

Upper Willamette River Dredging? No Way!

Willamette Riverkeeper Issue Update – October 2006

Recently a small group of people in the mid Willamette Valley have been advocating for dredging the Willamette River, for a variety of reasons. While their main reason is to allow a seasonal river boat to travel further upriver, they cite multiple other issues and relate them back to their perceived need for dredging. While dredging may be utilized in deeper portions of the Willamette in the lower river, such as when ship slips become too shallow, dredging the upper Willamette River is really not something that should be done, especially at present when we simply know better.

In the 1950's one might have given dredging the go ahead, without much scrutiny, but today we have learned that dredging a naturally shallow, and dynamic river such as the Upper Willamette destroys essential habitat for salmon and other wildlife.

Certain issues have been brought up to help advocate for dredging, but each of these issues can be dealt with through other means.

1) Some say that we need to dredge the Upper Willamette to improve navigability for public safety.

The reality is that there are excellent **maps and guides** available today that provide an abundance of information about how to travel the Willamette safely. For those that water ski, there are places in the Willamette, such as the 40 mile long Newberg Pool or Detroit Reservoir near Salem, that afford this opportunity.

The Oregon State Marine Board works specifically on the issue of public safety on Oregon Waterways. The OSMB Safe Boating website <http://www.boatoregon.com/Safety/> states:

“Boaters should make sure their skill and **equipment is adequate** for the waters they enter.” For the middle and upper Willamette appropriate low draft boats are most appropriate.

It is true that accidents happen on the Willamette River every year. Running aground on gravel bars, although embarrassing and harmful to your boat, is not often an emergency situation or cause of fatal accidents. In fact “While accidents happen for a variety of reasons, 80

percent or more of fatalities could be prevented if the victims wore life jackets.”

The solution to improving safety on the Willamette River is **education**. Perhaps the required Boater Education Exam and study guide could have a better section on “river boating” safety. Or the [*Boating Guide to the Lower Columbia & Willamette Rivers*](#), which clearly outlines safety concerns (i.e. currents, shallows, floating debris) when navigating the lower Willamette, could be expanded to include the middle and upper river.

2) Some say we need to dredge the River for Tourism.

There are multiple ways to spur tourism that highlight the river’s natural condition;

- use of shallow draft boats, jet boats, canoes and kayaks
- the Willamette River Water Trail
- riverside biking and hiking trails
- wildlife viewing opportunities in the Willamette Greenway
- re-connecting cities and towns to the river

One might consider that destroying the natural function of the river to enable large boats to more easily travel the river is a poor choice.

It is also important to note that historically, the *low-draft* stern wheelers and side wheelers that once traveled the river could not do so at all times of the year. Those captains had to choose their days and months, and pick their way carefully up and down the river. For some interesting reading on this issue one can check out *Willamette Landings*, by Howard Corning that described the historic and dynamic river boat era on the Willamette.

3) Some suggest that we can “Improve River Water Quality” through the reduction of erosion and flooding by dredging.

There is little to suggest that the river will be “improved” by dredging. The reality is that such dredging simply destroys the river bottom, and gravel bars where fish congregate.

The *Willamette River Basin Planning Atlas* developed by the Pacific Northwest Ecosystem Research Consortium provides scientific data and analyses as a resource to make better decisions about land and water use in the Willamette Basin. Channel meandering, erosion,

deposition and flooding are all *natural processes*. The Atlas's Conclusion and Recommendations state:

"Encourage natural process and dynamics: Restoring natural process and dynamics is generally more ecologically and economically effective, over the long term, than attempting to create desirable habitat features by construction, direct manipulation, or other engineering solutions."

There are many methods being implemented on the river to decrease erosion and sedimentation. Current methods include:

- increasing connections to floodplains
- increasing channel diversity
- laying back and vegetating steep banks
- studying and implementing alternative bank treatments, such as going beyond traditional rip rap
- implementing a more natural flow regime – both high and low flows

4) Some also suggest that dredging the natural river bottom will reduce water temperature, which today is needed along the Willamette.

Destroying the natural river bottom will not reduce temperature. Instead, the prescription for this is **planting trees** along the river bank, both on the mainstem Willamette River and its tributaries. In tandem with this, increasing the extent of **healthy floodplains and side channels** will also meet this need.

The recently issued TMDL (Total Maximum Daily Load), which is the State of Oregon's answer under the Clean Water Act to reduce river temperature, prescribes planting riverside trees which creates shade for the river. Online at the Department of Environmental Quality's website www.deq.state.or.us/WQ/willamette/WRBHome.htm.

Conclusion

It is Willamette Riverkeeper's view that **we need to have an open and honest discussion of major river issues such as dredging**. The river has been modified, dammed, and simplified over the past 100 plus years to a very significant degree. Dredging a great extent of the river simply isn't justified to meet the perceived needs of a few people.

Just when people are beginning to realize that natural river function is what is needed along the river, this unfortunate idea comes along that seems to **risk taking Willamette River restoration and protection backwards**. There are simply too many sensible alternatives to dredging the Upper Willamette River in 2006.

Stay tuned in the weeks and months ahead for more on this issue and an opportunity to make your voice heard.

Feel free to contact Willamette Riverkeeper with your questions and comments about this issue at 503-223-6418 or info@willamette-riverkeeper.org.