

NEWS UPDATE: President signs bill giving the Molalla Wild and Scenic federal protection!



Musings on the Molalla

Winter, 2019



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Save the Date!

By popular demand the MRA is returning to Everett Hall at Hopkins Demonstration Forest for our annual meeting. See you on Saturday, March 30, from 9 a.m. to Noon.

Molalla River Alliance

Newsletter 13

Wild and Scenic River Status Within Reach

Over the course of the Congressional session just ended, our Oregon delegates in the House and Senate made remarkable headway in bringing Wild and Scenic River status for the Molalla River to the brink of final approval.

In the hours before Congress adjourned, Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley worked successfully to secure an agreement to add 21 miles of the upper Molalla River to the nation's Wild and Scenic River system after the new Congress gets under way.

In view of protracted deal-making among members of Congress from several states—all with their own agendas and limited time to finalize a public lands bill—it was the best Christmas present the MRA could have hoped for.

It has been 10 years since the MRA began advocating for federal Wild and Scenic protection for the upper Molalla River—and 10 years since our Oregon delegation in Congress took up the cause. Thanks to the tireless work of Sen. Wyden, Sen. Jeff Merkley, and Rep. Kurt Schrader, we are now closer than ever to final Congressional approval.

The scenic Molalla River rises in the Table Rock Wilderness and flows 50 miles through spectacular basalt

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A Wild and Scenic Molalla River?

By John Atkins
MRA President



Since the founding of our Molalla River Alliance, there has been an unbroken effort by our members and affiliates to keep our beloved Molalla River running clean and cold, protect its habitat and

wildlife, and encourage family-friendly recreation.

Early on, it was understood that one of the best ways to accomplish those goals was to obtain federal Wild and Scenic River status for the upper Molalla River. This would protect this remarkable natural treasure from man-made interference into the future.

After more than 10 years of trying, through the persistent work of our advocates in Congress—Rep. Kurt Schrader and Sens. Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden—the year 2018 marked the most productive result to date.

In the closing days and hours of the 115th Congress, it looked like the stars were coming into alignment around a bipartisan agreement on what was being hailed as an “omnibus public lands” package—incorporating numerous conservation bills from a variety of states, including Oregon.

In our case, the Oregon Wildlands Act sponsored by Sens. Wyden and Merkley was a prominent element. (See related story for details.)

As the deadline for adjournment of the Congressional session inched closer, the horse trading intensified, with conservation advocates rooting from the sidelines. Your MRA president was actually on the scene, having been invited by the PEW Charitable

Trusts to come to Washington, D.C.—travel, lodging and meals all covered!—to visit congressional offices to lobby for the lands package. As things finally played out, time expired before the bill could be voted on—but not before an agreement was secured to reintroduce the bill early in the new Congress. This, my fellow river-huggers, is as close as we’ve ever come to our goal. Let’s keep our fingers crossed that 2019 will be the year we finally cross the finish line!

Elsewhere in this edition of *Musings on the Molalla* you’ll read about another long-standing conservation effort to avert extinction of steelhead in the upper Willamette River system—which includes the Molalla—due to predation by ravenous sea lions at the foot of Willamette Falls. It is fair to say that there is not unanimous agreement among conservation groups that trapping and euthanizing some of these predators is appropriate, and that much more must be done to improve water flows, water quality and fish passage to have any hope of saving our iconic Willamette River winter steelhead runs.

It seems to me that both sides are right. Euthanizing sea lions that fisheries biologists tell us are threatening extinction of Willamette steelhead will not, of itself, save the species. It is only a stopgap measure intended to increase fish passage up the Willamette Falls fish ladder (where the sea lions congregate) to the upper river and its tributaries to spawn. It buys us a little more time to make headway on salmon and steelhead recovery strategies.

To that end—as told a related article—the Molalla River Alliance is joining hands with numerous sports and conservation groups in forming a coalition to advocate for practical steps to protect and improve salmon and steelhead runs on the Willamette.

—John

--Molalla River

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formations and lower farmlands before entering the Willamette River at Canby.

It is the sole source of drinking water for the cities of Canby and Molalla, a mecca for outdoor recreation and a haven for wild steelhead.

