

# Be a good steward of our waterways

Two news items came across my desk recently that highlight our community members' divergent thinking about how we should treat our local streams.

On May 13, hundreds of individuals gathered to clean up the shores and waters of the Rogue River downstream of Grants Pass as part of the 25th Annual Rogue River Cleanup. Yes, for 25 years families, individuals, and organizations have banded together to show their love for a local treasure that is an international draw — the Rogue River.

Unfortunately, this event — viewed by many as a not-to-be-missed fun-filled outing — is necessary. And not because of the need to have fun along the river, but rather because of actions like the one headlined in the prior day's news: "Grants Pass man fined for dumping tires along Rogue." Approximately 60 tires, if you're counting.

Sadly, the dumping of tires and other garbage in our streams and rivers is not an isolated incident. A short walk along most creeks reveals cardboard boxes, bags of garbage, beer bottles, automotive parts, old TVs, and grass clippings. I found a Yugo back in 1996 on a long hike to the bottom of the Middle Fork Rogue canyon near Prospect! Add the volume of waste — cigarette butts, fast food wrappers, animal waste, oils and other toxic chemicals — washed down into the Rogue from Medford's and Grants Pass' storm drains and one can see that the Rogue, indeed, needs a cleaning.

So, why do people treat our waterways as public dumps? Social science research has come up with a number of reasons, but one of the biggest is that people just don't understand the damage — economic as well as ecological — they're doing by pouring oil down storm drains, dumping grass clippings in the river, or yes, even dumping 15 cars worth of tires along the river. Used oil from one oil change can contaminate up to one million gallons of river water, the very water many of us drink every day. It is toxic to most



aquatic animals and coats the gills of fish and insects, making it difficult for them to breathe.

Those grass clippings some folks throw along the river's edge? They decay and use up dissolved oxygen that is precious for native fish (like salmon, steelhead, and cutthroat trout) that require high levels of oxygen to survive.

What about those tires? In addition to being an eyesore and an invitation to further dumping, they serve as breeding grounds for disease-bearing mosquitoes and can, should they catch fire, produce large quantities of toxic oil contaminating the soil and waterways and releasing hazardous pollutants into the air.

But it's not just your health and that of our salmon to consider, think of the economic effect this behavior can produce.

Tens of thousands of anglers, rafters, hikers, photographers, and other sightseers visit the Rogue River each year because of its salmon and steelhead; clean, inviting waters; and beautiful vistas. Hundreds of people relocate to the Rogue Valley each year, many specifically because of the amenities the river and its tributaries offer. Recent research estimates that west coast residents alone enjoy more than \$1.5 billion in economic benefits from the Rogue River's salmon and steelhead runs annually — \$16 million from sport fishing alone. Total economic output due to river-based recreation on the Wild & Scenic sec-

tions of the Rogue River has been estimated as at least \$30 million, including \$15.4 million in individual personal income, with more than 440 full- and part-time jobs produced.

Does anyone think these numbers can be sustained if our rivers and streams become nothing more than community garbage dumps?

Our rivers and streams play a valued role in our lives in the Rogue Valley — culturally, economically, and ecologically. However, that's only possible if we keep them clean and healthy. Watershed councils, angling groups, and soil and water conservation districts focus much of their effort and resources on this work. But we need your help.

What can you do? Don't dump anything in our rivers or creeks (not even along their shores). Not tires, yard clippings, soil, or any kind of chemicals or other waste. Recycle used motor oil and antifreeze. Reduce your use of lawn and garden fertilizers and pesticides. Pick up after your pets. If you live on a stream, replace the lawn at the water's edge with native trees and shrubs. They will stabilize the banks, act as buffers against runoff, provide shade to keep the water cool, and provide habitat for wildlife.

It's not hard to be a good steward of our waterways. Sometimes you just need a little help in knowing what to do or not to do. For more information, contact your local watershed council or soil and water conservation district.

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