

Water: A Battle Fought On Many Fronts

Editor's Note — With the importance of water resources growing globally, nationally, region-wide and locally it becomes crystal clear that water is the new gold. If you follow the news, and even if you don't, you know that water is one of Mother Earth's most precious commodities. Last summer, the whole world watched as Klamath Basin farmers and local Indians fought a modern-day war over water. At home, prosperity means new construction. But, that construction has been delayed as we do the water dance with the local water authority. Living in the great Northwest where it rains almost everyday, it is easy to take for granted the importance of our water resources. Here, we took a look at water from many perspectives — locally and state-wide and we invite you to look at your own views on water.

All stories by Ron Karten

The indigenous way of life in America has long had a romantic side to it. Not that the romance was all that romantic as it was being lived, but a century of European culture has certainly dropped in with a dose of reality. A look at what's happening to water, not only here in Grand Ronde, but throughout the region, across the country and around the globe, provides a sobering update.

Twenty five hundred years ago, the Chinese sage, Lao Tsu, wrote, "A sound man, like water, serves as he goes along." But as the saga of the American West unfolded, Sagoyewatha, Chief of the Seneca

People, discovered that serving like water also meant the undoing of the Native way of life.

Much of that way of life fell as the dominant culture moved west across the continent, but Indians never let go of their connection to fishing and their respect for the waterways that provided for them for so many centuries. That connection to the rivers is proving itself to have been superior to the stewardship we see today. Untold challenges nevertheless remain.

As Native peoples rise again across America, many are working to bring the waterways back to life. They face a shrinking supply of

Your forefathers crossed the great water and landed on this island. Their numbers were small. We took pity on them and they sat down among us. We gave them corn and meat. They gave us poison in return.

—Sagoyewatha (Red Jacket), Seneca.

water. It is over-committed to electricity and farming, often leaving fish without. Increasingly, water supplies are also falling into private hands and sold for profit, even as public needs remain unmet. Potable reserves in many parts of the world are literally unaffordable in poor and indigenous communities.

In the face of all that, Tribal efforts here in Grand Ronde have secured enough water for the community today with room to grow. And the Tribe is participating in plans to develop a regional supply that will provide enough water for the whole area for the foreseeable future.

There is still much to be concerned about. Hardly a day goes by that we don't get another news report about the abysmal state of the world's water supply. A recent BBC story reported that in the last 18 years, the Aral Sea in Central Asia "has virtually split in two and a great white expanse of salty

desert has claimed the seabed revealed by the contracting waters." With fishing villages now miles from shore, the story goes on to say, "The independent states of Central Asia are now joined in an association to manage the waters that feed the Aral but in practice there is little agreement among them on how best to share the resource."

Too far from home? How about a Reuters story that said, "Farmed salmon, which Americans are scarfing down because it is supposed to be healthy, may actually be carrying high levels of cancer-causing chemicals called PCBs..." The fish tested came from Washington, San Francisco and Portland, Oregon.

It is at once frightening to see how poorly we humans have managed this resource, but also hopeful, when you look at the long record of the indigenous peoples of the world, and see how many are rising again to adapt the old ways to our new problems.

Filthy Habits

Local waterways and groundwater are at risk.



In Sheridan and at the Portland Harbor, two areas of interest to the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has established "Superfund" sites — or those envisioned by President Carter in 1979 as "hazardous waste dump sites, which threaten public health or the environment."

Over the years, these sites have been contaminated by companies and even government agencies dumping toxic substances right into local rivers or into ground repositories. As of July 2000, 60 percent of 1,238 sites across the country had "all cleanup construction completed," according to the agency.

The Taylor Lumber site in Sheridan, which was added to the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Superfund List in 2001, broke its owners. They were spending millions of dollars on the cleanup just as the bottom fell out of the timber market.

Testing showed that contaminants — including arsenic, creosote, polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and pentachlorophenol (PCP), dioxin and mercury, according to the EPA — were "found in high concentrations in the soil, groundwater, and drainage ditches surrounding the facility."

Forty-two hundred tons of contaminated soil was removed from the property. "To prevent further movement of contaminated groundwater,

EPA also built a slurry wall and an asphalt cap around the main treatment plant," an EPA fact sheet said. A second asphalt cap was built in the treated pole storage area.

"Both caps will limit airborne dust, which contains contaminants such as arsenic." In addition, the walls, which extend down into impermeable rock, are designed to



In Your Backyard — The Taylor Lumber and Treating Superfund site in Sheridan (above) is now owned and operated by Pacific Wood Preserving Companies, a privately held company with facilities also in California, Arizona and Nevada. The Environmental Protection Agency called Pacific Wood Preserving "the largest treater of low-environmental-impact wood in the United States."

keep the contaminants from moving, possibly to the South Yamhill River nearby, or into local sources of ground water.

The Sheridan area was fortunate that the Taylor Lumber and Treating plant has its problem capped

(though monitoring continues), but in Portland, the Harbor site still has a long way to go, according to Rod Thompson, Water Quality Specialist, who monitors water issues for the Tribe.

At the harbor, the EPA continues to evaluate which companies are responsible for which contaminants, and what responsibility each company holds in paying for the cleanup, said Thompson.

The EPA recently selected 11 sites nationwide to clean up for the coming year indicating that it was not allocated the money to either select more or clean up more of those previously selected.

pressure from industry lobbyists — in 1996, when the fund had reached \$3.8 billion.

Today, the fund is below \$30 million, and the Bush administration has explicitly declined to reinstate the tax on industry to continue funding the 30 percent of cleanups that companies decline to handle. That leaves fewer sites being named, fewer being cleaned up and for those that are named and cleaned, the taxpayer is picking up the tab.

An internal EPA study of the period from 1999 to 2001 found that "about a quarter of the nation's largest industrial plants and water treatment facilities are in serious violation of pollution standards at any one time, yet only a fraction of them face formal enforcement actions," according to the *Washington Post*. Even when fined, these companies paid only about \$6,000, the newspaper reported.

Before laws were passed in the early 1980s regarding the disposal of hazardous wastes, thousands of companies routinely and legally dumped these problem substances into the ground and water and released them into the air.

There are now 11 Superfund sites in Oregon and 81 others being watched for potential listing. Three have been cleaned up. Two have been formally proposed for listing. Ten have groundwater contamination and 44 percent of Oregonians rely on groundwater for drinking, all according to information collected from the EPA by the state Public Interest Research Groups and the Sierra Club.

Photo by Ron Karten