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www.clickpud.com

Goldendale Office
1313 S. Columbus Ave.
Goldendale, WA 98620
(509) 773-5891
(800) 548-8357

White Salmon Office
110 NE Estes Ave. • P.O. Box 187
White Salmon, WA 98672
(509) 493-2255
(800) 548-8358

Dark Skies

A group of concerned citizens visited me recently to discuss light pollution, or “sky glow.” This is stray light diffusing into the sky.

The delegation consisted of two women concerned about the observatory in Goldendale. At the observatory, the skies have become less and less ideal for the 24.5-inch telescope installed by amateur Vancouver astronomers in 1973. Goldendale originally was chosen to house the telescope because of the clear dark skies in Eastern Washington.

As more and more light escapes into unintended areas, it’s not just a problem for observatories. It affects everyone. Light not directed at the intended purpose wastes energy and can have other negative consequences, ranging from unhappy neighbors to health detriments for both humans and wildlife.

It can even become a safety issue. Glare can temporarily blind motorists and others, when the ability to use night vision could mean the difference between a safe trip to the barn or a bad trip over an unseen hazard.

Light needs to be on the ground, not in your eyes.

In about 1981, when the Washington State Parks system assumed responsibility for the observatory, the county passed a lighting ordinance to help control light pollution. It requires shielding of outdoor lights to direct the light down to its intended target. The PUD changed out all of the street lights to conform to the ordinance.

The popular yard light was fitted with a shielding device. While this helps, it doesn’t perform nearly as well as new street lights. Most yard lights are customer owned, and have no shielding at all.

Controlling light is an ongoing job. We still are not entirely compliant here at the PUD. The women pointed out that our parking lot lights, while compliant with the county ordinance, do not accomplish the task of directing the light downward to where it is needed. The stray light ends up in the sky and over at the neighbors.

The women plan to meet with other businesses and homeowners who have lights that need attention. The PUD has a program to help replace inefficient lighting. This program will dovetail nicely with their effort. Timers and motion sensors also are an excellent way to control light and save energy.

With nice summer nights approaching, take this opportunity to take inventory of your lights. See what you can do to save energy and help keep our skies dark.

Tom D. Svendsen
General Manager

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