RIVER NOTES
A Letter from the Executive Director

I checked the poll results relentlessly on election night. And the next night, the next night, and the night after that. It wasn’t healthy, and I’m not proud of it.

My experience during the Bush v. Gore election was the polar opposite and led me to where I am today.

I was on a research expedition to Antarctica with two colleagues from the University of Maine. Picture this: Three yellow canvas tents pitched in one of the most remote places on Earth. I stood on the ice in a red parka, listening. It was mid November, negative 30 degrees F, and windy. Always windy. I had no idea who won the Presidential election that I cared deeply about.

I finally heard the helicopter, which carried our bi-monthly resupply of food from the American base at McMurdo, a hundred miles away. It was also our only conduit to the outside world. Our pilot, a Texan with a handlebar mustache who loved George W. Bush, stepped out. “Who won?” I asked. He shrugged and explained “hanging chads,” taking pleasure that this was killing me. Then he left.

I went back to long days of field work researching the history of the East Antarctic Ice Sheet, trying to keep snotsicles from locking my mouth closed.

Weeks later, I heard the helicopter and ran back to camp. The pilot sauntered over, put on a cowboy hat, and grinned. “Noooo!” I yelled. I did not realize it then, but that grin—that huge, mustache-bending grin—started my path to environmental law and Columbia Riverkeeper. After leaving the ice, my research papers about climate change felt less important while President Bush was hell-bent on more coal and oil. I turned to advocacy.

I had no idea how much worse it could get under Trump.

In this newsletter, my coworker Lauren Goldberg describes Columbia Riverkeeper’s successes during four grueling years of the Trump administration (pages 8–9).

But mostly we look forward. Pages 4–7 feature our plans under a Biden administration. Plus, I hope you’ll check out our Heroes video series, described on page 3, and our interview with Washington Poet Laureate Claudia Castro Luna on pages 10–11.

Lastly, I invite you to read our 2020 Annual Report, which shows how your membership dollars make a difference. Thank you, and keep it up.

Brett VandenHeuvel, Executive Director

Cover: “Navigate Together” by Nina Montenegro www.ninamontenegro.com
As the evening darkness creeps in, grab a warm beverage and get inspired by tales from incredible people who made the impossible possible to protect the mighty Columbia.

This winter we’re rolling out a video series, “Heroes: The Untold Stories of Grit and Passion— and Success—to Protect the Columbia.” Visit bit.ly/heroes-video-series to watch at your leisure. The lineup:

• Jenny Lee, deputy director of Coalition of Communities of Color, shares the historic, Communities of Color-led effort to pass the Portland Clean Energy Fund ballot initiative.

• Cheryl Johnson, retired librarian and tireless Columbia Riverkeeper volunteer, captivates with the David-versus-Goliath stories of how communities stopped multi-billion-dollar liquefied natural gas terminals and pipelines.

• Kat Brigham, chair of the Board of Trustees of the Confederated Tribes and Bands of Umatilla Indian Reservation, reflects on the decades-long fight for tribal fishing rights on the Columbia, the successful campaign to convince Oregon to adopt the nation’s most protective water pollution limits, and a lifetime breaking barriers for Indigenous people and women.

• Ubaldo Hernández, Riverkeeper senior organizer, and Lorri Epstein, Riverkeeper water quality director, reminisce on transforming a former industrial site into an outdoor learning program and thriving waterfront habitat.

• Arlene Burns, mayor of the City of Mosier, shares the transformative power of an oil-train derailment and explosion that thrust her and the small town of Mosier, OR, into the national spotlight.

• Natalie Swan, analyst with the Yakama Nations Fisheries Program, pays tribute to her uncle, the late Atwai Dr. Russell Jim, a champion for Hanford cleanup and tribal sovereignty.

• Dan Serres, conservation director for Riverkeeper, gets your blood boiling with tales of the coal industry’s attempt to site North America’s largest coal export terminal along the Columbia’s shores.

I hope these powerful stories nourish your soul—and give you hope—at a time when we need it most.
Good riddance to the Trump administration's assault on the environment.

While we are thrilled we will not have to challenge any more of Trump's horrible policies in court, we cannot rely on the Biden administration as the environmental savior.

How do we navigate together?

