Oregon Environmental Council

NEWSLETTER I WINTER 2025 I **SPECIAL EDITION**

People, place, & planet

Stories, interviews, and voices from Oregon's environmental movement

"Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world." *– Howard Zinn*

OEC's work has never been done in a vacuum. Since our founding in 1968, every step forward has been the result of countless individual voices, actions, and experiences coalescing into something greater than the sum of its parts. It's the scientists who provide the facts; the coalition partners who let us aim higher; and the supporters like you who make it all possible. Through all our unity and diversity, we do *so much more* together.

For this Winter Newsletter, we're highlighting some of the people who power our movement. You'll hear from a former State Senator, a nature photographer, a new OEC board member, and others working for the future of Oregon's environment. What they do, and where they come from, span disciplines and continents. But the things they have in common – perseverance through hardship, dedication to protecting people and place, and *genuine hope* that a brighter future is within reach – rise to the top.

Whoever you are, and however you choose to show up – *you are welcome here.*

Jana Gastellum, *Executive Director and proud OEC member*

Oregon Environmental Council

In This Issue

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Oregon-Based Research, Global Impact on Public Health

A conversation between OEC's Sam Pape and OSU's Dr. Jamie DeWitt

Science is at the heart of all we do at OEC, and when it comes to PFAS, Dr. Jamie DeWitt's research is making a lasting impact. Jamie – a first-generation college student – has been studying PFAS for 20 years. OEC is currently collaborating with her department at Oregon State University to study PFAS exposure in everyday products.

Sam: How is the landscape of PFAS research changing?

Jamie: It's growing! There's a huge increase in the number of individual scientists who are studying PFAS toxicity and health risks. That's a very promising development – it will help build the knowledge base, and inform decision-makers about PFAS and their very real health effects.

Sam: What has been the impact of your research?

Jamie: Our papers have been cited in the US by the EPA and by regulating bodies in the EU. It's heartening to see that the science is having a real impact on health policy and protections across the globe. I've also seen collaborations grow in PFAS research – from toxicologists like me, to epidemiologists and organizations like OEC. The more of us working together, the better.

> *"The more of us working together, the better."*

Sam: What inspired you to deliver testimony for the PFAS phase-out bill last session?

Jamie: I've given testimony on PFAS in the states, D.C., and the EU. I think this is an important role that scientists should play. We know our data best and can provide the best information to decision-makers to help guide policy.

Sam: What gives you hope for the future?

Jamie: I work with an amazing community of scientists and students who aren't afraid to talk about these issues to the public. Being a scientist isn't just about huddling away in a lab – it's about empowering people to make decisions that are best for their health. Peoples' willingness to collaborate and speak up brings me hope.

Read the full interview

In Her Words

Indi Namkoong, Transportation Justice Coordinator at Verde

Growing up in Eugene, the natural world was part of my childhood. I can count on two hands the number of times I was driven to school – I walked or biked almost every day. Exploring my community on foot was formative for me in ways I didn't fully realize until years later.

I've always been interested in power and institutions, and how to make them work better for people. I helped found the ACLU student group at my high school during my freshman year. In college, I took a course about the lasting impacts of early American institutions on today's economic realities. That was the closest to a light bulb moment for my interest in public policy.

Today, I'm the Transportation Justice Coordinator at Verde, a nonprofit working for environmental, racial, and economic justice in Portland. I love our organization's approach, because we're trying to treat the disease – not the symptoms – when it comes to environmental racism and the burdens our communities face. My role involves representing Verde in our coalition spaces – including Move Oregon Forward, where I partner with OEC and over 50 other organizations from across the state.

Move Oregon Forward began working on the transportation package more than a year before the 2025 legislative session started – engaging with a statewide listening tour, building relationships with legislators, and working to develop a people-forward transportation package that would best serve Oregon's future.

Move Oregon Forward coalition at the Oregon State Capitol

> *"It may be an uphill battle – but that motivates me to put up a dang fight."*

When the package failed to pass at the eleventh hour, it was heartbreaking for everyone involved. But I'm proud of how engaged people stayed from start to finish. We brought over 100 people to the Oregon State Capitol to rally for transit, safe streets, and climate investments. Our community was able to move the needle and start the conversation so we can show up even stronger next time.

The world we live in today was built to benefit some at the expense of others. That didn't happen in a vacuum – it took work. *But we can work too*. Having those levers available, and watching more and more Oregonians show up to pull them, brings me hope. It may be an uphill battle – but that motivates me to put up a dang fight.

