



## Can Investigative Journalism Pay?: *InvestigateWest* and the Nonprofit Model Epilogue

*InvestigateWest's* (IW) partnership with public media consortium EarthFix to assess the federal Clean Water Act on the legislation's 40th anniversary worked well for the nonprofit news outfit.<sup>1</sup> The six-month deal, penned in February 2012, adhered to the turnaround strategy IW had adopted earlier that month. The contract for five stories drew on IW's journalistic strengths—deep-dive investigative, explanatory and narrative reporting, but also allowed IW to try its hand at other activities such as training and support, design, roll-out, and audience-building.

The small news organization had never taken on such an ambitious project. Despite the logistical and organizational hurdles of coordinating the Clean Water Act coverage across regional media partners, *InvestigateWest* produced a successful series; it ran between July and October 2012. Stories covered a broad range of topics, from sewage and agricultural and storm water runoff to green roofs and water testing. Executive director Robert McClure worked with EarthFix reporters from Oregon Public Broadcasting, KCTS and KUOW to report, write, edit and share his expertise on water issues. IW development and community engagement director Jason Alcorn handled a mix of editorial and marketing tasks.

In total, IW and its partners produced a dozen broadcast and online pieces, along with blog posts and interactive maps. McClure was pleased that IW had proven it could orchestrate a multi-part project, and that the effort delivered the IW brand directly into news outlets across the Northwest. The reviews from partners were positive. Moreover, the \$20,000 paycheck was significantly larger than any other the outfit had earned from reporting in its more than three-year history. This was a promising start to IW's push to lessen its dependence on foundation funding. Notes McClure: "The [IW] board [of directors] liked the work, but I think they were happiest about a five-figure paycheck."

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.invw.org/projects/clean-water>

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The series also afforded IW the opportunity to mentor younger reporters in the techniques of in-depth journalism. McClure had collaborated with the public broadcast journalists, advising on story selection and development. IW felt it could promote this role to potential backers, and in fact in November 2012, McClure presented a guide to covering the Clean Water Act at the Society of Environmental Journalists annual conference in Lubbock, Texas.

## **Ebbs and flows**

Meanwhile, IW produced other important stories. Carol Smith, working with IW founding member Lewis Kamb (who had moved to the *Tacoma News Tribune*), brought out an investigative series on a controversial, privately-run Northwest federal immigrant detention center in Tacoma.<sup>2</sup> The series, three years in the making, was a potent blend of narrative, investigative and explanatory journalism, the kind of long-lead, deeply-reported social justice coverage that Smith had envisioned when she helped launch IW. That it was produced with a daily newspaper validated IW's role as an independent investigative newsroom augmenting traditional media.

Working with Seattle public radio station KUOW, Smith produced a pair of stories on the high incidence of multiple sclerosis in the Northwest. The pieces also ran on the IW site.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, IW worked closely with freelance contributors Lee van der Voo (on coverage of Alaska fisheries) and Lisa Stiffler (on the effects of floodplain development on endangered salmon).<sup>4</sup> Significantly, during this time IW expanded its coverage area to include the entire Northwest.

Work also continued on fundraising and marketing, including the launch of a new membership campaign. IW revamped its publishing system and added two new board members with experience in business and startups. It ended 2012 with net income of \$35,000 on revenues of \$240,000. True, much remained to be done. IW had yet to launch a planned fellowship program to bring in junior editorial staff. Moreover, rather than add fulltime staff, IW in January 2013 lost Carol Smith, who left for a job as an editor with IW partner KUOW. Nonetheless, the organization was largely on track. Notes McClure, "Nothing is for sure in this world, and especially this slice of the world called non-profit journalism. But we feel like we're hitting the mark."

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<sup>2</sup> See: <http://www.invw.org/article/a-rare-look-inside-tacoma-1309>

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.invw.org/article/pediatric-ms-cases-rise-i-1327>

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.seattleweekly.com/2013-01-09/news/sharecroppers-of-the-sea/full/>. Also: <http://www.hcn.org/issues/44.22/fighting-development-in-floodplains>