



# ARID LANDS PRESS KIT

## Vital Statistics

*Arid Lands* (2007)  
Documentary Feature / 98 minutes  
Directed by Grant Aaker and Josh Wallaert  
Produced by Sidelong Films  
[www.sidelongfilms.com](http://www.sidelongfilms.com)

## Distribution

Bullfrog Films  
Educational Use + Public Performance  
[www.bullfrogfilms.com](http://www.bullfrogfilms.com)

Sidelong Films  
Home Video Use (DVD - \$24.95)  
[www.sidelongfilms.com](http://www.sidelongfilms.com)

## Primary Media Contact

Josh Wallaert, Co-Director  
[info@sidelongfilms.com](mailto:info@sidelongfilms.com)  
(612) 235-4753

## Secondary Contact

Grant Aaker, Co-Director  
(320) 224-9756

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High-Resolution Images  
Video Trailer

Available for download at  
[www.sidelongfilms.com/presskit](http://www.sidelongfilms.com/presskit)

Director Headshots  
Review Copy  
Complete Transcript

Available by request to  
[info@sidelongfilms.com](mailto:info@sidelongfilms.com)

*The directors are also available for interviews or appearances.*

# BRIEF SYNOPSIS

## 20 WORDS

*Arid Lands* is a documentary feature about the land and people of the Columbia Basin and the Hanford nuclear site in southeastern Washington state.

## 60 WORDS

Sixty years ago, the Hanford nuclear site produced plutonium for the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki. Today, it is the focus of the largest environmental cleanup in history. *Arid Lands* takes us into a world of sports fishermen, tattoo artists, housing developers, and radiation scientists living and working in a unique landscape of the American West.

## 100 WORDS

*Arid Lands* is a documentary feature about the land and people of the Columbia Basin in southeastern Washington state. Sixty years ago, the Hanford nuclear site produced plutonium for the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki. Today, it is the focus of the largest environmental cleanup in history. *Arid Lands* takes us into a world of sports fishermen, tattoo artists, housing developers, ecologists, and radiation scientists living and working in the area. It tells the story of how people changed the landscape over time, and how the landscape affected their lives.

## 150 WORDS

*Arid Lands* is a documentary feature about the land and people of the Columbia Basin in southeastern Washington state. Sixty years ago, the Hanford nuclear site produced plutonium for the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki, and today the area is the focus of the largest environmental cleanup in history. It is a landscape of incredible contradictions. Coyotes roam among decommissioned nuclear reactors, salmon spawn in the middle of golf courses, wine grapes grow in the sagebrush, and federal cleanup dollars spur rapid urban expansion.

*Arid Lands* takes us into a world of sports fishermen, tattoo artists, housing developers, ecologists, and radiation scientists living and working in the area. It tells the story of how people changed the landscape over time, and how the landscape affected their lives. Marked by conflicting perceptions of wilderness and nature, *Arid Lands* is a moving and complex essay on a unique landscape of the American West.

## FULL SYNOPSIS

*Arid Lands* is a documentary feature about the land and people of the Columbia Basin in southeastern Washington state. Sixty years ago, the Hanford nuclear site produced plutonium for the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki, and today the area is the focus of the largest environmental cleanup in history.

### **The Hanford Project**

In the spring of 1943, the federal government seized 670 square miles of land along the Columbia River and began to construct a secret nuclear facility. Fifty thousand men and women came from across the country to work on the project, living in a makeshift trailer camp in the middle of the desert. They built three nuclear reactors there without knowing what they were working on, and in less than eighteen months, they produced the plutonium for the Trinity and Nagasaki bombs.

Over the next forty years, the Hanford project continued to produce plutonium, providing the raw material for more than fifty thousand weapons in the nation's nuclear arsenal. Production facilities closed at the end of the Cold War, but millions of gallons of hazardous waste remain at the site. Today, two-thirds of the nation's high-level nuclear waste is stored there, much of it in massive underground tanks that are leaking contaminants into the soil. The Department of Energy oversees an environmental cleanup project that costs \$2 billion a year and is expected to last for decades.

The nuclear legacy has left its indelible mark on this landscape. In the nearby Tri-Cities of Richland, Kennewick, and Pasco, nearly half of all payroll dollars come from the federal cleanup project. One local high school, the Richland Bombers, has adopted the mushroom cloud as its unofficial mascot.

