

I Was A Dirt Cop For The FBI

by Tangela Purdom

No, I wasn't slinking around the White House pretending to be an FOB. In fact, I wasn't really in the FBI. I was in the Gresham CDD (Community Development Department). But there really was plenty of dirt. Just drive through any subdivision under construction, and you will see it flooding down the storm drains toward the small creeks and small rivers where our remaining wild salmon spawn.

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Construction is a dirty business. In our wet climate it is worse, because dirt turns to mud and is tracked into the streets, where it is left to wash away—unless the builder helps it along with a hose. The rules against this kind of pollution have been around quite a while. Most of the serious builders and inspectors know what the regulations are, so you constantly see runoff fences around job sites and bags of woodchips barricading the storm drains. However, putting those things in place is no guarantee they will do the job. Sooner or later the devices fail, so they have to be maintained. That is why Gresham needed a dirt cop.

I was asked to do the job because there was nobody else who wanted it, and management thought I had the knowledge, commitment and people skills it would take to sell such a program. I did it for a year, along with my duties as a plans examiner and a manufactured-homes inspector.

Building inspectors always have a big stick. Dirt cops do, too. I could put a stop-work on any job where they refused to cooperate. However, I had a positive mes-

sage to deliver, too. Most of these guys were fishermen, so I could appeal to their love of the fish. Once I explained that erosion from job sites could silt up the spawning beds in nearby streams they were a lot more attentive.

Now I work as a residential plans examiner for the Portland Bureau of Buildings, so my days as a dirt cop are over. Still, I drive by plenty of building sites around the city where the original effort has been abandoned. Erosion fences are knocked down or sagging under the weight of dirt. Chip bags are so cruddy that they cannot hold any more silt. Not long ago I saw a story in the *Oregonian* about efforts to protect ponds in Beaverton from construction runoff. The theme

was that some developers and residents are serious about protecting wetlands.

To my practiced eye the pictures told a different story—the fences were not holding because no one was maintaining them. Same old story: people think there is a quick fix which relieves them of the expense of sustained maintenance. Those erosion fences have to be repaired and the dirt they capture needs to be restored to its proper place. The landscaping needs to be kept up so that it holds the earth the way it was supposed to. Too often people who move into a new building think that any erosion problems have been solved permanently, so they do not keep up the effort that their site requires. I have not seen Portland doing very much about it, either.

I am bringing this up right now because the Metro area has just been hit with a new environmental mandate. Salmon and steelhead in our local rivers have finally been put on the list of endangered species. That is growth for you—no sooner do we get out from under the Clean Air mandate than we get clobbered by an endangered species listing. Actually I am grateful for the listing, because I am one of those Oregonians who want to see the wild fish survive and prosper. If we are going to succeed, we are going to have to boost our efforts to protect the rivers from everyday pollution. As a dirt cop I was concerned with a particular type of crud that ends up in the rivers because of the habits of modern life. I did not have to bother with the human sewage, the street oil or the cleaning fluids. But I know first hand how much effort and expense it is going to take for us to turn things around. For one, my department will have to give erosion a lot more attention than it does now. Pogo was right, you know.