First, the Biden administration provides an opportunity to protect the environment and avert a climate disaster. There is no guarantee. It's up to us. Together, we will push the new administration and federal agencies to be bold. We will work with partners like the Waterkeeper Alliance to engage on national issues with a special emphasis on strategic policies and permits here in the Pacific Northwest. Just like we rise to defend against threats, we must rise to answer opportunities.

Pages 6 and 7 of this newsletter features our top priorities for the first 100 days of the Biden administration.

Second, Columbia Riverkeeper will continue to focus on state and local decisions to protect the Columbia. We won major victories over coal, oil, and fracked gas by convincing state and local officials—not the federal government—to deny permits. We pushed Oregon to adopt the nation’s strongest limits on toxic pollution while the Obama Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) maintained the status quo. We forced Washington state to evaluate the lifecycle greenhouse gas emissions from a fracked gas refinery while the federal government looked the other way. Our strategic focus on state decision makers gets results.

Local actions, including land-use zoning, ordinances to ban fossil fuels, and ballot initiatives to fund clean energy, create a huge impact. The good news: Riverkeeper has become a powerful influence on state and local government decisions because we have smart and passionate members who show up and speak out. While we gain better national policies, we must continue to prevail locally.

Third, during this time of political change, Riverkeeper will stick to the values and strategies that have proven successful. We will continue to take on the most dangerous threats, biggest polluters, and thorniest problems. We will challenge the bad and promote the good.
As We Navigate Together, We Commit to:

Be relentless. Now is not the time to sit back and watch. It is time to double down on our efforts to fight the fossil fuel industry and enact strong climate policies. We cannot let devastating fires and extreme weather become the norm. We will ramp up our creative legal work and community organizing to seize this opportunity for real change.

Be inclusive. The work to protect clean water and our climate is directly tied to social justice. We will listen to and partner with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities. We will use our privilege to promote justice.

Enforce the law. We will not back down from corporate law firms, lobbyists, and their cronies. Riverkeeper’s team of five environmental attorneys will sue illegal polluters and challenge dangerous industrial projects in court. We will use the law to level the playing field and spur public engagement.

Listen and reflect. Good advocates always believe they are right. We must balance this with humility and self-reflection as an organization. We will pause, evaluate, and ask for feedback. Own our mistakes. Listen.

Keep it local. We are 100% focused on local and regional issues. We live here, raise our families here, and build long-term relationships here. You do not have to worry about Riverkeeper shifting its priorities elsewhere.

Be grateful. What better job than to protect the environment and work with amazing people? We will always be grateful to our members for your trust and donations as we put every dollar to work.

These are dynamic times. We can navigate together by pushing for better federal policies, focusing on state and local decisions, and staying true to our values and strategies for success.

The good news: Riverkeeper has become a powerful influence on state and local government decisions because we have smart and passionate members who show up and speak out. While we gain better national policies, we must continue to prevail locally.

OUR 2021 PROGRAMS

Stopping Pollution
Goals: Protect fish and wildlife from toxic pollution; reduce toxic pollution so people can safely eat fish without toxic contamination in all locations on the Columbia River

Fighting Fossil Fuels
Goals: Protect the Columbia River ecosystem and river communities from fossil fuel infrastructure; promote policies that restrict fossil fuel development, including terminals, pipelines, and facilities that increase the region’s dependence on fossil fuels

Saving Salmon
Goals: Robust and recovering populations of salmon and steelhead

Engaging Communities
Goals: Educate and inspire people to care about clean water, salmon and other species; promote clean energy policies in the Columbia Basin; engage in stewardship activities to improve habitat and water quality

Cleaning Up Hanford
Goals: A Hanford Nuclear Site cleanup that protects the Columbia River and upholds the treaty rights of sovereign Tribal Nations
The first 100 days of the Biden administration

Columbia Riverkeeper will work with partners to push the Biden administration to overturn Trump’s environmental rollbacks and to enact aggressive new policies to stop pollution and address climate change.

Here is a primer on the tools available to the Biden administration to make immediate changes. But first, I have a confession to make. When I decided to become an environmental lawyer, I thought it would be a little more adventurous—wolves howling in the wilderness, impassioned arguments about the morality of clean water. The reality: Environmental law and its ponderous cousin, administrative law, are dry as dust. Deep in the Federal Register, no wolves howl. But Riverkeeper’s legal team loves this stuff because 1) we need to understand the rules to win the game, and 2) let’s just admit it, we are nerdy.

