

Diane Heintz

Plaintiff: Pacific Seafood

Diane Heintz is a plaintiff in NELC's lawsuit against three Pacific Seafood Group companies (see pages 4-5). The companies operate a seafood processing plant in Warrenton, Oregon. During the summer, the facility also processes Pacific whiting into surimi, a fish gel used to make imitation crab and other products. The plant processes conventional seafood, such as crab, shrimp and bottom fish, year-round.

The facility's illegal wastewater discharge into the Skipanon River, which empties into the Lower Columbia River, has put aquatic life, including endangered salmon and steelhead, at risk. The pollution also threatens migrating bird populations and creates unpleasant conditions for local residents like Diane, who lives about a mile from the facility.

Why did you file the lawsuit?

As a research scientist at Oregon State University's Sea Grant Seafood Laboratory in Astoria from the late '70s to the early '90s, I worked on Pacific whiting protein recovery projects, which resulted in cleaner processing wastewater.

Based on our findings, I lobbied local politicians to support a federal mandate to increase on-shore whiting processing, because the alternative, factory-ship processing, is very wasteful, utilizing only about 15 percent of the fish

as opposed to a potential 50-60 percent onshore. So I was disappointed to learn that the Pacific Seafood plant in Warrenton is not using available technology to reduce the pollution in its wastewater.

It was clear that after years of Clean Water Act violations, Pacific Seafood was not about to self-correct.

What environmental and aesthetic impacts has Pacific Seafood's facility had on the area around your home?

The plant's wastewater enters the Skipanon near the mouth of the river. Twice a day, the water at the mouth flows upstream several miles as a result of incoming tides. The organic material in the wastewater accumulates along the banks of the river, and as it decomposes, smells like rotting fish.

In addition to the stench, dissolved oxygen in the river has repeatedly dropped to near zero, threatening the survival of indigenous fish and wildlife, and encouraging growth of anaerobic bacteria. It's been a while since I've seen Osprey fishing in the river.

Pacific Seafood is the largest employer in the county. Has that made it difficult for you to pursue this case?

Warrenton is an economi-

cally depressed community, and environmental issues are not necessarily a priority for everyone.

I've lived in Warrenton for 24 years and raised my children here. I hope my actions will help to preserve this unique, mostly wetland environment for my grandchildren and their children. I think most local residents share that hope on some level, but it's been difficult to get past the effort by Pacific Seafood to exploit the economic fear factor.

How has Pacific Seafood responded to the lawsuit?

Before filing suit, we met with the company twice in June. But the corporate manager made it abundantly clear that he resented the fact that citizens were asking his company to comply with the law. I hope we can persuade him to change his mind.

This company has the resources and the technological capacity to both comply with the Clean Water Act and conduct a successful commercial enterprise.

The local community needs jobs, but it also needs a clean environment. It is past time for Pacific Seafood to accept its responsibility for the Skipanon River. ♦



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—Diane Heintz*