

Merkley holds Town Hall in Grand Ronde

By Brent Merrill

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Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley toured Grand Ronde on Saturday, June 20, and started his visit to the Reservation by stopping at the Tribe's powwow grounds to view the new arbor.

"It's absolutely amazing," said Merkley. "It is just jaw-dropping. It's beautiful. I have never seen anything like it."

Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno, Tribal Council Vice Chair Jack Giffen Jr. and Tribal Council members Chris Mercier, Ed Pearsall, Jon A. George and Denise Harvey then walked with Merkley to the Tribe's plankhouse, achaf-hammi.

While the group took in the plankhouse surroundings and looked down on the new arbor, Giffen asked Merkley for an update on the Grand Ronde Reservation Act amendment.

Senate Bill S.818 is currently before the 114th Congress to amend the Grand Ronde Reservation Act. The bill was read twice before the Senate in March and referred to the Committee on Indian Affairs.

The bill would end the current two-step process that requires the Tribe take each piece of former reservation land into trust with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and then request that the land be designated reservation land by Congress. This action would combine the two-step process and is supported by the BIA.

"The bill has been refiled," said Merkley. "Senator (Ron) Wyden is the chief sponsor this time around and I am a co-sponsor. It (the Reservation Act amendment) is in committee without committee action scheduled yet as I'm aware."

Tribal Attorney Rob Greene shared the Tribe's wishes.

"They (the Committee on Indian Affairs) are going to be reaching out to your office soon to talk with you and Senator Wyden about moving forward on the bill," said Greene. "We really need you to say 'Yes, let's get this thing going' so we need your help to say 'Yes this is a priority' to you. We are hoping we can count on you to make the bill a priority because we are six years into this bill."

Greene said that the Tribal property Merkley toured would not become part of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde's reservation lands until the bill passes.

"That's why this is so critical," said Greene. "We really hope that when you get a call from the committee, you will tell them that this bill is a priority for you."

From the plankhouse, the tour moved down to the Tribe's fish weir on Agency Creek.

Tribal Fish and Wildlife Program Manager Kelly Dirksen and Natural Resources Department Manager Michael Wilson met the group and gave a presentation about the ongoing restoration of local streams.

Dirksen said that when the weir is operating, Natural Resources staff members are collecting infor-



Photo by Brent Merrill

Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley held a Town Hall meeting in Grand Ronde on Saturday, June 20. Merkley started his visit to the Grand Ronde Reservation by touring the new arbor at the Tribe's powwow grounds. From there, Merkley, center, walked with, from left, Tribal Council member Ed Pearsall, Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno, Vice Chairman Jack Giffen Jr., Tribal Council member Chris Mercier and Tribal Attorney Rob Greene up to the Tribal plankhouse. Tribal leaders used the opportunity to share with Merkley the importance of the proposed amendment to the Grand Ronde Reservation Act.

mation that helps make decisions regarding management of Reservations lands.

"Biologists can come in and count the fish," said Dirksen. "They can identify their gender, their species, take genetic samples and then mark them and send them on their way. What we do with that information is we have that guide the management of the Reservation and all of our restoration projects."

Dirksen said that since the Tribe regained a portion of its original Reservation in 1987, there have been 14 culverts replaced that have opened up more than 22 miles of streams. He said the Tribe puts as many spawning salmon carcasses back into the streams as possible.

"We call it salmon recycling," said Dirksen. "The salmon when they leave are only about 1 percent of the size that they will be when they return, so they gain 99 percent of their body weight while they are out in the ocean. When they come back here to spawn they return really rare nutrients to the stream that are important to rearing salmonids."

Dirksen said the Tribe has also completed many woody debris replacement projects in local streams that produce rearing and spawning habitat.

"When I started working for the Tribe 19 years ago we did not have juvenile Coho up on the Reservation," said Dirksen. "Now it is 20 percent of the juvenile fish population."

Giffen said the Tribe has had success partnering with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

"I think it is important to say that all these different projects that we have been successful with have been very instrumental in our reservation management plan that we worked out with ODFW to actually manage the reservation land," said Giffen. "They have partnered with us on some of these projects and they have seen the success we have had."