The key tools the Biden administration will employ are executive orders, agency regulations, and permit decisions.

**Executive order:** A published directive from the president that manages operations of the federal government. Key fact: Executive orders are not legislation, they do not require approval from Congress.

**Agency regulation:** A rule to implement, interpret, or prescribe law or policy for the agency. Federal agencies, like EPA, pass regulations that control the agency’s actions. Key fact: This is where the magic happens, the heart of environmental law.

**Permit decision:** An agency’s order on an application. We pressure agencies to deny permits for fossil fuel projects and other dangerous proposals. Key fact: An agency must follow its regulations in making a permit decision.

**Our top priorities for the first 100 days of the Biden administration:**

### Executive Orders

- Rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement. This is fast and easy via executive order. Once we become a party to the agreement, we must submit a target for greenhouse gas emissions.

- Stop expedited approval of fossil fuel infrastructure. Trump Executive Order 13868 sought to expedite fossil fuel infrastructure like oil and gas pipelines and terminals. This led to the Dept. of Transportation passing a rule to approve LNG-by-rail and EPA passing a rule to limit state authority to deny fossil fuel projects under section 401 of the Clean Water Act. The Biden administration should revoke Trump’s executive order, direct the Dept. of Transportation to reconsider LNG-by-rail (hint: it’s dangerous), and direct EPA to reconsider its rules on section 401. **Pacific Northwest (PNW) connection:** Oregon and Washington denied LNG and coal terminals using state authority under Clean Water Act section 401. We must restore states’ power.

- Commit to greenhouse gas reduction. Biden should issue an executive order to formalize his greenhouse gas campaign promises to eliminate carbon pollution from the electric sector by 2035 and achieve zero emissions by 2050. He also pledged to spend $2 trillion over four years to boost renewables and create incentives for more energy-efficient cars, homes, and commercial buildings. **PNW connection:** Biden’s plan is far from perfect and we must demand better. His electricity plan includes new nuclear and fracked gas power plants. He should expressly prohibit new fossil fuel infrastructure, which continues to target the Columbia River.

### Agency Regulations

- Limit methane emissions from oil and gas. EPA should reinstate Obama-era rules or pass better rules to limit methane—a potent greenhouse gas—released in the production, processing, transmission, and storage of oil and gas. **PNW connection:** On the Columbia, we continue to fight fossil fuel infrastructure that would greatly increase methane emissions during fracking, shipping, and refining. New rules will make fracking less profitable.

- Safeguard all streams and wetlands. The Trump EPA passed rules limiting the scope of the Clean Water Act to exclude some ephemeral streams and wetlands from federal protection. The Biden EPA should reinstate the Obama-era “Waters of the United States” rule. **PNW connection:** Ecologically valuable high desert streams and wetlands in Oregon and Washington deserve protection under the Clean Water Act.
• Protect public lands. Biden’s Dept. of Interior should reinstate restrictions on oil and gas development in sage grouse habitat. Trump’s Dept. of Interior reduced sage grouse protections on nine million acres to allow oil and gas drilling. **PNW connection: The sagebrush sea is a critical ecosystem in our region. You can see the endangered sage grouse in central Oregon performing its incredible mating displays each spring.**

• Reverse expedited approval of fracked gas exports. Biden’s Dept. of Energy should repeal Trump’s fast-tracking and go further to require the department to conduct a lifecycle analysis of greenhouse gases that accounts for the competition with renewable energy. **PNW connection: Our region is threatened by huge fracked gas export projects, including methanol and LNG.**

**PERMIT DECISIONS**

Historically, even during the Obama administration, most federal agencies rubber-stamped permits. This must change under the Biden administration. Our climate simply cannot afford any new fossil fuel infrastructure projects. **PNW connection: We have successfully defended the Columbia by focusing our efforts on state and local permits, where we have stronger influence. A responsible federal government, however, can support our movement and state leaders.**

In addition to these regulatory actions, the Biden administration must also:

• **Invest in equity and environmental justice.** While Biden has pledged to make a “historic investment” in environmental justice, we must advocate that real money and real opportunities flow to our most impacted communities. Riverkeeper will focus our advocacy on support for Columbia River communities, both urban and rural.