With so little time left on the clock before Congress adjourned, Oregon's senators secured an agreement to reintroduce the public lands legislation that includes the Molalla after the new Congress convenes in January.

The Oregon Wildlands Act championed by Sens. Wyden and Merkley would:

- Designate 15 miles of the upper Molalla River from Glen Avon Bridge upstream to the Bee Ranch, plus six more miles of the Table Rock Fork as a Wild and Scenic River—protecting it from future development, logging or mining on a permanent basis.
- Create a 30,000 acre Devil's Staircase Wilderness in the Oregon Coast Range.
- Provide permanent protection for the Chetco River, habitat for endangered salmon, in southern Oregon.
- Add 250 miles of salmon and steelhead spawning tributaries of the Rogue River, along with other rivers, to the National Wild and Scenic River System.
- Create a Wild Steelhead Special Management area on the North Umpqua River in honor of Oregon conservationist Frank and Jeanne Moore.
- Improve efforts by the BLM to protect Crooked River Ranch from catastrophic wildfire by releasing a portion of adjacent acreage designated as a wilderness study area for active management by the BLM.

The Oregon legislation is part of a larger public lands package of bills involving several states with both Republican and Democratic representation.



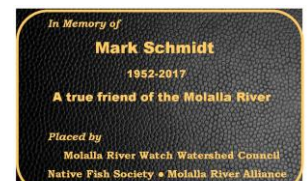
Friends of Mark Schmidt gather at memorial bench in Feyrer Park on the Molalla River.

A Bench by the River

In Feyrer Park, a popular picnic and recreation spot on the Molalla River just outside the City of Molalla, there's a memorial bench to sit down on and watch the river flow by.

The bench, embellished with a plaque and carvings of steelhead, was put there jointly by the Native Fish Society, the Molalla River Watch Watershed

Council, and the Molalla River Alliance in memory of Mark Schmidt, a founding member of the MRA, a board member of Molalla River Watch, and Molalla River steward for the Native Fish Society.



A lifelong resident of the Molalla River basin, Mark was a tireless advocate for salmon and steelhead recovery efforts. He died unexpectedly of circulatory failure in 2017. His memorial, fashioned from reclaimed redwood by wood sculptor Jim Barton of Aurora, stands by the river bank, across from a popular fishing and swimming hole.

It's a good place to reflect on one of nature's scenic wonders and to remember a man who was one of its best friends.

State steps in to avert extinction of steelhead by sea lions at Willamette Falls

Over the last few years, Oregon fisheries agents have tried repeatedly to discourage, trap, haze, and relocate sea lions feeding on depleted runs of wild winter steelhead at the at the foot of Willamette Falls, all without success.

Now, fresh out of options, they have begun trapping and euthanizing specific sea lion predators to give more migrating steelhead a better chance to climb the fish ladder to spawn in the tributaries of the upper Willamette River system, including the Molalla.

The new measures were approved by a federal agency and by Congress at the urging of state and tribal fisheries managers and the governors of Oregon, Washington and Idaho.

Up to now, all sea lions have been protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act, passed in 1972 when the sea lion population had dwindled to under 30,000 animals. It worked, and the population rebounded. Today there are an estimated 300,000 sea lions, a great many of them in the Columbia River system.

In recent years, increasing numbers of them have been swimming up the Columbia River and its tributaries to feed upon salmon and steelhead. This learned behavior has taken a toll on endangered migratory fish. Where once there were steelhead in the thousands climbing the ladder at Willamette Falls, last year the count was just over 500. A ravenous group of 40 to 50 sea lions now regularly congregate just below the fish ladder to chow down.

Under a newly issued federal permit, up to 93 sea lions annually may be trapped at the falls and euthanized in

accordance with strict guidelines.

No one expects that this kind of lethal intervention will bring back the great runs of Willamette River steelhead.

Essentially it is a strategy to avert extinction while longer-term remedies are applied. These include removing blocked fish passage at dams on the upper Willamette tributaries, improving water flows, and controlling water temperature and pollutants from runoff: all contribute to ever-declining migratory fish numbers. On top of that, evidence from biological studies points to lower survival rates of salmon and steelhead raised and released from hatcheries.