Leno said the Tribal program is making a difference in local creeks and streams.

"We're really thinking this is an outstanding thing for us," said Leno. "There are no herbicides used

on the Reservation and that is huge for our ceremonial hunts. Take it from somebody that grew up here in Grand Ronde, we never thought we would have a fish weir. I can tell you that much."

Merkley asked Dirksen how many adult fish returned through the fish weir this year. Dirksen said about 300 and that record years have had as many as 1,000 returns.

Merkley, who joined the Senate in 2009, then accompanied members of Tribal Council to the Tribe's Governance Center for a brief meeting before the senator's Polk County Town Hall meeting.

Merkley's Town Hall was held in the Tribe's Community Center and was attended by almost 30 people. Merkley held a Town Hall meeting in Tillamook County earlier in the day.

Merkley said he takes great pride in holding a Town Hall meeting in every county in Oregon every year. The Town Hall in Polk County was his 243rd such meeting.

Leno introduced Merkley to the audience of mostly local residents and some Tribal members. Merkley thanked everyone for participating in his meeting despite it being a beautiful, sunny weekend. He then invited local elected officials to introduce themselves.

"I like to shine a light on something that is positive that is going on in every community," said Merkley. "And today, we are shining that light on the Grand Ronde Color Guard."

Merkley asked Color Guard members present to come up and he presented them, with a flag that had been flown over the Capitol. The Color Guard was represented by Tribal Elders Steve Bobb Sr., Alton Butler and Raymond Petite, as well as Al Miller.

Speaking on behalf of the Color Guard, Bobb said they are each "honored to represent the nation, the state and the Tribe."

Tribal youth Michael Reyes was selected to ask the first question of the meeting and he inquired what the "toughest part" of being a U.S. senator is.

"I think the most difficult part is taking on the very, very pow-

erful institutions," said Merkley. "I took on Wall Street over their hedge funds that are subsidized by the taxpayers. You shouldn't have hedge funds inside ordinary banks that are supposed to take deposits and make loans. These hedge funds really were a major force in the 2008 (economic) meltdown because they promoted securities based on predatory loans, predatory mortgage loans, loans that went up from 4 percent after two years to 9 or 10 percent and families couldn't pay them. We shut down the hedge fund-style operating banks. That was good, but it's getting harder. We are up against some very powerful forces. I'm going to keep taking them on."

Merkley also fielded questions about how to report concerns to the Environmental Protection Agency, about Senate passage of "fast track" trade legislation, gun control, dealing with the Internal Revenue Service, the current state of education, funding for food banks, funding for the Tribe's canine police officer and concerns from a local veteran about health care and the shortage of rural doctors.

Merkley thanked the Tribe and the audience for taking time to meet with him and discuss important issues.

"Very few senators hold town halls," said Merkley. "Senator Wyden set the example and I followed that idea. I've learned a tremendous amount from your comments and insights."

After the meeting, Merkley talked about his relationship with the Tribe.

"It's extremely important," he said. "There are a host of issues regarding Tribal law and federal law that require a close partnership."

Merkley said the job of an elected official doesn't necessarily become easier with time on the job.

"Certainly I get more familiar with the issues as time passes, but my staff works very hard on these issues," said Merkley. "I came here years ago to see the health center when it was opened. I have been to Tribal Council meetings, but I had never seen the powwow grounds and I hadn't seen the plankhouse and I hadn't seen the fish weir. These are all developments related to important issues and I was excited to come out firsthand and see what you were talking about."

Leno said he thinks it is important for Merkley to see the Grand Ronde area for himself.

"I think it was really important for him to come out here and see that this is just powwow grounds. It really is just a plankhouse," said Leno. "There is no way that this Tribe would allow for any other use for that ground. It is sacred ground to us and we explained that to him."

Leno said he felt good about the time spent with Merkley.

"I felt coming away from this meeting that we basically really got our point across," said Leno. "I really think he understands what we are trying to accomplish with the Reservation Act. It's important to us." ■