• **Appoint environmental champions.** Trump filled his administration with oil and gas industry insiders. The Biden administration should appoint a diverse, equity-focused team of environmental champions. Riverkeeper will work with partners to recommend and advocate for these champions.

• **Ramp up enforcement.** Trump’s Dept. of Justice gave most polluters a free pass. This must stop. Biden has pledged to establish a new Environmental and Climate Justice Division within the Dept. of Justice. If adequately funded, this change to focus on climate and justice is positive.

We believe the Biden administration provides an opportunity for strong environmental policies, but this will require strategic asks and strong public pressure. Together, we can seize the opportunity, while continuing to focus on the best ways to protect the Pacific Northwest.

*For a thorough list of Biden’s options, see Climate Reregulation in a Biden Administration, Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, Columbia Law School.*
For four grueling years of the Trump administration, you fought back against the dangerous threats to clean water, our health, and the climate. And you secured big victories. From defeating new fossil fuel infrastructure to courtroom wins against Trump’s U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the administration’s agenda did not obliterate your vision for a clean Columbia.

Of course Columbia Riverkeeper sued the Trump administration. Ten lawsuits to be exact. The wheels of justice move slowly, but we’re winning. Case in point: After Riverkeeper and our partners sued the Trump EPA for failing to protect salmon and steelhead from dangerously warm river temperatures on the Snake and Columbia rivers, the Ninth Circuit Court mandated the EPA release a long-overdue protection plan in 2020. Many of our lawsuits challenging the fossil fuel industry and corporate developers are still pending. We’ll see those fights through until a court rules or we pressure the Biden administration to reverse course.

During the Trump years, our sights were fixed on more than holding the line against environmental rollbacks. Yes, we played defense, but we moved the ball on offense, too. Climate action must happen now. People eat locally caught fish and drink Columbia River water today. Stopping salmon from falling over the extinction precipice can’t wait.

EVEN IN DARK TIMES VICTORY ABOUNDS

By Lauren Goldberg, Legal and Program Director
Together, we earned victories during the Trump years because you dug deep at every level of power. Let’s reflect on how we made progress during a dark hour in our nation’s history.

**Honor the leadership of Tribal Nations.** Columbia Riverkeeper worked in solidarity with Tribal Nations to support a new vision for Hanford nuclear waste cleanup, petition for a new Superfund site on the Columbia River near the Bonneville Dam, and advocate that Washington state deny the world’s largest fracked gas-to-methanol refinery. We also launched new campaigns. Tribal Nations are fighting to protect the Columbia Hills near the John Day Dam from the Pacific Northwest’s largest pumped-storage energy project. Why? More than 120 acres of reservoirs would permanently destroy a bevy of sacred cultural and religious resources, and access to traditional foods and medicines. In just a month, over 1,000 Riverkeeper members signed petitions to elected officials. This fight is far from over, and we’re committed to working in solidarity with Tribal Nations until we prevail.

**Gather round the kitchen table.** Our team of organizers worked tirelessly with business owners, parents, farmers, and many more around kitchen tables to design strategies and actions. For example, over coffee and too many cookies, we charted a path to stop a massive petrochemical refinery for anhydrous ammonia proposed in Longview, WA, by pressuring local officials to deny building permits. In August 2020, we won. The company abandoned its proposal in the face of mounting community opposition.

**Activate the masses at city halls.** Riverkeeper helped channel the palpable energy of more than a dozen victories over fossil fuel infrastructure. You mobilized and convinced the Port of Vancouver to adopt climate-friendly policies, and the City of Vancouver soon followed, passing a moratorium on large-scale fossil fuel facilities in the city. You also convinced the City of Portland to pass an ordinance that sharply restricts large new oil train terminals and other fossil fuel projects. Since the ordinance passed in 2016, Riverkeeper and partners have supported the city in defending the ordinance from the fossil fuel industry’s attacks.

**Take it to the people: the ballot initiative.** Portland voters approved the Portland Clean Energy Fund (PCEF), a ballot measure that created a new one percent local revenue tax from the largest corporations. Communities of Color developed and led on PCEF. We were honored to serve on the steering committee and help activate our members to engage. PCEF passed by an overwhelming 65 percent of the vote! Revenue from the new tax will fund projects that primarily benefit low-income people and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities—people who have historically been excluded from environmental jobs and benefits.

