



# Cultural Impacts of Contamination at the Portland Harbor Superfund Site



The Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon (Grand Ronde) have maintained strong ties to the lower Willamette River since time immemorial. Salmon, lamprey, and diverse plant communities are among many natural resources from the river that have sustained our people and traditions.

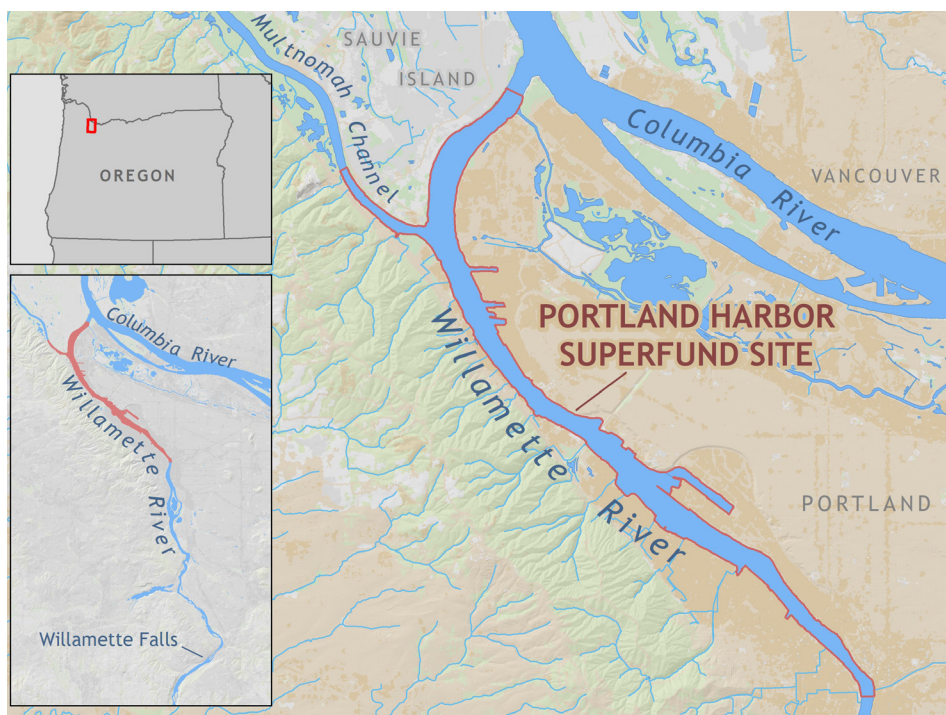
Over the past century, these vital resources have suffered from contaminants released into the Willamette River in the area known today as Portland Harbor. Restoring these resources is part of Grand Ronde's stewardship responsibility to these homelands and is essential to the Tribe's wellbeing and cultural survival.

## Our Ties to the Lower Willamette River

Grand Ronde is a community formed of more than thirty tribes and bands originating throughout western Oregon, northern California, and southwestern Washington. For countless generations, the lower Willamette River has been, and remains, at the heart of our world. It is a center for fishing, exchanging goods, and practicing ceremonial life. The Tribe's cultural responsibility of stewardship and hosting requires knowing and caring for the lands, waters, and resources of the lower Willamette.

## The Willamette River Sustains Important Traditional Resources

The Willamette River is home to many of our traditional foods and other resources. When Grand Ronde people historically came to the lower Willamette River for salmon and lamprey, they also fished for sturgeon and smelt, collected plants for food, medicine, and equipment, and traded resources with groups from throughout the region. These deep interconnections between resources and people are still essential to our culture today.



A Grand Ronde canoe on the Willamette River near the St. Johns Bridge.

## Traditional Resources from the Willamette River: Three Key Examples\*

**Salmon** (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*, *Oncorhynchus kisutch*) from the Willamette River has always been a main staple of Grand Ronde people who inhabited its banks. It is an integral part of daily life and the most important occasions. The practice of salmon fishing and the communal ties that surround it are fundamental to our health and give strength to our families and culture as they are passed forward to future generations.

**Pacific lamprey** (*Entosphenus tridentatus*), or eel, is a treasured food. Tumwata (the place name for Willamette Falls) is a key location for lamprey harvesting. Lamprey are the focus of many traditional narratives, which preserve and communicate knowledge about the world, our place in it, and our responsibilities. We have a reciprocal responsibility with lamprey, as with other resources from the Willamette River, to care for them as they provide us sustenance.

**Migratory and resident birds** such as geese, ducks, and herons rely on the lower Willamette River as an avian flyway and habitat. Birds are critical to Grand Ronde cultural practices and sustenance. Heron, for example, are honored at the salmon ceremony. For Tribal members, the birds that inhabit and migrate through the lower Willamette River are important indicators of seasonality and environmental wellbeing.

*\* There are too many culturally important resources in the Willamette River to list them all.*



Wapato is an important traditional food that grows around the lower Willamette River.

### Contamination Has Impacted Our Traditional Resources in Portland Harbor

Since the early 1900s, urbanization and industrial activities have transformed the Willamette River environment. Dozens of contaminants have been released into the river, including polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), dioxins/furans, pesticides, and metals. The presence of these harmful substances in the river led the U.S. EPA to designate Portland Harbor a Superfund site in December 2000. Years of data from scientific studies show that natural resources in the Willamette River have been injured by contamination.

### Restoration of Traditional Resources is Critical to Cultural Survival

Because of industrial-related contamination, some fish species in Portland Harbor are unsafe to eat. Grand Ronde tribal members are concerned that other resources in the Willamette River have been harmed by contamination and pose a personal health risk if consumed. For decades, reduced access to resources has been impacting vital cultural practices. Grand Ronde members fear

losing relationships with resources and thus losing connections to cultural knowledge, places, and practices.

“How do we measure all these impacts and costs for our ancestors, our families and communities of today, and for our unborn future generations?”

– Grand Ronde tribal member

Maintaining its stewardship responsibility to place, Grand Ronde has worked to counteract the harm of contamination. The Tribe has revived salmon celebrations and helped design programs to bring salmon and steelhead back. Continued efforts to restore traditional resources in the Willamette River are critical to sustaining Grand Ronde tribal members’ cultural identity and sense of community. The goal of restoration is to bring these resources back to the condition they would be in if the river had not been contaminated. Grand Ronde is participating in a Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) to identify the extent of harm to resources in the lower Willamette River, seek compensation from the parties responsible for contamination, and guide efforts to restore resources.

## More Information

### Grand Ronde History

<https://www.grandronde.org/history-culture/history/our-story/>

### Grand Ronde Natural Resource Management Programs

Grand Ronde Natural Resources Department:

<https://www.grandronde.org/services/natural-resources/>

### Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Efforts in Portland Harbor

Portland Harbor Natural Resource Trustee Council:

<https://www.fws.gov/portlandharbor/>