

A profile of THE COWBOY: Jim Walls

This is one in a series of three stories profiling actions of adaptation to climate change in the rural West.

by Dylan Kruse, Sustainable Northwest

They call this place the Oregon Outback. You understand the name when the July wind comes sweeping over the high desert mountains and through the dry pine forests before settling in the valleys below. There it builds massive alkaline dust storms that crawl forever east into the expanse of the Great Basin. It is a location so remote that the designation of rural no longer applies. In fact, the U.S. Census Bureau calls this place something entirely different: Frontier.

And deep within the heart of this frontier, 100 miles from the nearest stop light, is a giant wooden cowboy, outfitted with a bandana and 10-gallon hat. His right knee bends casually with a foot placed atop a sign greeting those that have made the long journey. Welcome to Lakeview.

A Storied Past

The town of Lakeview, Oregon was founded in 1876. During its heyday, this was the definition of a timber town, housing three of the five sawmills in Lake County. These mills drew much of their supply from the adjacent Fremont-Winema



National Forest. But in the 1980s and early 1990s, protests about environmental degradation and the endangered species listing of the Spotted Owl dramatically affected the whole forest economy, effectively shutting the forest down. Over the next decade, four of the sawmills were forced to close, over 800 jobs were lost, and the community found itself walking down the same road as countless others like it in the region. A couple of things could have happened at that point. The remaining industry could have dug in and fought to the end of a bitter war with environmental groups, most likely resulting in more economic devastation for the community and little action in the forest. Or residents could have succumbed to chronic unemployment and poverty and given up on their future.

But something different happened here.

In 1998, county leadership invited Sustainable Northwest to assist them in bringing together 100 environmentalists, scientists, agency personnel, timber industry staff, and community members to do what many thought was impossible: talk to each other and find a solution.

Sustainable Northwest is a regional nonprofit organization dedicated to finding local solutions to complex environmental and economic challenges. They worked hand in hand with local leaders to convene and facilitate dialogues over the next few years, ultimately resulting in the formation of the Lakeview Stewardship Group, a forest collaborative dedicated

to restoring and maintaining the ecological well-being of the Fremont-Winema National Forest, while deriving sustainable economic benefits from its resources. The common ground that was found set the stage for forest restoration to occur and the remaining mill to keep its doors open.

Starting Over

Lake County is set in a fire adapted landscape, where managing and preparing for the constant possibility of wildfire impacts all decision-making. The community, therefore, sought to revitalize its forest industry through the creation of jobs driven by the need for restoration, especially in the face of emerging landscape-level threats such as climate change.

However, the difficult forest health and economic circumstances that faced Lake County would not be relieved with remnants of its traditional natural resource economy; something else had to fill the gap. As the convening organization of the Lakeview Stewardship Group, Lake County Resources Initiative set out to define a different vision for the region. LCRI recognized and valued that their county has been bestowed with natural resources well beyond the trees and grasslands that supported its traditional forest products and ranching industries. Sitting atop the Abert Fault Line, geothermal energy is prevalent across the landscape, and the regional climate provides for some of the most consistent sunlight in the nation. Furthermore, fuels reduction in the forest and residue byproducts from the local mill resulted in tremendous amounts of waste wood that served no immediate purpose, but grew in size each year.

So within the Oregon desert, this relentless community built the foundation for a new natural resource economy; and set an audacious goal. Lake County is attempting to become the nation's first county to offset all of its fossil fuel emissions with renewable energy. And if Jim Walls has anything to say about it, you better believe that they're going to get there.

Leading the Charge

Jim Walls is a cowboy, and not metaphorically or like the wooden caricature that greets you as you enter town. When you add up the boots and hat, he's seven solid feet of booming voice that will be happy to talk to you about the local timber market right after he feeds his horses. But ask him about recent advancements in solar panel technology and watch his eyes really light up. This may be surprising to many, but Jim Walls is also the Executive Director of Lake County Resources Initiative (LCRI), and the man who many would call the shepherd of Lakeview's bold new future. Jim was born 100 miles outside of Lakeview

and worked several ranches in the region in his youth before leaving to make his name far across the country for 33 years with the Natural Resources Conservation Service. However, time and distance weren't enough to silence the calls of crisis. The chosen son who returned home, at the invitation of local leaders and with support from Sustainable Northwest, he took the helm at Lake County Resources Initiative in 2001 to help lead the community out of its darkest hour.