Move Oregon Forward Lobby Day in Salem, 2025

Measuring Patterns Across the State and Across the Street

The Science Behind Healthier Communities in a Changing Climate

Vivek Shandas, one of OEC's new board members, has always been interested in *land* – what it's made of, how it's allocated, and the ways society interacts with it. It started at a young age, when he and his family moved from a tropical region of Southern India to dry-and-mild Northern California. The contrast was immediately apparent.

"I saw firsthand the different ways the earth can reveal itself based on where you are," says Vivek. "That got me interested in trying to understand *why* we see such unique patterns in different parts of the planet."

That spark would eventually lead to Vivek studying "agroecosystems" – in his words, "trying to understand how plants talk to each other, and how they draw on the land's resources to produce the things we consume" – early in his academic career. It wasn't until grad school that his research turned toward urban areas and their relationship with climate change.

"Cities and climate are two trains on the same track, barreling toward each other," he says. "More people living in cities means climate events will impact more people as a result."

In 2010, Vivek founded PSU's Sustaining Urban Places Research Lab – or SUPR (pronounced "super") Lab, as it's affectionately known on campus. Much of the SUPR Lab's work is focused on how patterns change between different places – but on a smaller scale than India and California. They've researched "heat islands" (urban areas that are significantly hotter than surrounding neighborhoods), air quality differences across Oregon, and even how temperatures can change from one side of a street to the other. Beyond these data sets, they look at the contributing factors – from systemic inequalities that lead to things like heat islands, to the policies that allow them to persist.

"Convergence is at the core of what we do," says Vivek. "We need to be looking at *all* the factors if we want to drive the adaptations and transformations needed to create healthy communities."

Like many facets of academia and science, the SUPR lab is feeling the impacts of the Trump administration this year, facing terminated federal contracts and withheld funding. But despite current challenges, Vivek remains optimistic about the future.

"I'm actually more hopeful than I've been in a long time," he says. "Seeing the amount of people coming together around me – and organizations like OEC rising up to meet the moment – is a big part of what keeps me going."

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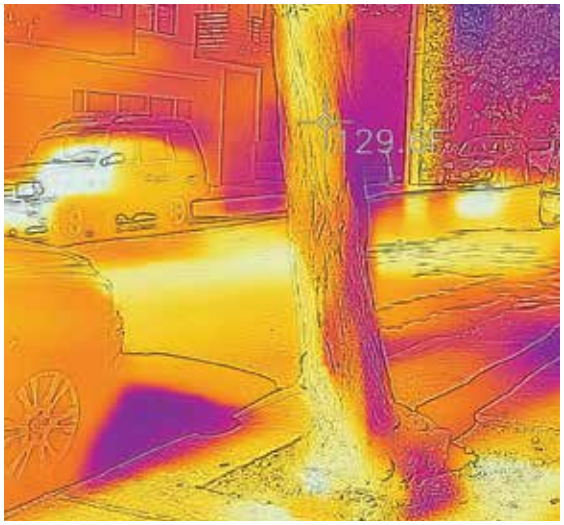

Examples of urban heat mapping through PSU's SUPR Lab

Read more about Vivek and the SUPR Lab on our website

From the White House to Wildlife

70 Years Behind the Camera

All photos by Kevin Stanford-Smith
Great Horned Owl, Cedar Waxwing, Northern River Otter, American Elk, Western Meadowlark

In 1965, Kevin Stanford-Smith – like some 180,000 other young American men at the time – found himself in basic training. He was serving in the Army, assigned to document the Vietnam War as a photo lab technician.

As he headed out for drills one morning, his commander stopped him: "You're staying back today," he said. "I've got something else for you." One long flight, eight hours of polygraphs, and a few new nice suits later, he was an official White House photographer, capturing the daily lives of LBJ and his family on the iconic Nikon F.

"There were only two places I wasn't allowed to photograph LBJ," says Kevin. "In the bathroom, and whenever he was laughing!"

After three years on the job, Kevin returned to Oregon, where he's followed his true lifelong passion ever since: nature photography. He loves to capture any wildlife, but birds are his favorite. "Plus, they're easiest because there are more of them than anything else," he says.

Kevin and his wife Kei Quitevis-Smith have been OEC members for 34 years. For him, it's all about keeping nature in balance.

"Without the birds, the insects they eat, and the plants they pollinate, we wouldn't be here. So whenever I start feeling pessimistic, I look out my back window and watch the squirrels chase each other around, and the birds at my feeders. Seeing Mother Nature thrive always brings me hope."

See more of Kevin's photos at his website:
kevinsmithnaturephotos.com

Celebrating the Commitment of Two Longtime Members

Walt Mintkeski: Engineering a Better Future for All

For decades, Walt Mintkeski has led by example, showing what it means to live your values and fight for what matters most. Few people have had a greater impact on our state's water protections.