**Hold corporate polluters accountable in court.** When the government ignored illegal pollution, Columbia Riverkeeper stepped in. Since 2016, Columbia Riverkeeper has sued 24 polluters. One of the beauties of the Clean Water Act is people can prosecute polluters without waiting on a government-agency gatekeeper. Riverkeeper can go straight to court. And we did just that, stopping thousands of pounds of toxic pollution from spewing into the Columbia. This year we celebrated the fruits of a legal victory from nearly a decade ago: Oregon’s only coal-fired power plant officially shut down. It took a people-powered campaign and a lawsuit brought by Riverkeeper and our partners to end decades of dangerous air pollution at Portland General Electric’s Boardman coal-fired power plant.

**Stay inspired on the river.** In summer 2019, over 150 people gathered along the Columbia’s scenic Hanford Reach for The Hanford Journey, an event organized by Yakama Nation and Riverkeeper to demand a thorough cleanup of the nuclear site. In spring 2017, Riverkeeper helped organize an aquatic adaptation of the People’s Climate March, a nationwide climate day of action, along the Columbia in Kalama, WA. Our team of scientists and organizers talked to thousands of students along the Columbia’s shores and in the classroom. The lesson: This river is a place worth fighting for.

Four years of the Trump administration threw up roadblocks. It also opened doors. As the climate crisis deepened, state and local decision makers couldn’t point fingers at D.C. to save us. We strategized—and prevailed—here at home on the Columbia.
What drew you to Columbia Riverkeeper?

My intent to bring awareness to the river—to think critically about its history and interconnectedness—has many partners. This year, I was at a statewide conference for nonprofits where I heard about Columbia Riverkeeper from a local journalist. It was the next day that the Seattle Times published an op-ed by Brett VandenHeuvel and Jay Julius from Lummi Nation about salmon survival in the Columbia and Snake Rivers. I then knew that I had to make the connection, so I reached out to Brett. Our vision aligned and we embraced a partnership.

We recently had the pleasure of joining you for your virtual book launch party for “One River, A Thousand Voices.” How was that experience for you?

It was like a dream. It was a moment where literature stepped out of a silo and spilled into the world of connectivity and activism. Poetry readings usually happen at a bookstore or with a publisher, and we need more raw, engaging ways to interact and weave literary arts into social and climate advocacy. It was refreshing to be able to launch the book alongside an acclaimed nonprofit focused on river advocacy and Tyrone Ross Thompson (Wyampum Nez Perce), who worked with me along the journey of writing poetry and exploring the river.

Can you share some insight on your connection to the natural world?

I grew up in a small town in El Salvador, surrounded by vibrant landscapes, tropical birds, and beautiful bodies of water. My family spent a lot of time camping and fishing in natural areas right along the river. We would sleep in...
hammocks and eat whatever fish my dad and uncles would catch. My draw to natural landscapes was cemented from a young age and traveled with me when I arrived in the U.S. at the age of 14, and flowed through me ever since.

**What initially inspired you to start writing poetry?**

Poetry is a very natural impulse that I have no control over. I believe some people are called to do different things, and poetry chose me. When I was in college I started writing my earliest poems. I studied abroad in France for a year, which was a total immersion in language and writing poems in French, English, and Spanish. During this time, I felt really far away—I could feel the ocean separating myself from my communities and family. This loneliness and distance propelled me to say something about it in the form of poetry.

Once I started writing poetry, it was always a welcoming space of exploration, of invention, of acceptance. I have issues with diction and an accent when I speak English, but poetry never rejected any of that—it actually absorbed and welcomed all of it. My shortcomings were okay in poetry, which made me embrace being here and always coming back to it no matter where

---

“**My ears should have been hurting, I should have felt the jets of the falls. But I could feel none of it. The river had been silenced. The damming and the silencing of the river has meant the silencing of Native people as well. To not have a free flowing river with salmon is cultural genocide.”**

---

One day, I was trading stories with kids on the Colville Reservation. One of the kids shared a story about moving up into the mountains to retreat from the flooding, and spoke about “living in the mountains now but that they will move back to the river again soon.” The way in which this story was told—and passed through generations—gave hope for the possibility of a return to a healthy river and to abundant salmon. It was through this story and many others from Native people that I have come to harbor hope for the Columbia River and our environment.