Jim Walls leads a forest tour in Lake County, Oregon

Under Jim's watch, LCRI emerged from the previous decade's conflicts with the goal of promoting local workforce training and sustainable economic development in the county. They've worked with environmental groups, timber businesses, and non-profits to preserve the ecological and economic functions of the Fremont-Winema National Forest, assisted local contractors in doing business with the federal government, developed creative landscape monitoring to measure their progress, and are the driving force behind Lake County's renewable energy push. Without on-the-ground technical assistance and guidance from LCRI, it is improbable that Lake County would have made such tremendous progress in the last decade. But it's also the intangible benefits that make LCRI, and other community-based organizations, so critical to rural community resiliency. Change is about more than project management and politics; it's also about generating a spirit of entrepreneurship and open-mindedness to catalyze innovation at the most fundamental level. That is the feeling that resonates so strongly when you walk down the streets of Lakeview, making it is easy to believe they will reach their goals.

More than the Trees are Green

They don't have a big red bus in Lakeview, but these days Jim

finds himself playing tour guide in his white truck quite a bit. He's spent the day showing me projects that have already been implemented and detailing plans to offset 93% of Lake County's fossil fuel emissions. I packed up expecting a long ride but had barely finished asking where the first facility was located when we pulled up to the local hospital. Jim smiled at the puzzled look on my face and pointed to the ground, "right under your feet".

In rural areas that lack access to natural gas like Lake County, more expensive sources of energy like heating oil and electric heat are used in facilities and homes. As a result, the cost of thermal energy (i.e. heating and cooling buildings) is well above average. Institutional facilities like hospitals, schools, and prisons are especially vulnerable to rising fuel costs, as they consume significant amounts of energy. So when Lake District Hospital conducted a massive renovation in 2011, the addition of a geothermal heating system for the facility was an obvious choice. Similar work has been done down the street at Warner Creek Correctional Facility, which also uses a geothermal system, and the next stage of this process will be a retrofit of the outdated boilers at four local schools. This work is possible due to a \$1 million geothermal energy retrofit grant available through President Obama's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, and a unique venture between the town of Lakeview, the school district, and the hospital. This project has created a district heating system that is already saving the hospital \$100,000 a year in reduced heating costs. By fall of 2013, the town hopes to have geothermal energy supplying the heating and cooling needs of the school district, estimating additional annual savings of \$50,000. These savings are nearly enough to hire two teachers, a substantial difference in a school district of 700 students facing potential budget cuts.

After touring the hospital's state of the art geothermal system, we headed to the outskirts of town, where construction crews were gathering and unloading supplies in a large open field. East of Oregon's Cascade Mountains, Lake County boasts 300 sunny days annually, and the largest solar project in the state will be built in Lakeview in the next year. This installation will provide clean renewable electricity to 400 surrounding homes, and upcoming projects in the area also include solar panels on barns and existing structures, as well as large scale electricity installations. But solar energy, like many renewable technologies, also has the power to generate more than electricity; it can also produce heat. This is being demonstrated at the Playa Retreat Center, located north of Lakeview near Summer Lake. Here, solar vacuum tubes have been placed on the roof of the facility to generate thermal energy for the building.

The county is also exploring woody biomass projects to not only fulfill its energy needs, but also to improve forest health. Forest restoration treatments in Lake County have resulted in massive amounts of small diameter wood byproducts that have no immediate value. Without an alternative purpose, they are often burned in the forest or simply left in piles, exacerbating the risk of uncharacteristically negative wildfire. However, this material can be burned to generate both electricity and heat, and the added value can help offset the costs of restoration treatments to conduct more work. The local sawmill also produces massive amounts of wood residue that could feed a biomass facility. To date, political and financing hurdles have prohibited biomass energy developments in the county, but the desire to pursue them has not waned. Long-term goals may include a district energy system to supply the electricity and heating needs of downtown Lakeview.

The potential for cost-savings, job creation, and energy security from reduced fossil fuel demand in the county are tremendous. So when I ask Jim about how he responds to climate change skeptics, his response covers everything else. "Regardless of climate change, if what we're doing is good for the country, and it's good for the economy, how can you fight that?"

Change Starts at Home

Lake County has many opportunities to install large scale renewable energy; however, residential and business projects must also play a critical component in reaching its goal. Recognizing this, Jim has taken the time to conduct outreach and provide technical assistance to many homeowners and local businesses, making it possible for them to convert to



Tubes convert solar energy into heat for a Playa Retreat Center building.



