

Watershed

By Bruce Hemenway

As stated in Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary. Watershed: a region or area bounded peripherally by a water parting and draining ultimately to a particular watercourse or body of water.

Here in Oregon when people hear, "Bull Run", immediately think of the watershed used by the Portland Water Bureau as the drinking water source for the City of Portland as well as several other water agencies that purchase water from the Portland Water Bureau.

The Portland water system serves drinking water to approximately 770,000 Oregon residents. Of that total, an estimated population of 276,000 are wholesale customers. Portland Water Bureau's retail and wholesale service area is approximately 253 square miles. Of that, the bureau's retail service area is 143 square miles.

Since 1895 the Bull Run watershed has been a city of Portland water resource. The Bull Run watershed is east of downtown Portland and covers 102 square miles. The Bull Run has been a protected watershed since the early 1900's. The watershed is reserved solely for producing drinking water. Federal laws restrict human entry. Because of the protection of the watershed and for the high quality of the water supply, current regulations allow for an exemption to filtration.

The Bull Run watershed however, is the exception. Most surface water sources in Oregon are from unprotected watersheds. Not only are they unprotected, they have diverse usage. Usage such as residential, agriculture, commercial, light industrial, logging, camping, other recreational usage such as hunting, fishing and forest product harvesting. Also, wood cutting and rafting. In addition, highways that transport both cars and trucks, often along the rivers edge and crossing back and forth across the river are within the watershed. Many watersheds that are the source for drinking water supplies include hydro-electric generating projects that include dams, spillways and fish ladders. Also to be considered is the amount of land that is public lands, managed by agencies such as the United

States Forest Service (USFS) the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF).

I listed some of the diverse usages to demonstrate the complexity of a watershed which is often the surface water source of drinking water for many Oregon communities. Since we can't restrict human entry in these watersheds, like the Bull Run watershed, what then can be done to protect a watershed?

The answer: there is not one *single* thing that can be done to protect a watershed. Watershed protection consists of multiple aspects involving all the stakeholders that live in and use the watershed for recreation, lively hood and all other uses.

Many watersheds in Oregon have local watershed councils. What is a local watershed council and why have one? Answer: a watershed council is.... "a voluntary local organization designated by a local government group convened by a county governing body to address the goal of sustaining natural resource and watershed protection and enhancement within a watershed." This definition is found in state statute, ORS 541.350, and contains a number of important concepts. The voluntary, local nature of a council is emphasized in the 1995 legislation. It also is clear that the establishment of a watershed council is a local government decision, i.e., city, county, water supply district or sewer district. The two primary guidelines provided by the legislature are: 1) that the watershed council is a voluntary, local group, and 2) the council represents a balance of interested and affected persons within the watershed. State statute does not prescribe the form local recognition must take. Whether a letter, resolution or an order is appropriate is a local government prerogative.

Next question, what is the benefit to local communities of forming a watershed council? Answer: watershed councils are made up of people from the local communities. They represent local knowledge and have ties to the existing community in all its complexity. Watershed council's work across jurisdictional boundaries and across agency mandates to look at the watershed more holistically. The council can be a forum to bring local, state and federal land management agencies and plans together with local property owners and private land

managers. The council forum provides local people a voice in natural resource management that can significantly influence watershed management decisions.

What does a watershed council do? Answer: the legislature has established a goal to enhance Oregon's waters through the management of riparian and associated upland areas. Local watershed councils are highly effective in the development and implementation of projects to maintain and restore the biological and physical process in the watersheds for the sustainability of their communities. Councils bring varied interests together in a non-regulatory setting to form a common vision for the ecological and economic sustainability and livability of their watershed. Councils often identify landowner participants for important projects, develop priorities for local projects and establish goals and standards for future conditions in the watershed. On-site projects are implemented in an effort to enhance the ability of the watershed to capture, store and beneficially release water. Education projects are undertaken to inform people about watershed processes and functions. Watershed councils provide coordinated, broad-based review of land management plans to local, state and federal decision makers.

Where are watershed councils in Oregon? Answer: a list of active watershed councils in Oregon is available from the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, OWEB office or at http://www.oregon.gov/OWEB/WSHEDS/wsheds_councils_overview.shtml .

OWEB provides funding for education and on-site watershed enhancement projects. OWEB also supports watershed councils by providing grants for project planning, watershed assessments, development of action plans, watershed monitoring and watershed council coordinators and by providing information to assist watershed councils.

If you are an army of one or a larger group, and have an interest in becoming involved by creating a watershed council you may also contact the Oregon Association of Water Utilities (OAWU) for assistance. OAWU can provide this assistance at no charge and would be able to assist you in the process to establish a watershed council. You can contact OAWU by phone at 503-873-8353, or by mail at P.O. Box 857 Silverton, OR 97381-0857.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that even though we live in a state where water seems to be plentiful, we still have an obligation to protect this great natural resource for future generations. Even though watershed usage and management is complex, we do have a venue whereby we can become involved, provide a strong voice and help form the way our watersheds are managed in the future. We have a unique avenue in Oregon, a way to accomplish the task of watershed enhancement and protection.

I have found that when concerned individuals understand that they can become an important part of the strategy that will protect and enhance our surface waters here in Oregon, they will become enthusiastic volunteers and also become involved in as many ways as there are users of a watershed. It's also been my experience that one of the best ways to communicate to the public the issues concerning the health of a local watershed, is to hold well advertised community education projects. Many times the general public simply may not be aware of ways that humans impact a watershed and how easy it is to make a positive influence on a river or body of water.

If you have a passion for one of the greatest natural resources that Oregon possesses, its natural waterways, please become involved.