

As the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde continue planning for [Tumwata Village](#) in Oregon City, four other tribal groups and Portland General Electric will soon begin laying the groundwork for a second possible location to access Willamette Falls from the West Linn side of the river.

PGE and the Willamette Falls Trust, which is composed of the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, announced their agreement to begin a feasibility study for what they are calling the [Willamette Falls Inter-Tribal Public Access Project](#).

Willamette Falls, the second largest waterfall by volume in North America, has been a significant landmark for Indigenous people for thousands of years. Tribes that lived at and around the falls, as well as Indigenous groups from hundreds of miles away, fished, gathered, traded and performed traditional ceremonies at the falls for generations.

Today, the land around the falls is only accessible through industrial sites like a PGE plant and the Willamette Falls Paper Company.

“Our vision is to secure public access to Willamette Falls that is free, inclusive, and brings healing to this sacred place for the many generations to come,” Robert Kentta, Chair of Willamette Falls Trust and tribal councilman of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, said in the June 29 announcement of the project. “This Agreement marks an important first step toward elevating the cultures and lifeways of the many Indigenous people with connections to the land and water that have sustained us for millennia. It will give all people a deeper sense of place in this incredible cultural landscape.”



Willamette Falls, as seen from PGE property in West Linn.
PMG Photo: Holly Bartholomew

PGE owns most of the land on the West Linn side of the falls, much of it taken up by the power company's energy generating facilities, the Willamette Falls Paper Company and the Willamette Falls Locks. According to the new agreement, the trust and PGE will examine portions of PGE property outside of the

areas controlled by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission — primarily the area known as Moore’s Island.

This is not the same area currently under dispute between PGE, the Department of State Lands and the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde, which is no longer an active member of the trust.

The Grand Ronde hopes to build a ceremonial fishing platform on the land around the falls that is now the subject of a [condemnation case](#) involving the tribal government, PGE and the state of Oregon. This contested site sits next to Moore’s Island — the subject of the Willamette Falls Trust Feasibility Study. According to PGE, the new agreement with the trust does not impact its efforts to condemn the land that the Department of State Lands previously said the Grand Ronde could use for the fishing platform. The case has moved slowly through the United States District Court for the District of Oregon. Most recently, both sides requested an extension of discovery deadlines.

The trust envisions that the Inter-Tribal Public Access Project would include public walkways, viewing structures and interpretive spaces for community events and cultural programming. Renderings from the trust also show native plants and garden spaces.



Regional tribes would like to see public access at Willamette Falls
Courtesy Image: Willamette Falls Trust

PGE stated the agreement reaffirms the power company’s “recognition of the area’s immense importance to Northwest Tribes and intent to grant a permanent easement that gives Tribal nations safe access for traditional cultural practices at the falls in a manner that allows PGE to continue to operate its Sullivan hydroelectric facility.”

The agreement also notes that PGE plans to reapply for its license for the Sullivan plant in 2035. The Willamette Falls Paper Company, which operates on PGE property leased through a Chicago-based real estate company, has the right to operate its mill until at least 2034.

Though the city of West Linn is not currently a member of the trust, PGE said its decision to join the agreement was based in part on community visioning for the West Linn waterfront conducted in recent

years. After those visioning efforts stalled during the pandemic, the city of West Linn decided to restart that process to [reimagine what the Willamette waterfront](#), including the area subject to the feasibility study, could look like. West Linn Mayor Rory Bialostosky said the city looks forward to collaborating with all interested parties on the waterfront vision.

"The waterfront near Willamette Falls is really special to West Linn, and increasing public access for all to the river and Willamette Falls is a priority for the city," Bialostosky said. "We welcome the news of the study and look forward to the continued conversation on the topic."

The trust noted it regularly communicates with the city of West Linn, Metro and other public and private entities.

Despite pulling out of the trust 2021, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde expressed excitement about the prospect of working with other tribes following the announcement of the Inter-Tribal Public Access Project.

"As caretakers of Tumwata village and the falls, we welcome the opportunity to work with partners on more public access to the falls," Grand Ronde spokesperson Sara Thompson wrote in a statement on behalf of the tribes. "Our goal, guided by our vision of restoration and revitalization, has always been increased public access to the falls. We look forward to working with local stakeholders, the Trust and the Tribes and seeing the results of the feasibility study."

While the falls were a cultural landmark for Indigenous people for thousands of years, industrial development began to dominate the area over the last century and a half. Only relatively recently — within the past decade or so — did governments other than the tribes push for more public and tribal access to the falls, in partnership with the tribes.



The Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde first erected the fishing platform at Willamette Falls in 2018.
Contributed photo: The Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde

In fact, the trust got its start in 2015 as the fundraising branch of the [Willamette Falls Legacy Project](#), a collaboration between the current trust tribes, the Grand Ronde, the state, Clackamas County, Metro and Oregon City.

The legacy project's chief objective was to construct a riverwalk in Oregon City that would provide public access to the falls.

The Grand Ronde officially became a partner in the legacy project after purchasing the former Blue Heron Paper Mill site in 2019. Grand Ronde [pulled out of the trust](#) in 2021, citing "undermining of our Tribal sovereignty and subjection to micro-aggressions" but remained with the Legacy Project for several more months before officially deciding to [leave that partnership](#) in March 2022.

The Grand Ronde plans to maintain aspects of the Legacy Project's aims, including a riverwalk, in its plans for Tumwata Village at the Blue Heron mill site.