



*Executive Summary:*  
**Whose Land  
is Our Land?**

*Spatial exclusion,  
racial segregation,  
and the history of the  
lands of western  
Multnomah County*

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## Introduction

This report examines the ways in which the historical relationships between land and marginalized people in Oregon, Portland, and western Multnomah County are still impacting the District's work and the communities we serve today. As an organization that has committed itself to integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion into our work at every level, we face the challenge of serving a region where access to home- and landownership, proximity to green space and healthy landscapes, and exposure to environmental hazards is substantially influenced by one's race. How did we get here? This report calls attention to some of the legal, social, and institutional factors that have determined how land, homes, and natural resources have been made available to white communities and withheld from communities of color over the course of the past 200 years. The histories explored include those of the indigenous Chinookan people of the Lower Columbia and the tribes that now comprise the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde, the Chinese American and Japanese American agriculturalists who farmed from the Columbia Gorge to Goose Hollow, and the African American communities who have long lived and worked around the Willamette and Columbia Rivers despite generations of exclusion and displacement. Going further, this report will examine the subsequent state of environmental injustice and inequitable access to landownership these communities in our District are experiencing today. After 200 years of racial exclusion and segregation in western Multnomah County, communities of color within our District stand to benefit substantially from participation in District programs, but may face higher barriers to accessing West Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District (WMSWCD) services compared to their white counterparts. By better understanding the dynamics of past and present racial injustices in western Multnomah County, and how they impact our work in land and resource management, we as a District will be better prepared to challenge and address patterns of inequity through our work.

## Native Land Loss and the Colonization of the Portland Basin

We are not the first people to live on or look after this land. The Chinook of the Lower Columbia are West Multnomah's first land managers and stewards. The Chinook have survived roughly two centuries of a government and society focused on erasure of traditional lifeways and land use practices that were utilized for millennia on the land we are now attempting to restore. The Dawes Act of 1887 and the termination of the reservation system in 1954 eroded the ability of Native Americans of western Oregon to own and benefit from the use of contiguous acres of land. Lands inhabited by the Chinook were subdivided and reallocated in ways that prevent most beneficial uses. So much of WMSWCD's work to build up the health of our soils, protect and restore native plant communities, and shield the last of our prairies and oak savannahs from redevelopment are efforts to recover what was eradicated during the colonization of the Portland Basin. Members of dominant culture, including members of District staff, board, and constituency, have benefitted from that colonial project through our rights to live, work, and recreate on land that was ceded in exploitative treaties in 1857, from Forest Park to Sauvie Island. As beneficiaries who have set out to work for equity and justice, we have a responsibility to include the voices, concerns, and interests of the people who started this work, and to ally our efforts to restore the traditional functions of West Multnomah ecosystems with ongoing efforts to restore the traditional cultural knowledge of the first people of this land.

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## Alien Land Laws and the Elimination of Asian American Agriculture

Asian American farmers and ranchers have been integral to agriculture in our District and our region. From Hood River to Guild's Lake, Chinese and Japanese immigrant communities at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century turned tiny pieces of land into thriving farms, cultivating rich soils, healthy crops, and a living for their families. The Oregon state legislature, encouraged by Governor Pierce (a member of the Ku Klux Klan) and the white farming communities and grange associations threatened by increased competition for land and market share, spent the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century passing increasingly stringent laws governing the right of foreign-born residents to own and work agricultural land. Alien Land Laws were explicitly designed to take desirable land out of the hands of the people who had improved the soil health of their land. The internment of Japanese Americans in Oregon accelerated this process, forcing families who had managed to retain their farms into camps far from home. While some Japanese farmers were able to find neighbors and friends to care for their land while they were interned, more than 85% of Japanese-owned land was leased or sold by the Farm Security Administration (FSA), a federal agency tasked with preserving agricultural productivity. Anticipating the end of the internment era, the Oregon state legislature passed the strictest Alien Land Law yet, forbidding non-citizens from setting foot on agricultural land altogether. While a coalition of Japanese American residents won a civil rights case in the Oregon Supreme Court that forced the legislature to repeal the Alien Land Laws in 1949, many remained unable to return to their land. The discounts and financial assistance the FSA offered to white buyers during internment weren't offered to returning Japanese farmers. Japanese American farmers had spent decades improving their lands, but their farms were now too expensive for them to repurchase. Japanese American communities were able to win many civil rights victories following World War II. Unfortunately, Oregon's state government was successful in virtually eliminating the competition white farmers faced from Asian American agriculturalists, and ensured that most of the region's most valuable farmland returned to white ownership.

## Redlining, Urban Renewal, and Racial Exclusion in 20<sup>th</sup> Century

### Multnomah County

From the New Deal to the present day, black residents of western Multnomah County have faced an onslaught of explicitly and implicitly racist policies that have created tremendous barriers to land and homeownership. The Home Owner's Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) spent the post-war era practicing discriminatory lending that created deeply segregated neighborhoods across the country. The FHA facilitated low-interest loans to builders and developers with the condition that homes in their new suburbs would only be sold to white families. HOLC collaborated with the FHA to map and define the riskiness of lending to builders and homeowners in residential neighborhoods; if one black household lived within a neighborhood's borders, or if restrictions on black movement into the neighborhood were on the verge of expiration, HOLC would downgrade the neighborhood's rating and cut off lending to the "redlined" neighborhood. Homeowners and developers in neighborhoods like Palatine Hill and Sylvan Highlands also installed covenants on property deeds across the city that restricted owners from selling or renting to racial minorities. Major mortgage lenders continued to deny applications in historically redlined districts well into the 1990s, forcing black home buyers to take out risky loans or continue renting. While the Fair Housing Act of 1968 ostensibly freed non-white households to buy homes in whatever neighborhood they chose, there were

no enforcement mechanisms in place to ensure enforcement until the late 1980s. Many properties were not affordable for families of color who had been denied three decades to build wealth and equity as a homeowner that their white counterparts had enjoyed.

