



---

## The Oregonian

### Just how green is our valley?

Thursday, August 23, 2007

#### The Oregonian

The Willamette River, as we all know, is an open sewer.

Howard Grabhorn can't be bothered to inspect the incoming trash at Lakeside Reclamation Landfill for pollutants, and Oregon's Department of Environmental Quality apparently doesn't care.

The state agency's approach to monitoring and enforcement is so cavalier -- mercury and carbon dioxide emissions at Portland General Electric's coal-powered plant, anyone? -- that the Northwest Environmental Defense Center, with two full-time employees and scores of student volunteers, annually collects more in fines from water polluters than the DEQ.

And when a Massachusetts company proposed planting forty 389-foot wind turbines to harness wind energy in the Columbia River Gorge, the local NIMBYs turned out, huffing and puffing about the intrusion upon their solitude.

Green? Us? Please. Smug? Definitely. But as for Oregon's reputation as an environmental pacesetter?

Way overrated.

While the 2007 Legislature made some progress in restoring some of Oregon's green luster, I'm a glass-half-empty kind of guy, particularly if that glass is dipped into the Willamette or one of the nine other major rivers in the state that don't meet minimum water-quality standards.

And I'm hardly alone.

"If you compare Oregon to Washington in terms of what we're doing to protect streams and rivers from urban runoff, it's pitiful," said Andrea Durbin, executive director of the Oregon Environmental Council.

Air quality? In Oregon, notes Mark Riskedahl, executive director of the NEDC, "That's a world where there's never been a watchdog. The rules are set up in favor of the biggest, dirtiest, oldest polluters."

Land use? With Measure 37, the state's land-use ethic is being thoroughly trashed.

For many environmentalists, the DEQ -- and the tin sheriffs advising it at the Department of Justice -- are the heart of the problem. The agency is disorganized, dispirited, underfunded and under the illusion its real customers are the regulated industries, not the citizens of Oregon.

Joan Stevens-Schwenger, DEQ communications manager, contends, quite reasonably, "We've been hamstrung for a long time with the funding issue. You can only do what you have resources to do. Sometimes our laws don't go where people would like to see them go."

But Art Kamp, who lives in the shadow of Grabhorn's money pit, argues the rules aren't the problem: "What I see in this state are strong environmental regulations and land-use rules that are often ignored."

Steve Novick agrees: "When I was involved with environmental enforcement (at the EPA) in the early '90s, the general impression was DEQ took environmental enforcement much less seriously than the Washington Department of Ecology. Oregon was in love with the idea of businesses auditing themselves, then revealing they were breaking the law and not being penalized for it."

And far too few Oregonians complained. "For 30 years, we've rested on our laurels," Novick said. "We did the Bottle Bill, so we're green."

"It was easier for us to be green back in the Tom McCall days," noted Angus Duncan, head of the Bonneville Environmental Foundation. "You could have a wild-and-scenic area over here and increase the allowable cut over there. We weren't facing the tough trade-offs."

We're facing them now. "The most immediate test of whether or not the tide is turning," Durbin said, "will be the Measure 49 vote," the land-use fix for Measure 37.

And that is just the beginning of the fight to regain our environmental ethic, sacrificing now for the sake of the future generations who will otherwise feel the brunt of our laziness and neglect.

Steve Duin: 503-221-8597; 1320 S.W. Broadway, Portland, OR 97201 [steveduin@news.oregonian.com](mailto:steveduin@news.oregonian.com)  
<http://blog.oregonlive.com/steveduin>

©2007 The Oregonian