### **"A Garden of Eden"**

The landscape of Eastern Washington has also been reshaped by another large federal project. Dams on the Columbia and Snake Rivers provide irrigation water that has transformed hundreds of thousands of acres from "desert wasteland" into a productive agricultural region. Washington farms grow most of the nation's apples and sweet cherries, and much of its other crops. But agricultural development has come at an environmental cost. Circle irrigation has wiped out much of the native sagebrush habitat, and the dams have altered the natural patterns of river systems. Water levels on the Columbia fluctuate daily with the demand for hydropower, and pools created by the Snake River dams slow the migration of endangered salmon. While some scientists and activists call for breaching the dams, thousands of farmers depend upon the irrigation projects for their livelihood.

## **Hanford Reach National Monument**

What some people call “wasteland,” others call the shrub-steppe ecosystem. The sagebrush, bitterbrush, and bunch grass lands that once covered millions of acres in the West have largely disappeared. Ironically, the Hanford site, because it was set aside for nuclear production, was never farmed extensively or developed. As a result, it provides a home for native plants and wildlife. In recognition of this unique biodiversity, President Clinton designated the land surrounding the nuclear site as the Hanford Reach National Monument in 2000. Hanford may be the most contaminated place in the Western hemisphere, but it also protects one of the largest remnants of shrub-steppe in the Northwest.

As ecologist Bill Rickard reminds us in the film, “There’s no national park of sagebrush. National parks for the most part weren’t set aside for biota. They were set aside because they were nice to look at, mountains and geysers and rivers, and whatnot. And there’s no place in the shrub-steppe that was ever considered to be set aside.” As we look closely at the arid lands of Eastern Washington, we find that what is “wild” and what is “natural” are cultural questions as much as they are biological ones.

## **The Old West vs. The New West**

The Columbia Basin today is a landscape of incredible contradictions. Coyotes roam among decommissioned nuclear reactors, salmon spawn in the middle of golf courses, wine grapes grow in the sagebrush, and federal cleanup dollars spur rapid urban expansion. In recent years, the booming Hanford economy has placed the Tri-Cities among the fastest growing cities in the West. High salaries and affordable real estate have brought new waves of settlers to the area. In order to meet the growing demand for housing, large tracts of sagebrush and agricultural land have been transformed into housing developments. And yet, residents anxiously await a future without the Hanford project. With an end to federal subsidies looming on the horizon, the atomic cities are remaking themselves into a destination for golf courses, wineries, and recreational tourism. A New Western economy is emerging that threatens the old one, as communities struggle with conflicting values.

Featuring interviews with more than two dozen people, *Arid Lands* takes us into a world of sports fishermen, tattoo artists, housing developers, and radiation scientists living and working in the area. Their perspectives shift and collide, as they tell the collective story of a unique landscape of the American West.

# AWARDS & SCREENINGS

## Awards

Northwest Film Forum's Local Sightings Film Festival  
 Wild and Scenic Environmental Film Festival  
 Hazel Wolf Environmental Film Festival  
 Ellensburg Film Festival  
 Plymouth Independent Film Festival  
 Seattle True Independent Film Festival  
 Montana CINE International  
 Montana CINE International  
 Sweet Onion Film Festival  
 Columbus International Film & Video Festival  
 Eckerd College Environmental Film Festival  
 CINE Golden Eagle Film & Video Competition  
 Cinema for Peace Awards

Best Feature  
 People's Choice  
 Best of Fest (Top 10)  
 Best Documentary  
 Best Environmental Film  
 Best Environmental Film  
 Focus Award  
 Best Independent Film  
 Audience Award, Best Documentary  
 Bronze Plaque (Chris Awards)  
 "New Vision, New Voices" Jury Award  
 CINE Golden Eagle  
 nominee

## Festivals & Theatrical Screenings

Wild and Scenic Environmental Film Festival  
 Eckerd College Environmental Film Festival  
 Longbaugh Film Festival  
 Hazel Wolf Environmental Film Festival  
 Bell Museum of Natural History  
 Rainier Independent Film Festival  
 Seattle True Independent Film Festival  
 Plymouth Independent Film Festival  
 Big Sky Documentary Film Series  
 Globians Film Festival  
 Wild and Scenic Environmental Film Fest (Tour)  
 Battelle Auditorium at the Hanford Nuclear Site  
 DocuFest Atlanta  
 Idaho International Film Festival  
 Montana CINE International  
 Eugene International Film Festival  
 Tacoma Film Festival  
 Secret City Film Festival  
 Ellensburg Film Festival  
 Fifth Avenue Cinema  
 Sweet Onion Film Festival  
 Northwest Film & Video Festival  
 Theatrical Run – Carmike Cinemas  
 Environmental Film Festival in the Nation's Capital  
 Paramount Theatre  
 Washougal International Film Festival  
 New York Peace Film Festival  
 Northwest Film Forum's Local Sightings Film Festival  
 Western History Association Documentary Film Festival  
 National Media Museum  
 Theatrical Run – Northwest Film Forum

