



Oregon Coastal Notes

Oregon Coastal Zone Management Association

September 2008

Oregon Rural Congress Meeting a Success!—by Onno Husing, Director, OCZMA



On August 21-22, 2008, the first meeting of the Oregon Rural Congress (ORC) took place next to the mighty Columbia River in Cascade Locks, Oregon. About 220 respected leaders from all corners of Oregon made their way to Cascade Locks to brainstorm about their future.

I was proud to be one of the organizers of the Oregon Rural Congress. The other co-organizers included: Laura Pryor (former Gilliam County Judge), Judge Steve Grasty (Harney County) and Commissioner Colleen MacLeod (Union

County). The concept is to use regional organizations like OCZMA and the Eastern Oregon Alliance (EOA), working together, as springboards for a statewide dialogue on rural policy.

It was stirring to see all these people from the sub-regions of Rural Oregon (including the Willamette Valley) express solidarity and a desire to work together across regional and jurisdictional lines. People were passionate and dedicated to changing the political climate/dynamic in Oregon.

The name “Oregon Rural Congress” reflects the fact a growing number of people believe the instruments of government (at the state and federal level) are, in effect, beginning to fail Rural Oregon. It’s time to think way out of the box.

The Crisis in Rural Oregon

How did this remarkable meeting come about? Well, there’s a lot of rural angst out there to tap into. The biggest motivating factor, of course, is the



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Congressional deadlock on county timber payments. Here's the dilemma. Without federal timber payments, many Oregon counties are teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. The main problem is, because of enormous federal land holdings in Oregon, in many counties there isn't enough private *taxable* land to run a local government. And, in many settings, even if voters supported substantial increases in property taxes, it won't come close to making up the shortfall. As such, there are deep structural issues crying out for reform.



The bitter irony is, *no one* disagrees our federal forests need to be thinned. If we got back to work in the woods, our counties would *not* need federal timber payments (or nearly as much federal money) because, the counties would, again, start sharing revenue from timber harvests on these federal lands.

I am *not* a forestry expert. But, I believe most people in Rural Oregon are *not* advocating a return to historic timber harvest levels and practices. That's a non-starter. What is being proposed is a form of structure-based management. That's where you go into a forest, thin it, and create fire-resistant and disease and pest-resistant forests, diverse ecosystems with strong riparian protections and fish and wildlife habitats.

Alas, the stalemate in Congress over timber payments drags on. And, the tug of war continues over the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) plan to address forest health. Each day, fuel loads mount. Our forests have become tinderboxes. *When* these forests burn down, it will leave a moonscape. These unnaturally intense forest fires will be similar to the historic Yellowstone National Park fires of 1988. Think of the enormous volumes of carbon that will be released into the atmosphere! If these forests don't burn up in our lifetimes, without active management, they will remain vulnerable to insects and disease.

Here's another issue that frustrates leaders in Rural Oregon. At the state and federal level, there's been a steep decline in federal and state resources to support rural economic development efforts. A series of ballot measures in Oregon have left the Oregon Legislature little room to fund needed initiatives. At the same time, federal and state regulatory mandates (many of them unfunded) keep trickling down to the local level. Rural leaders urge the implementation of "placed based" policies. It's a simple concept. There are profound differences between urban/suburban communities and rural communities. Can't we adjust or waive at least some regulatory requirements in truly rural communities to accommodate these different regional circumstances?

So, increasingly, a number of things have combined to threaten the viability of rural communities. If local governments in Rural Oregon begin to implode, which in some cases is a distinct possibility, Rural Oregon could really go into a tailspin.

Please, Not Another Gripe Session!

Leading up to the meeting, we put out the word that we wanted to avoid holding another gripefest. You know, that's where the same old complaints get aired and nothing gets done. The Oregon Rural Congress was **not** a publicity stunt. We wanted to hold a serious strategy session to build and then find ways to support a long-term process—***an independent process*** where candor and bold thinking is encouraged. For me, personally, I believe this is also an opportunity to ask rural Oregonians what ***we can do*** differently in Rural Oregon to make a difference. All ideas need to be on the table.

A Rainy Day in Cascade Locks



The original plan was to hold breakout groups during the first day of the two-day event. But, the weather (a rare rainy day in August) kept us inside the main building. So, we faced the challenge of holding the dialogue in one large room with a lot of people.

Hood County Commissioner Barbara Briggs served as master of ceremonies. Commissioner Colleen MacLeod explained to the crowd that we would try to work through four issue areas (health and human services, natural resources, economic development, and

telecommunications). Public finance and transportation will be added to the list of issue areas for further discussion. People were asked to take turns describing a problem facing Rural Oregon. ***And***, they were asked to offer ***a proposed solution*** to the problem. By the end of the two-day meeting approximately 350 problems and solutions were identified and recorded.

In a lot of cases people did **not** offer simple remedies to complex problems. Many of those knotty issues were assigned to study groups. No one wants to reinvent the wheel. In cases where reform efforts are underway (like the Big Look Task Force for land use planning) we will start by reviewing those work products.