**How can people engage with your work?**

I’ll be hosting a Spanish poetry workshop for young kids and families “Tardeada de Poesía” with Columbia Riverkeeper on January 27. Visit columbiariverkeeper.org/events to sign up. You can also purchase “One River, A Thousand Voices” on the website by clicking on “Shop.” You can contact me directly on Twitter or on my website, castroluna.com.
To protect and restore the water quality of the Columbia River and all life connected to it, from the headwaters to the Pacific Ocean.

A Columbia River that unites people to fight for clean water, abundant fish and wildlife, and our climate.

Embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion at every level of our work. Communities are the backbone of what we do. As an organization that advocates for the health and safety of river communities, we must fight for social justice and take a stand against racism.
Columbia Riverkeeper is powered by more than 9,300 members who invest in clean water and a healthy climate because the fight is urgent and the time is now. You accomplished great things.

**STOPPING POLLUTION**
Lawsuits against the Trump administration brought in the last four years: 10
Pounds of toxic pollution lawsuits against polluters prevented in 2020: 50,000
Amount polluters paid to nonprofit organizations as a result of lawsuits in the last four years: $2,430,000

**FIGHTING FOSSIL FUELS**
New fossil fuel terminals you defeated in last decade: 13
New fossil fuel terminals built on the Columbia in that time: 0
Legal victories over fossil fuel projects in the last five years: 15
Tons of greenhouse gas prevented annually from coal, oil, and fracked gas projects: 200 million

**SAVING SALMON**
Years the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) plan to save salmon from hot water sat on a shelf with no action: 18
Months it took EPA to issue the plan after we won a lawsuit: 1.5
Number of acres of farmland the Port of Columbia County wants rezoned for heavy industrial development in the Columbia estuary: 837
Number of times we sued—and won—to stop the Port’s rezone effort: 2

**ENGAGING COMMUNITIES**
Number of signatures gathered on Riverkeeper petitions in 2020: 25,667
E.coli samples collected annually for Columbia River beaches: 220
People who viewed these data on our Swim Guide app: 60,000
“Conoce Tu Columbia” bilingual radio shows and podcasts aired: 51

**CLEANING UP HANFORD**
Number of people who signed Riverkeeper’s petition demanding that the U.S. Dept. Energy treat more toxic and radioactive chemicals in Hanford’s groundwater: 1,440
Number of webinar attendees who viewed Riverkeeper’s “Why Scientists Fear a Chernobyl-Like Catastrophe at Hanford”: 366
Age of Riverkeeper’s Hanford Art Contest First-Place Winner: 14
$1.97 million raised in last year

Revenue

$923 K
Individuals

$38 K
Legal

$15 K
Interest

$300 K
In-kind Contributions

$595 K
Grants

$105 K
Program Services

Expense

$866 K
Fighting Fossil Fuels

$280 K
Engaging Communities

$127 K
Saving Salmon

$137 K
Cleaning Up Hanford

$279 K
Stopping Pollution

Donor Spotlight

Carol Newman has been a member of Columbia Riverkeeper since the beginning in 2000. Her love affair with the group, the mission, and the "incredible human beings doing this work that so heavily impacts our local space" deepened during the LNG fights. She has remained a steadfast supporter for 20 years, dedicated to protecting the river from dirty fossil fuel projects. “I have continued to support the organization because we are all one place, one river,” said Carol. “Columbia Riverkeeper steps up to get the job done!”

Carol Newman
Fight for Clean Water and Our Climate

Here are five ways you can support Columbia Riverkeeper’s work:

1. Make a special donation today online or in the enclosed envelope.
2. Sign up for monthly donations. It’s easy and helps our long-range planning.
3. Contribute through your donor-advised fund.
4. Make a tax-effective donation of stocks, bonds, or IRAs.
5. Leave a legacy by adding Columbia Riverkeeper to your will or trust.

To discuss how you can support this work, contact Emily Kao, Donor Relations Manager, at emily@columbiariverkeeper.org or 541-399-5591.