

Seeking decent housing by their beloved river

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LONE PINE, Ore. (AP) — Bernadette Grace's trailer, tidy and small, is well hidden behind a larger trailer charred and strewn with trash. It's far enough from the communal restroom and shower without doors, where addicts have cooked meth and drunks linger after dark. But close enough to the icy waters that sustain her.

This is home: a scrap of rock and dried grass that juts out into the waves of the Columbia River, with a wide view of the massive Dalles Dam. The river is a constant reminder of Grace's fishing-centered childhood and Native American heritage; the dam is the root cause of all that her people lost when the backwaters swallowed houses, fishing platforms, and burial grounds.

"The river, it's my calm spot. Since I was a baby, I've been on a boat with my mom and dad," Grace says. Living elsewhere isn't an option, she adds. "If I don't see the river, I go crazy."

From the drying shed where Grace hangs salmon to smoke, makeshift structures spread like a shantytown: shacks topped with rescued slabs of fiberboard, trailers with broken windows bandaged with tarps, old tires, couches and rusted boats.

The settlement, known as Lone Pine, is located at an eight-acre replacement fishing site provided by the federal government to compensate tribes for the loss of fishing grounds inundated by the dam in 1957. Lone Pine is one of 31 replacement fishing sites, small pieces of land on the river's Oregon and Washington shores scattered among four hydroelectric dams east of Portland.

The sites aren't public. They're reserved for tribal fishermen from the four tribes who lived along the river: the Yakama, Umatilla, Warm Springs, and Nez Perce. But they have become permanent residences for Indians like Grace whose relatives were displaced by the dams, and who live in substandard, crowded, unsanitary and sometimes dangerous conditions.

"It's shocking, the living conditions on those sites," said David Sauter, board member of the Columbia Gorge Housing Authority, who toured the settlements this summer as part of a two-state congressional delegation. "It's like a Third World, terrible sanitary conditions, whole communities functioning with a single water spigot."

Native American leaders are now pressing the U.S. government to provide housing to the river Indians to correct past wrongs — something they argue is owed to them because the Indians received meager compensation for the destruction caused by the dams. It's not the first time the tribes are making this argument, but the government has largely disregarded it over the decades.

The tribes point to a federal fact-finding report which shows there are Native families who were dislocated by the dams who did not receive relocation assistance or alternative housing.

The report was issued earlier this year. So far, it has been greeted with silence.

They call themselves people of the river, people of the salmon.

For millennia, Native Americans lived in villages along the Columbia's shores, the river and its abundant salmon central to their culture and religion, sustenance and trade.

European settlers pushed the Indians off their land and into reservations; white men's diseases decimated Native villages. But many Indians remained to live and fish on the river.

To save their fishing-centered way of life, the tribes in 1855 signed treaties with the U.S. government in which they reserved the right to fish at their "usual and accustomed" fishing sites. Though housing was not mentioned in the treaties, many of the Indians lived at or near their fishing grounds.

Dam construction upended that way of life.

Between the 1930s and the 1970s, the U.S. government built four dams — the Bonneville, the Dalles, the John Day and the McNary — on the Columbia east of Portland to generate electricity through hydropower. Dozens of communities and homes were lost to construction or flooded.

Federal officials sought to compensate people for the damage, but their efforts focused on white residents. Several non-Indian towns were relocated and in some cases entirely reconstructed, complete with new housing, schools, parks and roads — their white residents given compensation or relocation assistance.

Native villagers were not treated the same way, according to tribal and government documents. In many cases, officials simply disregarded Indians' property damage, records show.

"These were our people's village sites. The government was supposed to replace them, but they never did," said Wilbur Slockish, a Yakama member whose grandmother was from Celilo village, where he lived and packed fish as a boy before the area was flooded by the Dalles Dam.

The report released earlier this year by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which examined the impact of two of the four dams, found that at least three village sites — home to at least 41 families and 50 housing structures — were torn down due to Bonneville Dam construction. None of the families were compensated.

