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More than 100 years in the making, Punchbowl Falls finally becomes County Park

Cherished Waterfall at confluence of the East and West Fork Hood Rivers
conserved for fish, wildlife and passive recreation

HOOD RIVER, Oregon – On Friday, a park that generations of Hood River residents have envisioned at Punchbowl Falls, on the Hood River, was finally realized when Western Rivers Conservancy transferred 103 acres of land surrounding the waterfall to Hood River County.

The county will develop Punchbowl Falls Park in order to protect the site and manage it for low-impact public use. WRC purchased the property in 2006, and has worked for a decade with the county, the state, local organizations and volunteers to place the lands into public ownership and conserve the waterfall and the confluence of the East and West Fork Hood Rivers.

“Protecting Punchbowl Falls is a century-old idea whose time has finally come,” says Ron Rivers, Hood River County Chair. “Punchbowl Falls Park is the result of a true community effort and it will protect an area that is near and dear to all of us.”

Punchbowl falls is formed when the West Fork Hood River pours over a basalt ledge into a huge, circular bowl carved into the canyon. The pool is surrounded by a natural amphitheater of columnar basalt, just above where the East and West Forks meet to form the main-stem Hood River.

“This is a remarkable spot on one of the most exceptional river systems in the Columbia Basin,” says WRC President, Sue Doroff. “We are glad that our efforts, and the outpouring of support we’ve received, helped make protecting this stretch of the Hood River a reality.”

The idea of protecting Punchbowl Falls as a public park has been around for more than 100 years. In 1910, the *Hood River News* wrote,

“To preserve the beautiful scenic attractions of the ‘Devil’s Punch Bowl’ is the motive of a number of Hood River residents who fear that in time it will be given over to utilitarian uses that will destroy its natural glories. It is suggested that the land around the scenic spot be bought by the county and that it be made into a public park. No spot in the valley...has more admirers than this unique combination of whirlpool and waterfall.”

This idea became a reality in July, 2015, when Hood River County received a \$470,000 grant from Oregon Parks and Recreation Department to purchase the lands from WRC and develop the park. The property was valued at \$1.2 million. WRC donated \$575,000 of that, and the remainder was raised by Hood River County, the Hood River Valley Parks and Recreation District and local individuals.

“This is a terrific use of OPRD’s lottery-funded Local Government Grant Program,” says OPRD Director, Lisa Sumption. “The park will provide unique outdoor opportunities to the residents of Hood River valley and to Oregonians everywhere for generations.

Now that the county owns the land, it will begin improvements to the property, including enhancing the trail system, placing informational signage, installing portable toilets and developing a parking lot. Although the site has been private property for over a century, people have walked to the falls along an old logging road and developed a series of social trails to and along the river. County improvements will reduce impact on the site while expanding the trail system.

“Residents from all over the Hood River area have been working to protect this place by volunteering, attending meetings, holding fundraisers and writing letters,” said Heather Staten, Director of the Hood River Valley Residents Committee. “It all finally bore fruit. This majestic stretch of the Hood River will now open as a park for all to enjoy.”

WRC’s motto is “Sometimes to save a river, you have to buy it.” The Portland-based nonprofit focuses its conservation efforts on what it defines as “keystone” rivers—streams like the Hood that remain relatively intact and crucial to larger river ecosystems.

Flowing off the north-facing glaciers of Mount Hood, the Hood River remains cold year-round and is an important refuge for cold-water fish species. The Hood possesses the most diverse assemblage of anadromous and native fish species in the Columbia River Basin, with spring and fall Chinook, coho, summer and winter steelhead, bull trout, rainbow trout and cutthroat trout. With the removal of Powerdale Dam on the lower Hood in 2010, the Hood River is now free-flowing from its headwaters to the Columbia.

Punchbowl Falls has long been important to Native Americans, who have fished at the foot of the falls since time immemorial. After WRC purchased the land, it worked with the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs to ensure it maintained sacred fishing rights to the pool.

For area residents, Punchbowl Falls and the confluence are a longtime favorite place to hike, swim, picnic and fish. The site also provides rare access to some of the best whitewater in the Pacific Northwest.

“River confluences are rich environments, and they need protection,” says Doroff. “The confluence of the East and West Fork Hood Rivers is doubly important, considering it is graced by the largest waterfall on the Hood River and draws people from all over this part of Oregon.”

Punchbowl Falls Park will officially open in summer, 2016. Major support for this project was provided by The Collins Foundation; M. J. Murdock Charitable Trust; and PacifiCorp and its foundation.

About Western Rivers Conservancy

Western Rivers Conservancy is a nonprofit organization that protects outstanding river ecosystems in the western United States. WRC acquires lands along rivers to protect critical habitat and to create or improve public access for compatible use and enjoyment. By applying decades of experience in land acquisition, WRC is able to effectively secure the health of whole ecosystems. It has protected hundreds of miles of stream frontage on great rivers like the John Day, Sandy, Hoh, Yampa, Gunnison, Salmon, Snake, Madison and Klamath. Founded in 1988, WRC is the nation’s only conservation program dedicated solely to the acquisition of riverlands. To learn more about WRC, visit www.westernrivers.org.