

Opinion: Grand Ronde not the only tribe with Willamette Falls interests

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The Willamette River is bounded by abandoned paper mills and a hydroelectric plant between Oregon City and West Linn. Portland General Electric and three other tribes are protesting the decision to allow the Grand Ronde to build the fishing scaffold. Molly Harbarger/Staff

By [Guest Columnist | The Oregonian](#)

By Gary Burke, Raymond Tsumpti and Delores Pigsley

Burke chairs the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Tsumpti chairs the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs. Pigsley chairs the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians.

As the chairs of four tribes in Oregon with interests in Willamette Falls, we feel compelled to set the record straight about the controversy over the construction of a modern, metal fishing scaffold at the falls (“[Grand Ronde win right to keep Willamette Falls fishing scaffold,](#)” Dec. 10). The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde has falsely blamed Portland General

Electric for interfering with their tribe's ceremonial fishing interests. In reality, Grand Ronde's own actions have turned an intertribal use agreement into a major publicity stunt. Despite the Grand Ronde's statements, they are not the only Indian tribe with historic, cultural or legal interests in Willamette Falls – far from it. For thousands of years, many different Indian bands and tribes have used the falls. Some were local, others traveled from far away to harvest fish there. Western conquest, disease, treaty-signing and forced removal scattered the original Indian people with connections to Willamette Falls.

The local Kalapuya Indians were almost entirely removed to both the 1.1-million-acre Siletz Reservation along the Oregon coast and the smaller Grand Ronde reservation next to it. Those who came from the east – upstream on the Columbia and Clackamas Rivers – were removed to several reservations in central and eastern Oregon and Washington. Many of the descendants of those people are enrolled members of federally recognized tribes to the east, west and north – with rights and interests at Willamette Falls and elsewhere in the area. Although our ancestors came from many places, we are now identified by the reservations they were moved to: Siletz, Warm Springs, Umatilla, Yakama and Grand Ronde.

These tribes regularly work together on issues of mutual interest on the Willamette River. Since 2001, for example, federal and state agencies have worked with Siletz, Grand Ronde, Warm Springs, Umatilla, Yakama and Nez Perce tribal governments on the cleanup of the Portland Harbor Superfund site because of the interests that all these tribes have there. More recently, Congress recognized the interests of the many tribes, not just the Grand Ronde, in protecting salmon and restoring ecological balance to the Willamette River.

Unfortunately, the Grand Ronde decided to deviate from an intertribal agreement in which our tribes had committed to discuss together tribal cultural issues associated with Willamette Falls. The Grand Ronde's unilateral action disrupted decades of tribal cooperation on issues related to the Willamette. Moreover, the Grand Ronde's decision invited conflict with the other tribes as well as PGE, which owns property around Willamette Falls.

As they rushed to build a metal fishing scaffold at the falls, the Ronde's public relations campaign went into full effect. They denied that other tribes had any historic connection to the Falls and had a historian support their bizarre claims. They falsely cast PGE as a corporate villain denying Indians access to their homeland. As tribal leaders, we are deeply concerned by the Ronde's rhetoric.

In reality, PGE is a model for corporate relations with Indian tribes. Even as ecologically-focused tribal governments, all of us enjoy a positive and constructive working relationship with PGE. Together, we have restored fish habitat and water quality in Oregon rivers. PGE has worked with tribes to facilitate lamprey harvest at the falls and to facilitate intertribal dialogue about cultural resource protection. PGE has acted respectfully to tribes by adhering to a collaborative process at the falls – a process the Grand Ronde deliberately bypassed.

We also object to the Grand Ronde's attempt to claim the falls for themselves alone. Sadly, the manufactured scaffold conflict is yet another saga in the Grand Ronde's effort to be seen as the only relevant Indian tribe in the Portland area, as well as other places in Oregon. That does not reflect the history of our tribal ancestors, our cultural practices or any treaty or law.

We urge the leadership of the Grand Ronde Tribe to work collaboratively with all the tribes who have interests, claims and rights on the Willamette River and at the falls. Our past, as well as our future, is united by Willamette Falls.

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