

A cultural milestone: Tribal members ceremonial fish from Willamette Falls platform

By Danielle Frost

WEST LINN -- Grand Ronde Tribal Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy said she could feel the presence of ancestors on Friday, Oct. 26, as she spoke about the Tribe's recently completed fishing platform at Willamette Falls, a historic and cultural milestone.

"I stand here with pride in my heart and know the battles my ancestors went through so we could have this celebration today," she said. "All of that flows through our veins so we could be strong today. ... We welcome all Tribes here to fish. This platform is the will of Tribal Council. It doesn't just happen."

Kennedy spoke to approximately 60 Tribal members, government officials and Tribal employees gathered at the McLean House. She praised the efforts of employees who risked their safety to ferry supplies across the Willamette River in rafts to complete the platform and worked nonstop to do so.


"It took a huge effort to get to this place," she said. "I'm thankful to our employees who helped us stay strong."

The Tribe applied for and received approval for a waterway structure registration application from the Department of State Lands in August. The fishing platform at Willamette Falls was completed on Tuesday, Oct. 23.

On Sept. 21, Portland General Electric revoked permission allowing Grand Ronde use of its land to access and build a platform, which meant Tribal Natural Resources Department employees had to undertake the tedious and more dangerous task of hauling supplies across the river from the Oregon City side of the falls to the West Linn side.

Previously, the Tribe was allowed to access the site from PGE property on the West Linn side to conduct ceremonial fishing and perform blessings, a much safer option than crossing the river. However, PGE maintains that the area where the Tribe built the removable platform is its land, not the state's. The company is currently appealing the process to the state Land Use Board of Appeals.

The celebration occurred on the same day that The Oregonian ran a front-page story entitled "Fight springs up over falls." The Portland daily newspaper reported that three Northwest Tribes – Warm Springs, Umatilla and Yakama – contest Grand Ronde's dominion over the falls and want the Department of State Lands to repeal the fishing platform permit.



However, Kennedy addressed that issue at the Wednesday, Oct. 24, Tribal Council meeting, where she said the Clowewalla band of Tumwaters were year-round residents at the falls and were “the gatekeepers of the falls.”

“They were responsible for the management of the fishery and visiting Tribal members would share with them a percentage of their catch as a type of tax on the fishery,” she said. “It is a part of our ancestral homelands and is an important location for fishing and gathering here. To this day, Grand Ronde Tribal members continue to fish for lamprey and salmon at Willamette Falls. ... Claims by other Tribes to supremacy in the area are simply inaccurate.”

Despite the land use disagreement between the state and PGE and flak from other Northwest Tribes, Grand Ronde Tribal employees started construction of the fishing platform on Oct. 3 and worked throughout the month to complete it. On Oct. 24, ceremonial fishers began dipnetting from the platform.

The structure was designed in consultation with the Tribe’s Cultural Resources Department staff and Tribal fishers.


Employees who worked at the falls included Fish & Wildlife Program Manager Kelly Dirksen, Biologist Brandon Weems, Aquatic Biologist Torey Wakeland, Wildlife Technician Matthew Zimbrick, Maintenance Technicians Nick Kimsey and Daniel Mooney, Cultural Advisor Bobby Mercier, General Manager David Fullerton, Utility Maintenance Supervisor Joe Loomis, Engineering and Public Works Manager Jesse White, Maintenance Supervisor Andrew Freeman and Tribal Career Development Caseworker David DeHart.

Planning for the platform construction has been ongoing for several years, White said. Once the Tribe obtained authorization from the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife to harvest 15 ceremonial fish at the falls in 2016, employees worked on several fronts to plan for platform construction.

“There were many items to be considered for in the planning including access, location, property ownership, design/engineering and safety, among others,” White said. “Earlier this summer when it appeared the waterway structure registration would be issued, staff finalized the location for three permanent anchor systems from which the platform could be erected.”

White said that the Tribe has more than two decades of experience navigating the falls for various reasons including lamprey harvest and study, and salmon fishing.

“This experience was helpful in navigating the challenges presented by waterway access,” White said. “We were fortunate to have good weather conditions and the construction progressed smoothly and was completed sooner than expected.”



The platform was removed by Wednesday, Oct. 31, which was the final day of the extended fishing season.

“In the coming years, it is our expectation to install the platform as soon as practicable prior to the start of the fishing season in May, and remove the platform by the end of the season in late July,” White said.

The platform will allow the Tribe to take fish at the culturally appropriate time of year instead of later in the season when water levels are lower and rocks are exposed.

Wakeland said the construction was a “long and arduous” process.

“Getting the generator over there was probably the toughest part,” he said. “We had to use pulleys to bring it over. This was a gigantic team effort and to be able to stand on the platform was awe-inspiring.”

Platform celebration

Despite the legal and other hurdles of the past few months to make the platform a reality, Friday’s event at the McLean House was all about celebration and gratitude.

It began with singing and drumming, followed with an invocation led by Tribal Council Secretary Jon A. George.


All Tribal Council members except Michael Langley, who was in Denver, attended the reception and enjoyed a lunch of traditionally cooked salmon, chicken, shrimp, salad, sandwiches and several trays of desserts.

Those who wanted to see the platform were escorted to a lookout on the Oregon City side of the falls while Tribal Elder Greg Archuleta and Tribal members Chris Rempel and Troy Douglass prepared salmon over an open fire.

George described the feeling of seeing the platform completed as one of elation.

“I felt so giddy looking down and seeing the Tribal fishers dipnetting at the falls,” he said. “There was so much feeling of pride and accomplishment. How proud I am of our men and women. ... What a beautiful day this is. To be able to stand there, look across the river and see that beautiful site, everything that led up to this and everything that was against us, I think of how proud our ancestors would be now.”

Tribal Council member Steve Bobb Sr. said the platform will have a “huge impact” on the culture of the Tribe.



“To be able to have this today for future generations, to fish in the spirit of our ancestors, is pretty cool,” he said. “The resistance we received is unfortunate, but we got through. The people who did the work deserve a big thanks as well.”

Tribal Council Vice Chair Chris Mercier said he could feel the history at the fishing site.

“It was really cool to see what has been a historic spot for us surrounded by modern features, and seeing us fishing in the background of all of this,” he said.

Employees who assisted with the celebration included Public Affairs Administrative Assistant Chelsea Clark, Tribal Council Chief of Staff Stacia Hernandez, Tribal Services Representative Lisa Archuleta and Temporary Administrative Assistant Shannon Ham-Teixeira. Recently retired Elders Activity Assistant Daniel Ham drove a bus to and from Grand Ronde for Tribal members who wanted to attend the event.