



ANDY PARKER

COMMENTARY

A clear-cut need to save the Molalla

Bull, Avalanche, Dungeon, Scorpion and Copper creeks are among the nine fingers of water that rush past towering cedars, hemlock and old-growth Doug firs, twisting and dancing through the rugged basalt canyons of the Table Rock Wilderness before giving birth to the Molalla River.

Up here, you're only about 20 miles from Molalla, 50 from Portland. But hemmed in by the roar of water and the towering columns of rock holding fossils dating back 5 million years, it feels much farther.

Until the blue log truck almost runs you off the road.

Until the first rays of sun reaching through the fir-topped ridge push deep into the crystal-clear waters and reveal that every silvery flash isn't a fish.

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And, no doubt, littering the nation's sky-blue rivers ever since.

The truth is, virtually every time I find my way into the upper reaches of the river, I'm surprised how wild the place remains. In the early morning stillness I've seen elk, deer and eagles on ridges high above.

But a river's health is always fleeting. On this day, a couple of dirt bikers zip along the riverbank. In an area where campers are asked to use established bathrooms or bury their waste 8 to 10 inches deep, fresh piles of horse manure line the edge of the road above the river.

Still, compared with stretches of the Clackamas River and popular spots in the Mount Hood National Forest, much of the 12-mile-long Molalla Recreation Corridor is pristine, a gem on the edge of the greater Portland sprawl.

That's not to say riparian areas aren't trampled by campers and fishermen. Or that the ongoing logging of the watershed by Weyerhaeuser and others hasn't affected the river's health.

But thanks to a 1992 BLM land exchange that created the narrow recreation corridor, and the ongoing cleanup work by groups such as Molalla RiverWatch, a hike in the early morning stillness beneath the moss-gloved branches that line the upper reaches of the river remains spectacular beyond description.

Now a growing number of people are acknowledging the area is far too special to be left to the sometimes politicized logging policies of the BLM.

This year, a new group, the Molalla River Alliance, joined an aggressive push for 22 miles of the river and its tributaries to be designated as a federally protected wild and scenic recreation area.

The congressionally awarded status would further protect the river's native cutthroat trout and winter steelhead populations by banning any new dams and limiting logging within a quarter-mile of the river, offering another layer of protection against the inevitable onslaught of Portland's swelling population.

Last month, Clackamas County commissioners joined the city of Molalla, the Sierra Club and others encouraging Congress to approve the wild and scenic recreation designation.

There's currently a push to add the stretch of river to a bill in Congress that, along with adding 125,000 wilderness acres around Mount Hood, would designate 142 miles of new wild and scenic stretches for Rogue River tributaries.

Bill Taylor, a member of the Molalla River Alliance, says supporters realize that might be a long shot, that it's likely they'll have to wait another year and push harder for the protection the Molalla deserves.

"We won't be too down if it doesn't happen this year," said Taylor. "We'll just keep working."

But you only have to drive out Dickey Prairie Road south of Molalla and gaze up at the clear-cut hills rising above the existing Molalla Recreation Corridor to understand it can't happen too soon.