January 13-14, 2007 Nevada City, CA  
 February 24 St. Petersburg, FL  
 March 31 Portland, OR  
 March 31 Seattle, WA  
 April 12 Minneapolis, MN  
 May 6 Ashford, WA  
 June 2 Seattle, WA  
 July 21-22 Plymouth, MA  
 August 3 Missoula, MT  
 August 13 Potsdam, Germany  
 August 19 Spokane, WA  
 Sept. 15 Richland, WA  
 Sept. 28 Atlanta, GA  
 Sept. 29-30 Boise, ID  
 October 4-7 Missoula, MT  
 October 5 Eugene, OR  
 October 6 Tacoma, WA  
 October 7 Oak Ridge, TN  
 October 7 Ellensburg, WA  
 October 12 Portland, OR  
 October 28 Walla Walla, WA  
 November 11 Portland, OR  
 February 8-28, 2008 Kennewick, WA  
 March 14 Washington, DC  
 June 30 St. Cloud, MN  
 August 22 Washougal, WA  
 September 28 New York, NY  
 October 6 Seattle, WA  
 October 22 Salt Lake City, UT  
 February 16, 2009 Bradford, UK  
 August 28-Sept 3 Seattle, WA

Arid Lands has also been shown in community centers, churches, and auditoriums across the country.

## PRESS REVIEWS

“A smart, comprehensive, and beautiful film.”

*Willamette Week*

“Stunning documentary . . . A provocative, complex portrait of Eastern Washington.”

*Crosscut Magazine*

“Creatively ecological...[one of] today's best environmental films.”

*The Chronicle of Higher Education*

“An insightful look into . . . the concerns of the people who work and develop the land.”

*City Pages*

“Engrossing.”

*Seattle Times*

“One of the most informative and eye-opening documentaries you'll see anywhere.”

National Media Museum (UK)

“In this age of golf courses in the desert, this honest look at the state of the west is as refreshing as a tall drink of water.”

*Missoula Independent*

“A love song for the ailing, if resilient, expanse of sagebrush and bunch grass that still thrives on the Hanford nuclear site. . . . A comprehensive and, at times, profound and entertaining narrative.”

*Minnesota Daily*

“I'll let you in on a little secret. . . . I was leery of reviewing this film. I was afraid it might be dry and boring, or cornponishly hokey, or off-puttingly biased, and that I'd have to slag on it like some sort of bone-chewing, Tri-Cities-hating ogre. I was cleared of those doubts within about two minutes. Well-shot, well-edited and refreshingly even-handed, *Arid Lands* finds wider meaning through a close look at a unique place.”

*Tri-City Herald (atomiictown.com)*

## EDUCATORS' REVIEWS

“Exquisitely filmed and carefully crafted. . . . The multiple perspectives showcased in the film highlight debates and issues that go far beyond the local environs—land development vs. ecology; science vs. real-world experience; and how to determine ‘acceptable risk.’ Minimal narration allows viewers to weigh the various economic, ecological, cultural and political vectors of the problems facing the Hanford area and reach their own conclusions, making this film an excellent launching point for classroom debates.”

Melissa Checker, Assistant Professor of Urban Studies  
City University of New York, Queens College

“*Arid Lands* is an engaging and thought-provoking film about shifting human adaptations and transformations of a particular landscape, and the incongruous absurdities sometimes generated in the process. . . . [The film] provides a compelling springboard for discussion of some of the most important issues defining our times.”

Dr. Lene Pedersen, Dept of Anthropology and Museum  
Central Washington University

“*Arid Lands* does not offer easy answers. Is it truly safe? What does it mean if a town is desensitized to nuclear waste? When will the federal money run out? Will tourism be the answer to economic development and at what cost? The film presents a richly textured view on a community that battles nuclear waste, wrestles with development, and worries about the water. *Arid Lands* does what most sociology professors want to teach: the ultimate sociological paradox of examining how societal influences shape individuals and, at the same time, how individuals shape the outcome of community, institutions, and society.”

Dr. Marisol Clark-Ibáñez, Assistant Professor of Sociology  
California State University - San Marcos

“Fascinating story. . . . The filmmakers have taken a very evenhanded approach to exploring the paradoxes that make up this part of eastern Washington. . . . This video is highly recommended in support of high school and college curricula in environmental studies, geography, and urban studies. It fully supports the broader topic of American studies, the consideration of the choices our citizens will have to make in order to maintain controlled growth of our country and our economy while considering the cost of abandoning or choosing to maintain our national and regional heritage.”

