

## **WRITTEN TESTIMONY**

### **Oregon Joint Committee on Capital Construction 2/11/22**

**TO:** Co-Chairs Oregon JCCC

**From:** Steve Mealey, McKenzie River Discovery Center (MRDC)  
Board of Directors (BOD)

**Subject:** Request for Capital Construction funds for the proposed  
MRDC near Vida, Oregon

**Thesis:** As a ‘world class’ destination attraction, the MRDC is an urgently needed investment to help revitalize the McKenzie Valley community and its social/economic and environmental bases deeply affected by the pandemic and devastated by the Holiday Farm Fire. MRDC is on track to be ‘shovel ready’ by December 2022 and is ready to lead the river community recovery. It will attract as many as 50,000 visitors/year and contribute as much as \$7 million/year to the area. MRDC cost is \$18.5 million, of which 10% has been raised; the BOD is requesting one-third of the remainder in Capital Construction funds to advance the project in a challenging fund-raising climate. These one-time dollars will assure potential donors that the MRDC is a worthy and needed investment.

I am a 4<sup>th</sup> generation Oregonian and have lived in the McKenzie Valley or been associated with the McKenzie River for nearly 70 years. Since 2000 I’ve been particularly active in the community and have served in several roles including president of the McKenzie River Guides Association, member of the McKenzie Fire and Rescue BOD, member of the McKenzie Chamber of Commerce and co-founder in 2006 of the MRDC project. In that latter role, I presented the concept of the MRDC to the Lane County Parks Advisory Board in 2007 and to the Lane County

Board of Commissioners in 2017. My advocacy was based on providing a 'world class' destination attraction at the 46-acre Lane County Parks-owned Old McKenzie Hatchery property at Leaburg Lake that would showcase the beautiful, rare-in-the-world McKenzie River and watershed, it's unique and famous fish and it's iconic McKenzie drift boats. In revealing these under-appreciated treasures of the McKenzie in digital and interactive ways, tens of thousands of visitors would experience the McKenzie in new ways and help revitalize the declining McKenzie Valley community. Both the parks advisory group and county commissioners voted to support the MRDC project.

Since living in the Blue River community in the early 1960s, I've observed the following (applicable primarily from Vida to McKenzie Bridge) relating mostly to job loss resulting from the dramatic decline in the federal timber program and the completion of federal and private hydropower and flood control projects.

- 1) McKenzie school enrollment has dropped from nearly 1000 students in the 1970s to under 200 presently. Supporting education funding has declined dramatically.
- 2) Church attendance has declined dramatically as congregations have aged and declined in numbers.
- 3) Values of many once valued and valuable dwellings have declined and become refuges for "squatters" and the unemployed.
- 4) Lane Council of Governments (LCOG) projects a continuing trend in population aging and decline for the McKenzie Valley.
- 5) The early September 2020 Holiday Farm Fire burned 173,000 acres in the McKenzie watershed with particularly high intensity in the river corridor between Rainbow and Vida destroying over 430 structures, mostly homes and businesses. The effects on infrastructure including social/economic/environmental effects at

present are both devastating and incalculable. At best, without significant economic aid, the social/economic/environmental future of the McKenzie Valley is uncertain if not at great risk.

6) “**MCKENZIE STRONG**” appears written in numerous places up and down the fire devastated McKenzie River corridor. It conveys an attitude expressed by organizations such as the McKenzie Schools, McKenzie Community Development Corporation, the McKenzie Chamber of Commerce, McKenzie Community Track and Field, FEMA, ODOT, and Lane County Commissioners that they are committed to a strong, vital recovery and future for the McKenzie Valley in spite of unimaginable tragedy, hardship and challenges. This is an attitude shared by the MRDC BOD and is embodied in the project’s commitment to help the community rebuild, and in particular complement/supplement McKenzie Schools learning programs at a time of declining school funding.

Over 100 years ago, my grandfather, William Mealey wrote the attached poem *To the McKenzie*. It celebrates the purity and healing powers of the river. With the river as a powerful source and symbol of healing, I ask on behalf of the MRDC for the JCCC to support our request for Capital Construction funds to advance the MRDC project and help the McKenzie Community on its path to recovery and sustainability.

## To the McKenzie

By William Mealey

Fairest of all the crystal streams  
Wonderous river of my dreams

Thy source is the eternal snows  
From whence thy icy water flows

I would thy pureness could depart  
All sin fromout the human heart

That thy waters as they play  
Could wash each impure thought away

Could leave the soul without a stain  
Always, ever to remain

As clear as thine own limpid flows  
That flashing bright as silver goes

Ever onward on thy course  
Full of life and strength and force

Gathered from a thousand rills  
Fromout the everlasting hills

Would that I were such as you  
Could cut impeading barriers through

From source of life, to peaceful sea  
And rest there for eternity

But what am I, who gaze on you  
What can I even hope to do?

Who am of lowland country birth  
Not of the highlands of the earth

As you were born, pureness abides  
And flows within your crystal tides.