The rain on the first day was a blessing in disguise. It kept everyone together. As a result, everyone got to hear

directly from people about issues and proposed solutions. The larger group format worked because people were respectful



(translation: speeches were kept to a minimum). Commissioner Barbara Briggs was effective at keeping folks on track.

Discussions continued that evening during the sternwheeler cruise. The weather cleared and we enjoyed a glorious sunset on the Columbia River.

Day Two: How Are We Doing?

We began the second day by asking people to comment on the meeting. We inquired, “Is the format working; Do we need to do things differently; What issues haven’t been raised that need to be; Is this worth your time; How can we set up meaningful follow-up efforts; What are the next steps (short term and long term)?” We were open to all suggestions. After all, the meeting in Cascade Locks was *not* a choreographed event designed to validate pre-conceived ideas.

Then we asked people to discuss *Why Urban Oregon should care about Rural Oregon?* That’s important. Without support from urban legislators (state and federal) and business leaders along the 1-5 Corridor, it will be difficult to make progress.



Commissioner Colleen MacLeod, Union County

One of my favorite moments of the meeting was when Commissioner MacLeod shared a story about some folks from Eugene who, at a meeting, characterized the City of Eugene as “rural”. She chuckled and said, “They think they’re rural? You know, some of us actually live outside the pizza delivery zone!”

In the end, people signed up to serve on workgroups that will continue to work on these issues. A report summarizing the results of the meeting in Cascades Locks will be prepared.

Other follow-up meetings of the Oregon Rural Congress are in the works. As promised, we finished the meeting on time (around mid-day). Before we adjourned, state legislators were asked to provide feedback (six legislators attended the meeting). They signaled strong support for the Oregon Rural Congress and promised to help us work these issues during the 2009 Session.

The next day (August 23, 2008) *The Oregonian* ran an editorial about the Oregon Rural Congress. It was entitled, “The Struggles of Rural Oregon”. One passage in particular caught my eye. *The Oregonian* wrote, “In Cascade Locks this week, almost 200 people gathered for the first meeting of the Oregon Rural Congress, an effort to pioneer a common agenda. The smartest ones in the room were those looking forward rather than back.”

They’re right. Nostalgia can’t be our guide. We must adapt. I’m proud of the people who attended the Oregon Rural Congress. Very few of them spent time looking in the rear view

mirror. For example, when telecommunications issues were discussed, people were just as passionate as when we talked about natural resources. That's a *really* good sign.

Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB): The Discussion Continues

A few days later (August 25, 2008) I found myself in OPB's Corvallis studio as a guest on their live hour-long "Think Out Loud" call in program. The topic was the Oregon Rural Congress. The other guests included: Colleen MacLeod (by phone from Union County), Commissioner Marilyn Kittelman (by phone from Douglas County), Representative Dave Hunt, Majority Leader of the Oregon House of Representatives (participating from the OPB studio in Portland).

Prior to the broadcast someone wrote on the program's blog that the Oregon Rural Congress was just a "smoke screen" for the Republican agenda. The hosts of *Think Out Loud* asked me to comment about that. I struggled to keep my emotions in check because I found that remark so irritating. I responded by saying everyone's entitled to their opinion. "But", I said sternly, "The comment is dead wrong. The Oregon Rural Congress was established as a reaction *against* political partisanship." I continued, "Partisanship is damaging our capacity, as a state and as a nation, to solve problems." Indeed, that's why we are having this dialogue. It's not controlled by political parties or lobbyists. No subject is out of bounds.

Commissioner Colleen Macleod agreed party politics have nothing to do with the Oregon Rural Congress. The hosts from *Think Out Loud* put the same question to Representative Dave Hunt. I was gratified to hear Representative Hunt say, "I think Onno & Colleen got it right." He also said issues facing Rural Oregon should transcend partisan politics and that he looked forward to receiving our report so the Legislature can take up some of these issues during the 2009 Oregon Session.

What will be the outcome of all this? We will see. It depends entirely on the follow through. We will be judged by the quality of our recommendations. I sense, though, this could be the beginning of something really important.



Information about OCZMA

The Oregon Coastal Zone Management Association (OCZMA), formed in 1976, is a voluntary association of coastal counties, cities, ports, soil & water conservation districts, and the Coquille Indian Tribe on the Oregon Coast established to provide a forum for the resolution of issues of particular concern to the local governments of the coast and the people they represent.

Association Officers

Tim Josi • Chair (Tillamook County)

Jack Brown • Vice Chair (City of Depoe Bay)

T.V. Skinner • Secretary-Treasurer (Curry SWCD)

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Association Staff

Onno Husing • Executive Director

Georgia York • Executive Assistant

Telephone: (541) 265-8918

Fax: (541) 265-5241

E-mail: onno_husing@class.orednet.org

georgia_york@class.oregonvos.net

Web Site: www.oczma.org



P.O. Box 1033; 313 SW 2nd, Suite C
Newport, Oregon 97365

Association Membership

Clatsop County

Coos County

Curry County

Douglas County

Lane County

Lincoln County

Tillamook County

City of Brookings

City of Cannon Beach

City of Coos Bay

City of Depoe Bay

City of Florence

City of Garibaldi

City of Lakeside

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City of Manzanita

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