

# Trail Advocates

of the Clackamas River Ranger District of the Mount Hood National Forest

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## Austin Hot Springs

**Topic:** [Austin Hot Springs](#) (click to view all messages in thread)

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**Posted on:** 12/22/2008; 12:40:28 PM

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Drove by there about a month ago, noticed lots of earth berms and signs of heavy machinery. Here's the low-down:

## Austin Hot Springs owner in hot water with regulators

by Scott Learn, The Oregonian

Friday December 12, 2008, 8:33 PM



Courtesy of the Hot Springs Conservancy Rubble blocks a side channel at Austin Hot Springs on the Clackamas River, stranding juvenile salmon. Regulators say the owner of the private property removed material and filled on both sides of the river at the popular but unauthorized soaking site. The owners say they did some work to prevent trespassers from burning themselves in the sometimes scalding water but did not remove material or damage the river.

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The private owners of the steamy place known as **Austin Hot Springs** had tacked up the no trespassing signs, dug the roadside ditches to thwart cars, posted the warnings about unexpected surges of 200-degree water.

But the soakers kept coming by the hundreds, some bearing bags of concrete.

After four people were badly burned at the Clackamas River's only hot springs this fall, the owners brought in an excavator to try to discourage the soakers once more.

What happened next is in dispute.

But the ground truth is that many of the makeshift pools are now gone, a side channel considered prime salmon habitat is blocked with debris -- and the owners, the J. Frank Schmidt Profit Sharing Trust, are in hot water with environmental regulators.

The Department of State Lands issued a cease and desist order Dec. 1. A host of federal, state and local agencies are involved in the investigation.

Michael McCabe, a senior resource coordinator with state lands, noted that the Clackamas is a federal wild and scenic river and is home to three runs of salmon listed under the Endangered Species Act.

Juvenile fish are stranded in the blocked side channel, likely spring chinook, McCabe said. The state says removal and fill occurred on both sides of the river, though such work isn't allowed without state permission.

"It's a complex situation," he said. "But we really do have a high degree of concern for the habitat that was adversely impacted."

Jan Barkley, a trustee with the Boring-based trust, said the contract excavator operator concentrated on blocking off auto access from Oregon 224, which runs just by the site, about 35 miles southeast of Estacada.

Squatters at the hot springs have damaged the river, she said, but the contractor did not.

"We know better than that," Barkley said. "We just went in there to try to protect ourselves (from lawsuits) and to try to protect people from getting burned. You put up (warning) signs, and they're down almost before you leave the place."

The dispute puts the remote and spectacular site, officially off-limits but a destination for decades, at a crossroads.

Regulators could order the owner to restore the river to its natural state. But if history holds, unauthorized visitors would likely change that in a hurry.

The site -- owned by Portland General Electric until burning incidents prompted the utility to sell it in 1985 -- still has several unauthorized concrete-edged pools left, complete with piping to let cool water in and hot water out.

### **Potential buyer**

Michael Rysavy, president and chairman of the **Northwest Forest Conservancy**, has helped tend nearby **Bagby Hot Springs** and Austin for years, helping pluck out thousands of pounds of trash and cut crime at the springs. He met his wife at Bagby, and together they've visited about 150 hot springs sites.

He has a plan to make the hot springs a legitimate destination.

The 32-year-old Clackamas Realtor is trying to raise \$1 million in the next year from donors and investors to buy the 152 acres of private land that includes Austin Hot Springs. He hopes to buy it for \$700,000, using the remainder to begin restoring the site.

He just set up a company and a **Web site** to spearhead the effort.

Rysavy's vision is to turn Austin Hot Springs into an overnight campground, with on-site caretakers and perhaps yurts and cabins.

He'd construct natural pools along the far side of the river, where the hot water trickles from a cliff and can be easily segregated.

On the road side of the river, where volcanically heated, near-boiling water can come unexpectedly from below, the options include a concrete-lined pool or a bathhouse like at Bagby that would draw hot water from geothermal wells on the property, leaving the river alone.

"You can't just come in here and throw down civil penalties and say, 'Fix it,'" Rysavy said. "This needs to be a safe place for recreational use, because you're not going to be able to keep people out."

