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(Reviewed by Whitney Avery)

Governor Kulongoski and the Willamette River

I am drawing on five different articles to help paint a picture about the future of Willamette River restoration. The first is a press release from the Governor's office about his two-day trip on the Willamette and his intention of making it a top priority during his governorship. The second piece is the Governor's plan for cleaning up the Willamette. This involves three points: repair, restore, recreate. The third piece is a Register Guard article written after the first day of the trip, which outlines the problem of mercury pollution coming from the abandoned Black Butte mine and the \$8 million of federal funds that the Governor is seeking to clean it up. It also quotes a local environmentalist and his concerns that the trip was nothing but a political stunt. The fourth piece is another Register Guard article that talks about OSPIRG's criticism of the Governor's policies, and lack of enforcement thus far. The last piece is a press release from the Port of Portland talking about the "early action" clean-up that is going to be taking place in conjunction with the EPA, DEQ, Native American tribes, natural resource agencies and ten of 69 potential responsible parties. Together, these articles give us an idea of the players involved in cleaning up the Willamette. It also tips us off to some of the challenges that lie ahead.

Critique

The main problem with these articles is that no one is really saying anything. Everyone has a plan to make a plan. The "early action" proposed by the Port of Portland was started in 2003 but is not slated for implementation until 2007. That kind of lag time in policy implementation makes a person wonder how much a Governor could really hope to accomplish, especially if he doesn't get re-elected. This shifts the burden to action groups and agencies that often don't have the funds, resources, access or authority they need to carry out the work that has been assigned to them. This comes from a need for substantial funds.

A governor can be instrumental in securing those funds, but then he must also make sure that they are properly appropriated by the legislature. Also, everyone knows that the State is facing budget crisis. Trying to find a lot of money to appropriate to expensive environmental projects is a tough sell. Governor Kulongoski is at least astute on that point, in that he is seeking federal funds for some of the projects that he is proposing. So, if we think that we can create a policy that will address the issue and have the funds to carry it out, then what is the best policy to enact? That is where all the research comes in; the plan to make a plan. As Larry Tuttle from the Portland-based Center for Environmental Equity put it, "State and Federal agencies have spent two decades studying and analyzing the problems with the river."

I also think that a great difficulty is getting all of the numerous agencies involved to act in accord with one another, each tackling a different problem, creating a coherent plan. This is exactly what the Governor proposes in his Legacy of the Willamette plan, but I think that is easier said than done. I do feel that OSPIRG is right in criticizing the Governor's plan, which focuses on citizens and clean-up actions and does not place the responsibility on polluters. There are a few lines of his press release devoted to saying that he, the state Attorney General and the U.S. Attorney General are working closely together to "coordinate investigation and prosecution of environmental crimes." However, he downplayed this aspect in subsequent addresses and focused instead on reinstating policies like the Pesticide Right to Know Act. In the end, it is easy to see that clean-up will remain difficult with so many problems and so many players and no one the really conduct the symphony.

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