The belief that homes, buildings, and properties in non-white neighborhoods were substandard and undesirable would further devastate black communities in Portland during the urban renewal era of the 1960s and 1970s. When the federal government began providing funds to local governments for highway construction and other infrastructure projects, influential planners like Robert Moses encouraged cities and counties to utilize large-scale development projects as an opportunity to clear areas of “urban blight”. These projects adversely impacted segregated and struggling neighborhoods into which black and immigrant families had been relegated for decades. The construction of the I-5/I-405 loop, the Veterans Memorial Coliseum, and the Legacy Emanuel Hospital expansion razed a combined total of nearly one thousand black-owned homes. The owners of these homes were given 90-day notice to vacate their homes, accompanied by a below-market-rate payment of \$15,000. The devastating economic and social impacts that these policies and programs had on Portland’s communities of color were not accidental or coincidental; they were the result of intentional decisions on the part of public officials over the course of the century to devalue, disenfranchise, and disintegrate the wealth and wellbeing of these communities. This interruption of the intergenerational transfer of homeownership, exacerbated by racial income gaps and the housing market crash of the Great Recession, has created a black homeownership rate that has not substantially changed since housing discrimination became illegal in 1968. The average net worth for black and Latinx individuals barely clears one tenth of the white individual net worth average. The belief that black neighborhoods are inherently blighted and less valuable continues to limit opportunities for black communities to build wealth and access services like the ones offered by WMSWCD.

## Land, Environment, and Justice in the District Today

By exploring the history of land and race in western Multnomah County, we see how federal, state, and local policies have intentionally removed opportunities to accumulate wealth and acquire valuable land from communities of color and redistributed these opportunities to white communities over the course of the last two centuries. The result is a pattern of landownership that not only suppresses the ability of racial minorities to rebuild wealth and reestablish homes within our district, but also disproportionately exposes these communities to environmental hazards while reducing their access to environmental health benefits. Amenities such as public green spaces in our district, from community gardens to Forest Park trails, are often not available in traditionally redlined neighborhoods and to individuals who rely on public transportation. This makes it more difficult for marginalized communities to access the physical and mental health benefits associated with access to the natural areas our organization works to improve. Further, the industrial sanctuaries in riverfront neighborhoods like Guild’s Lake, Linnton, and St. John’s are home to many of the polluters responsible for our local Superfund site, which has degraded in-stream and riparian habitat and created a hazard extending up the food chain from the area’s resident fish. Households in these areas are also the most exposed to the hazards associated with Portland’s growing fossil fuel industry. Zenith Energy, a company that has developed Portland’s export market for hazardous tar sand crude (“dilbit”), purchased a terminal in the Guild’s Lake Industrial Sanctuary in 2017. Zenith has successfully dodged regulators and public disclosure requirements as they have continued to ship over \$71 million of dilbit per year into the city by rail. Multnomah County’s

communities of color are disproportionately concentrated in this area and are subject to increased risk if exposed to a spill or explosion. Many of these same communities face disproportionate exposure to air toxins from industrial facilities and unfiltered diesel vehicles in a county that has the dirtiest air in the state. A national study recently showed that air pollution is largely generated by white communities and breathed in by people of color. When communities of color are pushed out of safer and more desirable neighborhoods and into the margins of industrial areas, and when pollution vectors like freeways are installed in the neighborhoods in which people of color live, these communities are sentenced to lower life expectancies by virtue of the color of their skin.

West Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District has resolved to work towards diversity, equity, and inclusion as an integral part of our conservation mission. We face our own barriers in this pursuit: as an organization that primarily works with landowners, we are missing large segments of already underserved communities thanks to centuries of exclusionary policy. As an organization that is overseen by a board primarily composed of people who own land in our district, we are drawing our leadership from a pool that does not represent the diversity of communities in our district. Finally, as a government agency, we have a great deal of trust and accountability to rebuild with communities of color, who have experienced these injustices at the hands of our counterparts in government. As a district, we are already making inroads towards rebuilding access, participation, and power to communities of color in their relationship to the lands of western Multnomah County. However, as we move forward in planning for the future of this organization, the pursuit of environmental justice must be integral to our approach: one's identity should not determine one's degree of protection from environmental hazard or one's ability to participate in the decisions that determine whether the place that one lives, works, or plays will be safe and healthy. By amplifying the voices of communities of color in our programs, our staff, and our leadership, we will not only be helping to restore some of what has been taken from these communities, but we will be ensuring that our conservation and restoration work is better informed, more resilient, and addresses a wider range of needs for the human and ecological communities that co-exist on this land.