

# Opinion: Answering the call to protect our rivers

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The sun sets over the Clackamas River, as it flows through Milo McIver State Park in Estacada. LC- Jamie Hale/The Oregonian (*Jamie Hale | The Oregonian/OregonLive*)

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**By Bill Monroe**

We're fortunate to live alongside clean rivers, born in Cascades wilderness and tumbling downhill into our kitchen faucets.

Fish, birds and other native fauna and flora not only share the water, but are our bellwethers – depending upon us to protect the flows and warning us when we've unraveled too much of their habitat to suit ourselves.

Alarm bells are ringing.

Climate change, persistent drought and urbanization have set in motion sharp declines in salmon, steelhead and Pacific lamprey, to name just a few better-known aquatic co-inhabitants in the metropolitan realm. Attendant wildlife and native plants also suffer.

Headlines draw our attention to controlling sea lions, Gov. Kate Brown's climate initiative, troubling low water and snow years, and projected downturns in 2019 salmon and steelhead numbers.

Less heralded, however, is a large coalition of dedicated and passionate representatives from agencies, utilities and non-profit groups. With boots on the ground, they have been quietly righting wrongs for the past decade.

Now, their momentum begs for a boost.

The Clackamas Partnership consists of nearly two dozen area entities, including the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Metro, Clackamas County, Native American tribes, Portland General Electric, the U.S. Forest Service and local water providers, which serve as many as a half a million local residents from the Clackamas River.

Their work is impressive:

- Clackamas County Water Environment Services protects tributary and Clackamas Riverside habitats.
- Metro restores and protects hundreds of acres of floodplain, riparian and channel habitats along the Willamette and Clackamas rivers, Abernethy Creek and Johnson Creek. Kellogg Creek is on the radar.
- The Johnson Creek Watershed Council engages industrial landowners in voluntary actions to improve storm-water quality.
- The Clackamas River Basin Council plants trees and shrubs along more than 30 miles of the lower Clackamas River and its tributaries to provide beneficial water-cooling and storage canopies.
- Forest Service workers block sediment-producing roadways and ditches from smothering salmon spawning areas in the Mt Hood National Forest.
- The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife eliminated hatchery plants in the upper Clackamas River, providing safer conditions for wild fish.
- Perhaps most significantly, PGE recently invested millions in its showcase Clackamas River Hydroelectric Project. The project included a new pipeline at North Fork Dam to allow juvenile fish a safe bypass around dams and reservoirs in hours instead of days, resulting in nearly complete survival. The dam also includes a state-of-the-art system that now allows biologists to quickly sort adult hatchery from wild fish without handling or anesthetizing. Wild salmon and steelhead ascend to spawn upstream, while hatchery fish can be trucked downriver for anglers. Lastly, a new fish ladder at River Mill Dam creates an easier climb for adult salmon and Pacific lamprey returning from the ocean.

These investments have helped create an encouraging increase in wild coho, chinook and steelhead, and have opened a window of opportunity for the partnership to address even more downriver challenges.

More than ever, now is a time for action. And not simply on the Clackamas River.

Other Willamette River tributaries -- Johnson, Kellogg and Abernethy creeks -- are part of the complex web of side-channel habitat, cold-water refuge, and aquatic insects at the base of the food chain. All support smaller runs of fish and juveniles from the entire system. Thousands of Clackamas smolts drop out of their natal river to re-enter smaller tributaries and feed before heading to sea.

Cleaner, cool water pumping into the Willamette below the falls is also a haven for upriver Willamette migrants from as far away as Eugene and beyond as they pause to rest before threading the Portland harbor on their way to sea. The system, anchored amid Oregon's most dense human population, is a unique showcase -- perhaps in the world -- of what can be accomplished among urban challenges to save signature fish.

As the Oregon Legislature convenes and faces its own daunting financial challenges, elected members and state agencies will hopefully see an opportunity to help us cross even greater recovery thresholds.

We're poised to build on PGE's efforts by providing even more complex habitats for juveniles, floodplains at the shoulders of our rivers and streams to absorb and store water from rain events and, especially, attract the vital attention and support of human neighbors.

As we face an almost certain future of drought and lower water, now more than ever is the time to invest in a system capable of coping.

The future brightens if we fix what's wrong when we're most exposed.

*Bill Monroe is a semi-retired outdoor writer for The Oregonian/OregonLive and the outgoing chair of the Clackamas River Basin Council.*