Simply put, Walt is known for showing up.

During his career as an environmental engineer, he focused on providing communities with clean water and clean energy – two resources most essential to life. With a professional background in municipal water and wastewater systems and stormwater management, Walt has been a steady force for clean water and sustainable resource management. His charitable giving has helped OEC put into place important state policies that protect the groundwater that 70% of Oregonians depend on, particularly benefiting lower-income families relying on private wells.

Even in retirement, he has continued to be a consistent advocate in the fight for stronger policies to protect Oregon's agricultural land, forests, water, climate, and communities.

We at OEC are proud to count Walt as a supporter since 1988. He brings the same commitment to other statewide partner organizations like the Nature Conservancy, Oregon League of Conservation Voters, Wild Salmon Center, Citizens' Climate Lobby, and Johnson Creek Watershed Council, through countless volunteer hours and financial support alike.

His years of service – in partnership with OEC and across Oregon's environmental community – will forever shape our work. Thank you, Walt, for being a champion for Oregon's environment, and for your decades of work building a healthier planet for future generations.

Public Policy Expert Jackie Dingfelder on Oregon's Environmental Leadership

With four decades of experience as a planner, legislator, and educator, Jackie Dingfelder has seen what's possible when communities work together. In a recent interview with OEC, she emphasized the importance of state-level action. "It's not a time to throw up your hands," she says, "It's a time to double down and get involved."

From 2001 to 2013, Jackie represented NE and SE Portland in the Oregon Legislature, chairing the Environment, Energy and Natural Resources committees in both the House and Senate. Her legislative achievements read like a roadmap of Oregon's environmental progress, including the state's first Renewable Portfolio Standard, the Global Warming Commission, the Clean Fuels Program, e-waste recycling, Oregon's first marine reserve, expanding the Bottle Bill, and passage of the bill to remove the Klamath dams.

Oregon's collaborative approach to problem-solving has always resonated with Jackie. "Oregonians have a can-do spirit and want to work to solve problems on their own," she says.

Jackie now serves as a Senior Fellow at Portland State University's Hatfield School of Government, where she focuses on special projects and earned her PhD in 2017. She also serves on the Central Oregon Land Watch Board (focusing on land use, water, and wildlife issues), and on the National Caucus of Environmental Legislators, a national organization empowering a nonpartisan network of state legislative champions.

What gives her hope for the future? The next generation of environmental leaders. "I'm always impressed when I meet with young people who are working for a better future," she says. "They're not backing down."

Read the full interview

Inside OEC

Welcome, New OEC Staffers!

Grace Gonzalez, Executive Assistant
Having lived on both coasts, in Colorado, and in Puerto Rico, Grace carries a unique appreciation for the diversity of natural systems across the U.S. She is dedicated to ensuring a healthy, resilient environment for future generations, including her son.

Jessie Kochaver, Clean Grid Campaign Director
Jessie is passionate about building a clean, equitable energy future through collaboration, policy, and advocacy. Prior to serving as Climate Policy Analyst in Representative Mark Gamba's office, she was a member of OEC's Emerging Leaders Board.

Sarah Clark, Deputy Director of Programs
Sarah is an organizer at heart. She served as a legislative aide in the Colorado State Senate, supported power-building efforts for 36 chapters throughout the West at Sierra Club, and managed statewide LGBTQ campaigns at One Colorado.

Meet Our New Board Members!

Dr. Vivek Shandas is a professor in the School of Ecology, Environment and Society at Portland State and an advisor to CAPA Strategies, a global climate consulting firm. His work aims to translate scientific findings about the built environment, climate change, and public health into community adaptation strategies and regional policies.

(Read more about his work on page 4.)

Jacob Fritz is a born-and-raised Central Oregonian. As Program Director and Facilitator for the Deschutes Collaborative Forest Project, he works with environmentalists, loggers, and recreationalists to create a shared vision for forest restoration. He also brings this expertise to the world of architecture, helping clients manage onsite energy integration, water treatment, and Living Building Challenge certification.

Emerging Leaders Board: New Cohort Announced!

Meet Oregon's next generation of environmental leaders in our Emerging Leaders Board. Learn more about the new cohort and read their bios at oeconline.org/emerging-leaders-board.

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We bring Oregonians together to protect our water, air and land with healthy solutions that work for today and for future generations. Founded in 1968 by concerned Oregonians across the state, we are a membership-based, nonpartisan nonprofit.© 2025 All rights reserved. ISSN 0890-1201