Cliff Glaviano, Bowling Green State University Libraries  
Educational Media Reviews Online



# ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

with quotes from the interviews

*Arid Lands* features interviews with twenty-seven people who live or work in the Columbia Basin of southeastern Washington. They are presented here in order of appearance.

**JOHN JONES** is a retired commercial fisherman who sleeps in a boat on the Hanford Reach of the Columbia River. “I don’t know why they call it the wild stretch of the Columbia,” he says, “because there’s nothing wild about it.” We meet him at a landing about a mile upstream from the world’s first nuclear production reactor.

**RUSSELL JIM** is a cultural leader of the Yakama Nation, one of several tribes with historic ties to the land occupied by the Hanford nuclear site. The Yakama people sued the US Department of Energy to force a natural resources injury assessment at Hanford. “Our treaty said for all time we would be able to gather our foods and medicines,” Russell says, “and we mean until the end of time.”

**ROBERT KUHLEN & MORRIS UEBELACKER** are cultural geographers at Central Washington University. “We spend a lot of time trying to read landscapes,” Morris says. “If we got in a car today, or on a horse, or walked, and you were with Bob and I, the whole thing is a conversation about what’s going on here and why. Why is this here, and where did it come from, and what forms have these people put on this landscape?”

**WALT GRISHAM & ALENE CLARKE** are former residents of the town of White Bluffs. They were evicted in 1943 when the government seized the land that became the Hanford site. “I don’t know what in the world is going to happen with that place,” Walt says. “I can’t imagine all that acreage . . . just sitting from now to eternity. There’s nothing out there. It’s sagebrush and cheatgrass, and a few old concrete hulks of reactors.”

**BILL WILKINS** moved to the area in 1943 after his father got a job on the Hanford project. They lived in a makeshift trailer camp along the river. “That town went from a couple hundred people to fifty thousand people in less than a year,” Bill says. In less than eighteen months, Hanford workers produced and delivered the plutonium for two atomic bombs.

**BILL RICKARD** is a botanist who worked for forty years at Hanford and helped found the Arid Lands Ecology reserve. “I always thought of the sagebrush region as the grey zone,” he says. “The soil is grey. The plants are grey. And when I came to Hanford the buildings were grey, the reactors were grey, and they even painted the cars grey. But the flowering forbes are beautiful, for a short time in the spring.” In the 1950s, Bill witnessed atomic explosions while working as an ecologist at the Nevada test site.

**TOM CARPENTER** works for the Government Accountability Project, a citizen activist group that defends the public interest at the Hanford site. “If you look at the big picture of this place,” he says, “There’s lots of money going into cleanup. Not a whole lot of cleanup happening. Failed projects. And every year the contaminants spread further. . . . Is it time to evacuate the Tri-Cities? No. But at some point that might be so.”

**GERRY POLLET** is director of Heart America Northwest, a citizen activist group working on cleanup of the Hanford site and other hazardous waste issues. “If it was just up to this community,” he says, “they would be telling Congress that there’s no risk, and Congress would be saying, ‘Well, why the heck should we spend \$2 billion a year to clean up no risk?’”

**DAVE ARNOLD** is a historian at Columbia Basin College who calls into question our ideas about wilderness and nature: “I think the entire North American continent was a cultural landscape and still is a cultural landscape. So it hasn’t changed in that regard. It’s just changed in that the cultures who now control the landscape have very different ideas about what they want to take from the landscape.”

**PAUL LARIVIERE** is a fish biologist who discovered steelhead and coho salmon spawning in a stream that passes through a local golf course. “I use the word pristine at time,” he says. “I’ve actually been told that pristine is reserved for your high-mountain wilderness areas, but I’ll tell you what, we have our own wilderness right here in the Tri-Cities.”

**GREG MOODY** is a fish biologist at Little Goose Dam on the Snake River. The dams have slowed salmon migration on the rivers, and the Army Corps of Engineers has begun barging and trucking millions of juvenile salmon to the ocean. “It’s an important key element in the natural system that man has made here,” Greg says.

**JANELLE DOWNS** is an ecologist at the Hanford site, recently designated the Hanford Reach National Monument. “Even though we have large production areas and wastes associated with nuclear production,” she says, “we also have one of the most diverse and rich shrub-steppe ecosystems that are left in the lower part of the state.”

**GINGER WIREMAN** is a citizen activist who fights to protect sagebrush habitat from urban development. “I don’t know,” she says. “I don’t know why people like to move to deserts and then turn them into the proverbial oasis. It’s kind of like, if you want to live in the desert, then live in the desert.”