Hunter's Hot Springs geyser (left) is popular with residents, and pipes at Lake District Hospital carry hot water from underground to heat the building.

renewable energy sources. For example, geothermal heat is used in residential and commercial buildings across the county. For those lucky enough to visit Hunter's Hot Springs outside of downtown Lakeview, you can relax in the lodge that is heated with geothermal, and enjoy the tomatoes growing in the greenhouse next door. This is how businesses and people survive the long winter months, when temperatures can drop to 18°F for days at a time. Additionally, homes that dot the county roads often tap directly into the geothermal resource or have installed ground source heat pumps at a fraction of the cost of purchasing heating oil.

Another emerging trend is a growing interest among residents to move “off the grid” with their homes and ranches; fulfilling their energy needs with individual units installed directly to their homes. These include small solar panels and wind turbines for electricity, ground source heat pumps for warmth, and energy efficiency measures as part of the county's culture of sustainability. And nearly every one of these residents smiles and shakes the hand of Jim when he approaches on our visit. That's because LCRI's technical assistance efforts since 2008 will save homes, businesses, and ranches in Lake County nearly \$2 million in reduced energy costs over the next 30 years. In a town reeling from economic decline, these simple actions are home-grown solutions that help make a rural livelihood possible.

Getting There: Overcoming Challenges

Despite these impressive accomplishments and plans, the adage about Rome not being built in a day certainly applies here. Redefining and rebuilding rural economies in the western U.S. involves many hurdles. One of the largest challenges for Lake County is that its land is 78% government owned and

has a limited tax base to finance new projects. That's why in Lakeview, as in rural communities across the West, innovative public-private partnerships that leverage state and federal financing with private sector support are essential to constructing renewable energy facilities. Many of Lake County's operational renewable energy sites were initiated with grants, loans, and tax-credits available through state and federal sources, and additional contributions in the future will be key to unlocking the county's full potential. Jim will be the first to tell you that the

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county is filled with “independent people with a rugged spirit, but the government is still an important partner.”

Another issue is scale. The dream of many project developers is to go big, but without substantial renewable market opportunities, it often isn't financially feasible to construct large installations. However, smaller community-scaled projects still benefit isolated rural communities experiencing expensive energy costs. That's the direction that Lakeview is going in, and one that continues to provide opportunity even as large renewable markets fluctuate. Like anyone else, Jim worries about the economy, but doesn't let it slow him down. “The big export markets will come back, in the meantime, we'll adapt. There is plenty of opportunity right in our own backyard”.

Changes on the Land

Jim brags about developing just about every form of renewable energy in Lake County except for ocean wave technology. And with a touch of black humor, he adds “but I tell people that because of global warming I wouldn't rule it out”. The specter of climate change in Lakeview is one that is very real, and coupled with existing stressors, presents a profound threat to the long-term health of the landscape and the communities

that steward it. An active response has been demonstrated in the commitment to renewable energy generation, but actions to offset carbon emissions aren't enough to help the landscape adapt to transformations that have already occurred. These include drought, invasive species, increased tree mortality, and uncertainty about the future of the forest's expansion or recession in response to these variations. All of these add up to the potential for more frequent high-intensity fires, where just one severe event could fundamentally alter the future of Lake County. In a community setting its sights on a future of sustainably derived benefit from natural resources, these risks are too profound to be ignored.

Partners in Restoration

This means coming together once more to find a solution to what many see as an intractable problem. But this time, the setting is very different. Jim has helped the Lakeview Stewardship Group mature into a strong entity capable of reacting in unison where only tensions used to arise. The group has bound together diverse stakeholders to adapt to stressors and changes by pursuing active management for forest health and resilience. And a key ally in this battle is one of the unlikeliest of all. In a community with adjacent public and private lands, action on Federal land alone will not be sufficient to improve the well-being of the landscape. These activities can also be expensive to conduct without a source of revenue from the byproducts of restoration to offset costs. All this means keeping a place at the table for Collins Pine Company, the lone sawmill that survived the great transformation of the 1990s. Jim is well aware of how critical maintaining this relationship is, and has made a concerted effort to ensure Collins actively participates in the collaborative group and is supported to keep their doors open.

