

In Pursuit Of

PURE WATER

Grassroots group aims for a clean Long Tom River

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Of the News

FRANKLIN — Some Oregonians may remember the famous 1930s environmental documentary that sounded the alarm regarding the Willamette River's water quality.

Filmmakers put cutthroat trout into a wire basket and exposed them to the Willamette River's water at locations from Eugene to Portland. What they found was that increased pollution levels had profound effects on the fish.

At a location south of Eugene, the fish swam about and died within 20 minutes. In the Portland area, they fish were doing their best to leap out of the water and dying within a matter of 10 to 15 seconds.

Oregonians were horrified, and, in 1936, they passed by a 3-to-1 margin a citizen referendum requiring that the Willamette River be cleaned up.

Since the problem of pollution was first publicized, lawmakers have focused more attention on protecting Oregon's waterways. Once considered the property of whoever owned the land through which they flowed, rivers are now viewed as communal property. The way one landowner treats a stream or river will most assuredly affect those who own land downstream.

Who's watching water quality in Lane County? Powerhouses like the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife pack a big punch when it comes to pollution.

And then there's the Long Tom Watershed Council, a group of researchers and residents who work together to promote good water quality and watershed health in the 410 square miles that extend from Coyote Creek to the south Amazon Creek, to the east and Ferguson Creek to the west. These creeks drain into the Long Tom River, which eventually joins the Willamette River north of Monroe.

Broadly speaking, land use in the upland portion of the watershed is forestry, and, in the lowlands, it is farming and urban areas. But use is mixed throughout.

The Long Tom Watershed Council features a unique combination of voluntary cooperation from landowners matched with research

and funding from the government and private industries, farmers and other contributors.

"What we want is for people to think historically," says Long Tom Watershed project coordinator Cindy Thieman. "We have a mix of members, from large-scale agriculture, to small wood lot owners, to ranchers, to small business owners, to University of Oregon faculty members."

Here's how it works. Anyone who lives in the watershed — the Long Tom River and all the streams that feed it — is automatically a council member. Once a year, council members are nominated or volunteer to serve on a 12-member steering committee. A volunteer facilitator helps the group conduct regular meetings, where they discuss watershed topics and concerns. Regular water quality testing helps members keep tabs on the health of local rivers and creeks.

The council's main goal is to find projects in the Long Tom Watershed that will protect or improve water quality and habitat and help the landowners get those implemented by finding funds and materials from the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board and other contributors.

One example: the Historic Coyote Creek Restoration. An Eugene attorney decided to restore his 100 acres of farmland near Franklin Road to what it was like historically. Following turn-of-the-century maps, workers

reconnected a branch of Coyote Creek. They're now working to change the culvert system so that the creek retains more throughout the year.

They tore out blackberries and other non-native plants and planted 40 Oregon white oak and 80 pine trees along the new channel. Eventually, water will once again flow through the area, and its temperature will stay cool — one of the marks of a healthy river — because of the shade.

The project will cost a total of \$65,000, with the state paying \$41,300 and the landowner and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service contributing \$23,700. This particular landowner

also opted to hire a UO graduate student to work part-time on the restoration project. While the project has been a unique chance to do full-scale restoration, most projects are smaller and include simple methods for keeping bacteria out of the water, shading creeks or simply monitoring water quality.

"This kind of project is going to be the exception," Thieman says. "You don't have to completely turn over your property. There's as lot you can do to enhance native wildlife and still make a living."

Most projects created and funded by the Long Tom Watershed Council are much smaller. The most recent is an effort to build



a mile of fencing along Poodle Creek near Allison Road. It will span five properties, all of which are home to livestock. The new fence will keep the owners' horses and cows from wading and defecating in the creek.

The state is kicking in \$22,800 to fund the project; the landowners will add another \$7,200 of in-kind donations in the form of labor to build the fence.

"People don't necessarily have to put up cash at all," Thieman says. "They can do the work."

This is the attitude that the Long Tom Watershed Council hopes to foster. It's a far cry from a situation where the government is forcing private landowners to make changes to their properties. Proudly, the council is not government. Instead, it's a grassroots group of members who have common concerns about water quality. Illustrating its independent orientation, half of its day-to-day costs are funded through location donations.

Just when the Long Tom Watershed Council seems to be looking at the big picture — with its birds-eye view of every creek draining into the Long Tom River — the picture gets bigger. The Long Tom runs into the Willamette River; which, joined by the output from other watersheds, meanders toward the Columbia River in Portland.

For more information on the Long Tom Watershed Council, those interested may call Dana Erickson at 683-6578.



University of Oregon graduate student Jim Elkins has been hired to oversee one property owner's restoration project.



(Top) Wearing waders, Americorps volunteer Michele Stowe checks the Long Tom River's temperature at one probe site. (Above) Native seedlings thrive at the Historic Coyote Creek Restoration project.