Concerted Action Needed

In recognition of those threats, the Molalla River Alliance is joining hands with numerous conservation and sports fishing organizations to forge a unified effort to spur corrective action by state and federal agencies responsible for managing our rivers and streams, and the fish and wildlife that depend upon them for survival.

The fledgling organization is called the Willamette River Salmon and Steelhead Recovery Coalition.

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Mark Sherwood, executive director of the Native Fish Society, addresses the organizational meeting of a new coalition to save Willamette River steelhead and salmon. The event drew more than 100 individuals.



Field Manager John Huston receives the MRA's service award on behalf of the Bureau of Land Management.

BLM Recognized as Service Award Winner

The Ryan Morgan Service Award is given annually by the MRA to honor a person whose contributions have advanced the goals and ideals of our organization.

For the first time, our award recipient is not a person, but an organization—one the MRA has worked closely with for more than 10 years: the federal Bureau of Land Management.

The BLM's Northwest Oregon District has proved to be a respectful and effective manager of the upper Molalla River.

Early on the MRA partnered with the BLM and the City of Molalla, aided by a grant from the federal Justice Department, to increase law enforcement in the Molalla River Recreation Corridor.

Regular police patrols in the corridor soon drastically reduced a variety of human problems. Thanks to the BLM, we now have an adopted recreation master plan for the upper Molalla and the Table Rock Wilderness; we have new congregate campgrounds along the river; we have ongoing restoration of damaged riparian habitat.

Best of all, the BLM has watched over

the Molalla as if it were already a Wild and Scenic River. One day soon, we hope to make that status official by an act of Congress.

John Huston, field manager of the BLM's Cascade Resource Area, accepted the award at the MRA's 10th Anniversary Dinner, together with our thanks for all the BLM is doing to keep the Molalla flowing clean and cold.

The award is given in honor of Ryan Morgan, a founding member of the MRA, who died in a kayaking accident on the Little White Salmon River in 2009. He was young, talented, energetic and full of promise. He loved the Molalla River. He embodied the goals and ideals of our alliance.

Wild and Scenic Rivers Day

October marked the 50th Anniversary of landmark Congressional legislation creating Wild and Scenic River System in the U.S.—preserving Nature's treasures for everyone and their descendants to enjoy.

The MRA joined other conservation and environmental organizations in Portland as part of a nationally organized observance of Wild and Scenic Rivers Day.

There are 209 Wild and Scenic Rivers in the U.S. Of that number, 56 of them are in Oregon. We continue to work for No. 57 to be the Molalla.



Board member Terre Rogers staffs the MRA's booth on Wild and Scenic Rivers Day.

No uncertainty here

As of this writing, it was unclear whether any of our income tax returns would be processed in a timely manner by the IRS, due to the government shutdown. But fret not about your tax-deductible contribution to the all-volunteer Molalla River Alliance. It will be processed promptly and put to good use. Just put your generous check in the mail to Molalla River Alliance, PO Box 727, Molalla, OR 97038.

—Coalition

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So far, its members include American Rivers, WaterWatch, Wild Salmon Center, Willamette Riverkeepers, Steamboaters, Conservation Angler, Northwest Sport-fishing Industry Association, McKenzie River Guides Association, Kayak Anglers, Salmonwatch, WildEarth Guardians, Advocates for the West, Trout Unlimited, Northwest Steelheaders, Native Fish Society, Molalla River Alliance and confederated tribal organizations representing the Grand Ronde, Siletz and Warm Springs.

Representatives from these groups understand that restoring healthy and sustainable migratory fish runs in the Willamette System is a long-term proposition, and one that will require persistence over the coming years. But lacking a coherent, organized effort from grassroots advocates such as ourselves, there will likely be little progress.

The Molalla River's stake in all of this, as a Willamette River tributary a few miles above the falls, is beyond debate. To put a number on it, it is estimated that 20 to 25 percent of the steelhead coming over the

falls turn left at Canby and swim up the Molalla to spawn. There are no dams to stop them.

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Useful information about the recreation opportunities and events going on in the corridor. Check it out! Post info!

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Molalla River Alliance

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