Collins has held up their end of the deal as well. In 2007, the company built a small diameter mill to utilize material from restoration, and is working with LCRI to explore renewable energy generated from woody biomass from the surrounding forests and mill operations. Collins has even had its private forest holdings in Lake County certified by the Forest Stewardship Council, a program designed to promote responsible management of forests. This includes removing overcrowded and unhealthy trees at risk of abnormal wildfire and disease, and selective harvesting, where only certain trees in a particular stand are removed to maintain biodiversity. These efforts have allowed the company to stay economically competitive, saved 100 jobs, and supported restoration work on both public and private lands. As Paul Harlan, Vice President of Resources at

the Collins Companies stated, "I truly believe that the world has to come to grips with the idea of sustainability, and I very strongly believe that this is the perfect place to talk to folks about how you work and fit in your local environment." The Lakeview Stewardship Group has thus forged a public-private partnership that cares for the land, maintains infrastructure for economic opportunity, and is prepared to adapt to future challenges like climate change.

Looking Ahead

This is the story of a community that not only survived, but has come together and is determined, destined if you will, to thrive. They've adapted to each challenge before them and displayed remarkable ingenuity to develop new markets in a place that many thought would wither away in the Oregon Outback. Like the giant wooden cowboy on the edge of town, it's helped to have a larger than life figure to guide the process. But Jim Walls is humble about his role and knows that the responsibility for the future belongs to everyone. He looks beyond the county line and says, "What if 100 communities did this, what if 1,000 communities did this? They say the problem before us is huge, but I say let's take it a step at a time. Either way, doing nothing is not an excuse anymore".

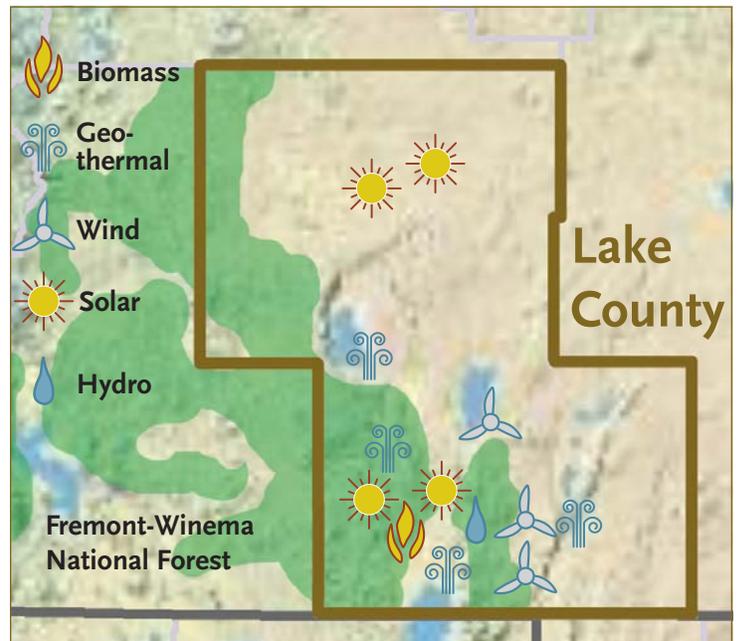
They call this place the frontier for a lot of reasons. These are people defined by perseverance who refuse to be denied the path they choose in life. But perhaps the greatest reason is because of the unique place their ambition is taking them, and the course they are charting to get there. Significant challenges face the health of the landscapes of the western U.S., and this work will become more complex due to the anticipated effects of climate change, energy demand, and competition for natural resources in coming years. However, this visionary community has shown time and again that regardless of land ownership, financial obstacles, or value systems, common ground solutions can always be found if you are willing to build a new future together. With that commitment in hand, no place is too bold to go, and no goal is too large to achieve. ■

Jim Walls is the Executive Director of Lake County Resources Initiative and the convener of the Lakeview Stewardship Group. He is also a longtime member of the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC), a network comprised of western rural and local, regional, and national organizations that have joined together to promote balanced conservation-based approaches to the ecological and economic problems facing the West. The RVCC is a policy initiative managed by Sustainable Northwest.



Recommendations

- Prioritize funding to programs and activities that strengthen community capacity, including community-based and regional organizations.
- Fund state and federal grant and guaranteed loan programs that support retrofits of institutional facilities that currently use petroleum-based fuels to generate thermal energy.
- Provide state and federal grant programs and tax incentives to assist low income and rural communities with energy efficiency upgrades and residential-scale renewable energy installations.
- Support collaborative groups by providing financial assistance to their organizational infrastructure to promote community and landowner engagement.
- Encourage the development of climate change adaptation plans and integrate them with existing land management plans on both public and private lands.



A variety of renewable energy projects are planned or underway in 2012

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