

George addresses Clean Water Conference

By Danielle Harrison
Smoke Signals assistant editor / staff writer

PORTLAND – Grand Ronde Tribal Council member Kathleen George gave the keynote speech at the Clean Water Conference held at the World Forestry Center on Wednesday, Jan. 11.

The event focused on the 50th anniversary of the federal Clean Water Act and its effectiveness in a changing world, and was hosted by the Environmental Law Education Center. It was the first in-person conference since March 2020.

The day-long event explored the latest developments in water quality laws, regulatory programs, science and compliance strategies, with presentations and roundtable discussions.

“Fifty years ago, the EPA was handed a very complex set of circumstances that were then picked up by the states and it fell on the various regulatory communities and citizen activists (to implement),” Education Center Founder Holly Duncan said. “Is the Clean Water Act up to the challenges? ... We must ask if regulatory programs of addressing critical water quality are working.”

According to its website, the center was founded in 1994 with the goal of “bringing together diverse environmental professionals in a neutral setting where they could learn from each other and share solutions to some of the most challenging environmental problems.”

George, who chairs the state Environmental Quality Commission, focused her speech on celebrating the accomplishments of the Clean Water Act as well as its shortcomings.



Photo by Kamiah Koch

Tribal Council member and Oregon Environmental Quality Commission Chair Kathleen George gave the keynote speech during the Clean Water Conference at the World Forestry Center in Portland on Wednesday, Jan. 11.

“Although my work with the Environmental Quality Commission brings me back to this regularly, I will not pretend that I am the foremost expert on clean water in this room,” she said. “I will talk to you about the Clean Water Act as a citizen of Oregon who has wrestled with, worked with, fought for and listened to others about the act and its many consequences. I come to this work in different roles, both as a Tribal Council member and from the commission. Both of those roles inform how I come to clean water issues.”

George touched on conflicting goals of the act.

“So, this was an ambitious act and undertaking at its time, but it sets conflicting sets of expectations. Despite the goal of eliminating pollution discharge, it also talks about how we will permit, allow and regulate discharge,” she said.

“Broadly speaking, the Clean Water Act sets a course for states to identify what are those beneficial uses of water that a jurisdiction intends to protect. ... There are definitely some things to celebrate for sure. The nation’s waterways are no longer open sewers. They don’t look like they did in the 1950s and 1960s. But on the other hand, far too few of our nation’s rivers and lakes are swimmable.”

She said after 50 years the goal of eliminating pollution isn’t even remotely close to being accomplished. However, the nation’s waterways are much more utilized now than when the act was passed.

“A benefactor of the water quality regimes are the water-using public,” George said. “There is a process for organizations to discharge pollutants into the water, and it is to be refined and improved over time. This is a process that does its best to control and minimize pollutants. The watersheds are also winners.

We’ve made real progress with pollution loads diminished.”

She said those who continue to be most heavily affected by polluted water tend to be people who live in poor and rural communities.

“It’s a tragic and unacceptable reality,” George said. “We enjoy a tremendous luxury these people do not. ... We tend to imagine that those are other-world problems, things that occur in distant and exotic places, but they aren’t. Those are a regular reality for some Oregonians. It is incumbent on us to find a way to do better.”

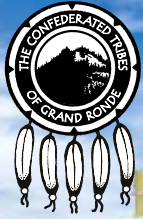
A big challenge moving forward is language in the act that made sense at the time, but doesn’t hold up to today’s scientific understanding.

“Some of the challenges we face are the result of a paradigm that made sense to its creators, but today don’t quite meet with the scientific understanding of our waters,” George said. “They saw rivers functioning as sewers or catching on fire, but they didn’t want to get involved with water rights or water quality. ... How do we deal with pollution that comes out of our streets, farms and forests area, and finds its way into our waterways? There are many challenges faced by our native fish besides water quality. But without cold and clean water to support the life stages of salmon, the other challenges won’t matter as much.”

George closed her speech with a coyote and magic fish trap story at Willamette Falls, known in Chinuk Wawa as “tumwata.”

“Coyote often shows us what not to do,” she said. “We are both clever and powerful at making use of our rivers. We need to remember the precious gifts of our waters can be lost if we’re unwise in the gift of appreciation for our rivers.” ■





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