And at least two villages housing several dozen families and homes were destroyed by the Dalles Dam. The government handed out some relocation assistance in that case and placed 10 army surplus barracks on a small parcel near Celilo village. But the money and homes helped only a fraction of the Indians — the sums were very small and the houses substandard, quickly falling into disrepair.

In the report, tribal interviewees recall what was lost: traditional tulee mat lodges, tents, stacked stone homes, shacks with drying sheds, below-ground shelters with plank roofs covered with dirt.

The tribes also say the report's estimate of how many Indian families were not compensated is far too low, because the historical documents the report relied on are biased.

The Corps says officials at its Washington headquarters are reviewing the report. The Portland office would need their go-ahead to do an exhaustive study of dams' impact on tribal housing, said project manager Eric Stricklin. Congress would have to authorize construction and funding.

The Corps admits discriminatory policies influenced how it handled the Indian housing issue, spokeswoman Diana Fredlund said.

"The government's position was a policy of assimilation," Fredlund said. "They were trying to assimilate the Indians, so housing was not high on the priority list as far as the government was concerned."

As the dams were built and the Indians fought to reassert their treaty fishing rights, the federal government did agree to develop replacement fishing sites to compensate for those flooded by the dams. Tribal leaders say the government also promised to rebuild living quarters, but later denied that such a promise had been made.

It took seven decades of struggles to replace the fishing sites. The Corps initially developed five so-called "in-lieu" sites; another 26 "treaty fishing access sites" were developed in the past two decades. In 2008, the Corps also rebuilt the dilapidated Celilo village.

During those decades, the river Indians say, they endured years of prejudice from Oregon and Washington officials who tried to eliminate Indian fishing by restricting it and arresting and jailing Native fishermen. White property owners barred Indians from accessing fishing sites and white fishermen destroyed their nets, the Indians say.

The replacement fishing sites provided the Indians places of their own — families who had been displaced by the dams moved onto the sites as soon as they were opened and set up permanent homes in drying sheds and other structures. From the start, the Bureau of Indian Affairs — the sites' landlord — didn't approve of their presence: Federal officials harassed and aimed to evict the dwellers.

In the 1980s, the Indians filed suit and won. A judge in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals found the Indians had maintained homes at their fishing sites prior to the construction of the dams and could do so again at the five in-lieu sites. It remained illegal to live on the other 26 sites developed after the court victory, but people moved onto some of them anyway.

Today, the sites still offer little beyond basic amenities: a fish cleaning station, communal restrooms and showers, a boat dock, an access road. Over the years,

they have degenerated due to overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure and neglect. Some attracted crime and other social ills.

The sites lack plumbing or electric lines. They have no fire, police, or ambulance services. In some cases, there is no septic system, just a storage tank that must be pumped out weekly. The water systems were not meant for permanent homes, and recently some were designated as public water systems — meaning substantial renovations are needed.

Residents have built makeshift homes, added primitive plumbing or additions to sheds and trailers. None of the housing is built to code, tribal leaders say.

At the Underwood fishing site on the Washington shore, Chief of the Cascade Tribe Johnny Jackson spends nights in a drafty trailer after his hand-built cabin burned down in a September fire caused by a propane leak.

About a dozen people, including children, also live at the site. A large Native American village once stood at Underwood, the 83-year-old Jackson recalls.

"We used to play by the river when I was a little boy. My grandmothers lived there" until the government built the Bonneville Dam that flooded houses, drying sheds, and racks, he said. "No one asked us for permission."

And no one, he says, replaced the Indian homes inundated by the dam. Jackson built his cabin at Underwood in the 1960s and two decades later won the right to live at the site after a long legal battle. He's vowed to rebuild at the same site, because the river is his home.

Across the Columbia at Lone Pine in Oregon, makeshift dwellings support about 40 permanent residents, including children. There's running water and sewers, but no plumbing to dwellings. No electricity either, though the Dalles Dam can produce up to two million kilowatts of power just a few feet away.

