

For last year's efforts, the Tribe will soon be awarded the Frank Roberts Award from OYCC, given to the best program of the year. All 36 counties have projects, but OYCC Program director Ron Adams credited the Tribe for "the variety, the diversity of the work, the community sponsorship...the partnerships and collaboration."

"I would like the Tribe to be proud of this accomplishment and of the commitment and generosity of the Tribal Council to fund and support this program over the years," said Kelly Doerksen, Natural Resources' Fish and Wildlife Coordinator, and also Tribal coordinator for the OYCC program.

The Tribal Council has more than tripled the basic commitment for an OYCC program. Usual OYCC grants, parceled out county by county, fund half a crew of six or seven. The sponsoring organization funds the rest. Last year, the Tribal contribution of \$35,000 enabled the program to accommodate 14 youth and two crew leaders.

The program grows every year. Doerksen said that he is now beginning to see applications from the younger siblings of former workers, but it is not because the work is easy. A crew might have a forest trail to clear, taking it down to dirt, providing drainage by placing logs crossways in the dirt and sometimes building small stream crossings.

Projects that impressed OYCC included "the miles of trails, the checker-mallow enhancement. They cleaned lamprey eels for the community. They did some noxious weed eradication. And (they did) the little things like Red Cross First Aid certification that not everybody does," said Adams.

Doerksen in concert with biologist Jeff Baker develops jobs that each crew can complete in their allotted time. Sometimes it is an entire trail, but if a trail is too long, Doerksen and Baker specify a portion of the trail so that the crew's work will end with

a sense of accomplishment.

Baker works with the crews to make sure they are working safely and efficiently. Little problems like hornets have to be considered in case crew members have allergies. And Doerksen and Baker design projects with enough variety that the work remains interesting.

Some work locations could be a mile or two into the woods. That requires packing in the tools, the water, special raingear for the day, lunches and so on, but Doerksen said, "hiking is nice compared to what else they'll be doing (during the day)."

Crew members use hand tools familiar to few home gardeners. A Rhinehart (a shovel-hoe hybrid) is the most popular, Doerksen said, but on any given day, the kids could also use a McCloud (a hoe-rake gizmo), a Polaski (a hoe-axe in one) or a Sandvik (looks more



Kelly Doerksen displays some of the tools used by the Tribe's award winning Summer Youth Crew.

Photo by Ron Karten

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like a hacksaw at the end of a shovel handle). As near as Doerksen and others at the Natural Resources storage shed one recent morning could tell, the names refer to the people who developed the tools.

With these strange and powerful tools in hand, it's usually an 8-5 day for the kids. If a day promises to be really hot, the crews could start at 7 a.m.

"I impress on them that this is a job," said Doerksen. "For a lot of them, this is their first work experience. This is not like high school," he tells them. "We don't have to keep you here."

Almost every year, he said, "at least one washes out. They start to make the connection that this is what it's like to have a job. I also make the point that they can parlay this (work experience) into another job.

"OYCC tries to serve disadvantaged kids," said

Doerksen, "but that fits for most any kid in this area." The pay is \$7 an hour for crew members and \$10.50 for crew leaders who generally are college students. "We're going to try to hire every Tribal member who applies," said Doerksen, "and we usually end up with 50/50 (Tribal/non-Tribal)."

Improving the program has been a continual effort.

"The crew lives or dies by the quality of the crew leader," said Doerksen. "We've learned the qualities that make good crew leaders." They include people who are "self-motivated, gung-ho and relate to kids. And they have to be extremely responsible."

The makeup of a crew also is important. While Doerksen said that high school kids are often testing limits and "even the best kids will test you," he has learned over the years that you can't put too many "difficult" kids in the same group. "We look to get a crew where the chemistry works.

"It's a nice recognition on our part that we've been able to refine and improve the program to the point that we received this award. Personally, we're extremely proud but it works because the Tribal Council supports it for youth, not just Tribal youth but all youth in the county."

Success has encouraged Doerksen to continue seeking new work opportunities for work crews. He also seeks new funding sources "to maybe hire as many kids as want jobs."

For the last two years the program had twice as many applicants as the program could fund.



**Employees Honored** — The Annual Employee Recognition Day on Friday, February 7 was a chance to honor Tribal employees for their years of hard work for the Tribe. Tribal Council Chairwoman Cheryle Kennedy (left) was there to thank the employees, like General Manager Cliff Adams, (below) as well as Margo Mercier and Bonnie Tom. Margo and Bonnie have served the Tribe over 18 years.

Photos by Peta Tinda