### **Improvements needed**

Rysavy would have to make a lot of improvements. Today, the site is ruttled with trenches, largely denuded of trees near the river and littered with huge concrete pylons, rubble and trash.

Given the environmental sensitivity of the site, Rysavy and his allies would have to negotiate a thicket of regulations. And development plans for Austin have fallen through before.

But Rysavy's efforts have the support of Gary Larsen, supervisor for the **Mount Hood National Forest**, which surrounds the site. The forest has an "excellent working relationship" with Rysavy, Larsen said in a letter to J. Frank Schmidt this week.

Todd Alsbury, North Willamette watershed fish biologist for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, is one of the regulators involved in advising on the excavator incident.

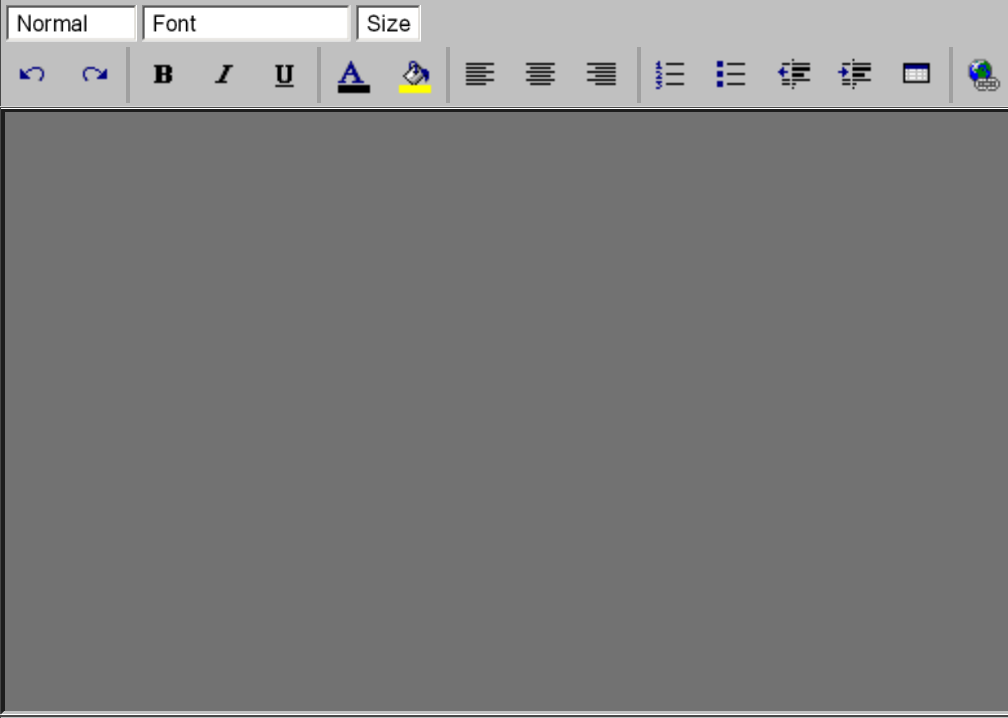
"You could create something like a small park that would have the fish benefits and recreation at the same time," he said. "You'd have to have somebody to manage it and continued long-term maintenance. Provided that happens, we're on board with that."

The profit-sharing trust loaned the previous owner money and obtained the property in foreclosure after he defaulted on property taxes, said Barkley, the trustee. She said she'd like to see the site become legitimate, too.

"It is an absolutely gorgeous spot, and it's so close," she said. "Hopefully Mike can get something through so people can enjoy a hot springs."

-- Scott Learn; [scottlearn@news.oregonian.com](mailto:scottlearn@news.oregonian.com)

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**Response subject:****Text:**

The image shows a rich text editor interface. At the top, there is a toolbar with several icons: a 'Normal' button, a 'Font' dropdown menu, a 'Size' dropdown menu, and various icons for undo, redo, bold, italic, underline, text color, background color, bulleted list, numbered list, indent, outdent, link, and unlink. Below the toolbar is a large, empty text area with a dark gray background. At the bottom of the editor, there are two checkboxes: 'View HTML Source' (unchecked) and 'Use CSS' (checked).

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