Grace, a member of the Yakama tribe, uses a small generator to charge her cell phone and watch TV. Her family once fished at Celilo Falls, the most important Indian fishing area, before it was submerged by the dam. Though she doesn't fish herself, Grace cleans and smokes salmon for other tribal fishermen.

She tries, usually without luck, to stop outsiders from dumping trash onto the replacement fishing site. She pulls weeds near the fish cleaning station and sweeps the common grounds. And she's bought her granddaughter a potty so she doesn't have to use the public restroom, with its crime and grime, after dark.

"I don't want my grandchildren to be around that," Grace said.

She dreams of a real house: safe, well-insulated against the wind. But she remains at Lone Pine, she says, because it's where she grew up with her parents — and because it's the only place she can afford near the Columbia's banks. Most river people like Grace earn incomes well below the federal poverty level.

Local officials admit affordable housing near the river is very hard to find. Rents have skyrocketed as towns along the Columbia have gentrified, becoming destinations for windsurfers, kiteboarders, and other well-off tourists who buy or rent vacation homes. The National Scenic Area Act and local policies also limit where housing can be built in the area known as the Columbia River Gorge.

Tribal housing authorities, who receive federal funds, can also do little to help people like Grace. They face a huge backlog of applicants — but even if they had more funds, Indians who subsist on fishing don't want to move to reservations far from the river.

Three years ago, the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission — a Portland-based organization that's run by the tribes — took over management of the fishing sites, though the Bureau of Indian Affairs retains administrative jurisdiction. The bureau did not return calls for comment.

The fish commission, which has 12 tribal police officers who enforce fishery laws and who now oversee the fishing sites, embarked on a three-year clean-up campaign. It pulled out tons of garbage, renovated bathrooms, and removed permanent structures from the sites where permanent dwellings aren't allowed.

As soon as clean-up was completed, people moved back onto the sites to live, the commission's executive director Paul Lumley said.

"Things have improved, the sites are safer," Lumley said. "But the problem remains. ... There is a housing crisis out there. You can't see these sites from the highway, they're out of sight, out of mind and the government wishes this problem would disappear, but it will only get worse."

Record salmon returns in recent years have drawn even more Indians to fish as a livelihood, something that would have been impossible a few decades earlier when fish runs drastically declined, Lumley said. Fishery biologists say more than a million fall chinook salmon returned to the Columbia this year.

Because fishermen want to be near their nets, the abundance of fish means more fishermen are camping at the sites during fishing season and more are staying year-round, making the housing problem worse.

The commission is pressing the housing issue, Lumley said, because "it's a crisis that impacts fishing rights." In some locations during peak fishing times, the sites are so crowded that access to the riverbank is limited.

But the commission doesn't want the government to evict people, Lumley said. Many who live at the sites are older, have children, or had family members who once lived in a Native village on or near the site.

"We are not going to throw them out, because it would be cruel" and unfair, Lumley said. "We would like safe and sanitary housing available to them, so they no longer have to live that way."

Tribal leaders say solutions to the housing crisis could vary, from rebuilding or adding infrastructure at the sites where possible, to finding or building alternative housing — as long as it's near the river.

Still, even if Congress gives the go-ahead to build or improve Indian housing, challenges abound.

Several sites are too rocky, too small, or otherwise unfit to install permanent housing infrastructure.

In some cases, the Native Americans residents don't want government involvement. They're afraid they'll be kicked out of their homes without compensation, as in the past.

It's also unclear who should benefit from housing, as families have grown and mixed; some may not be able to document the damage done by a dam two or three generations ago.

But the effort must be made, for the sake of justice, said Charles Hudson of the Fish Commission.

"People have been trying to run the Indians off the river for decades," Hudson said. "Our tribal members are striving to reclaim what they once had: a presence, a sense of place on the river, and their identity as river people."

"The river is where they belong." #

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