**DAN MILLER** is a hay farmer who receives irrigation water from the Columbia Basin Project, diverted by the Grand Coulee Dam. The project has entirely transformed the agricultural landscape of Eastern Washington. “The place where my mom and dad live— When they moved here, there was absolutely nothing but sagebrush and jackrabbits inhabiting the land.”

**SCOTT WILLIAMS** is a winemaker at a local vineyard. His family planted the first grapes on Red Mountain, now one of the hottest wine growing regions in the state. “We have to irrigate,” he says. “There’s just no way around it. . . . The average rainfall here is less than six inches a year.”

**CAREN WHEELER** is a cherry farmer whose orchard draws irrigation water from the nearby Yakima River. “It’s gold,” she says, “I mean, people get in wars. Guys packing guns, fighting for water rights. Because it is your life.”

**RON KATHREN** lives down the street from the Hanford site. He is a professor emeritus at WSU-Tri Cities in radiological health sciences. “I have a wife,” he says. “I have two children. I have two grandchildren. . . . And I’m a devout coward. I really am. If I felt there was a hazard living next to the Hanford site, believe me, I would not be living there.”

**BECKY MCCREADY & TIGGER SEXTON** work at Atomic Tattoo and Body Piercing in downtown Kennewick. Born and raised in the Tri-Cities, Becky loves it there; she has the area code 509 tattooed on her arm. Tigger is from New York and has a very different perspective on the area: “This is some of my artwork inspired by Kennewick and Hanford. Should be a skull, a mushroom cloud, some dead fish swimming up some toxic waste.”

**DEAN SCHAU** is an economist at Columbia Basin College who explains the impact that Hanford has on the local economy: “Very few communities have ever had their primary source of their economic well being centered in one area. And when people ask you what’s going to happen next year, you don’t know what’s going to happen next year.”

**KATHRYN & TERRY WHEELER** are homeowners on Red Mountain who see their rural way of life being threatened by the development of the new tourist economy. Terry says, “Well, as you can see my place here, I’m a peon, and those are rich people, and I’m getting screwed. That pretty much simplifies it, doesn’t it?”

**PASTOR DALE WHITE** is a second-generation pastor who has come down from the mountains to the desert. He wants to build a forty-foot high waterfall at the Cathedral of Joy. A sign facing the road reads, “An Awesome Waterfall Will Be Built Here to the Glory of God. Thanks for Clean Fill and Top Soil.”

**RANDY CROSBY** is a housing developer with a sentimental streak for the farmers whose land he bought and developed. “Now, I live on high stress,” he says. “That’s what I do. That’s how I get my juice. And they live on serenity. Sometimes they don’t even know it.”

**ROBIN FRENCH** is one of those farmers. “I don’t know why the cities always have to move out through the agricultural land,” he says. “Seems like it. Some guy that’s got a nice farm, and next thing you know there’s a house next to him. . . . I’m not really angry. It’s just there’s not too many place to go now though, you know. Everything’s developed everywhere.”

## DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

If you spend much time in the Northwest these days, you see a world that is changing faster than anyone can imagine. It is “lonesome and crowded.” It is “subdivided and conquered.” It is overwatered. And it is about to be paved under. This film focuses on the arid lands of the mid-Columbia Basin, but in that landscape you find patterns that repeat themselves in communities all across the country. We hope the film encourages viewers to think about geography—a dry, academic subject—in a way that is personal. When you start thinking that way, you see that geography is not just a catalogue of mountains and rivers. It’s a cultural force that affects all of us in our daily lives. The people we interview in the film define the word “wasteland” in different ways. For some, wasteland is an acre of sagebrush. For some, it’s a nuclear site. For us, a wasteland is a place that has lost its identity. We wanted to make a film about someplace that hasn’t. Not yet. This is the story we found.

## ABOUT THE DIRECTORS

**GRANT AAKER** is originally from Minnesota and moved west to attend college in Portland, Oregon. He got his first film experience working for Departure Films in New York City. He is currently a medical student at Cornell University.

**JOSH WALLAERT** has an MFA in creative writing from the University of Minnesota. He is originally from Oregon and now lives in Vancouver, BC. He often writes about landscapes of the North American West, but this is his first experience working in film.

# PRODUCTION CREDITS

**DIRECTED & PRODUCED BY** Grant Aaker and Josh Wallaert

**STORY BY** Josh Wallaert

**CAMERA AND EDITING** Grant Aaker

**WITH MUSIC BY** Mike Chylinski  
Dustin Tanner  
Matt Keating  
Unlearn  
Vito Ricci  
Jeremy Patfield  
Lee Cullivan  
Gringo Motel  
Heidi Spencer  
Jon Itkin  
Dan Rabb  
ThorNton Creek  
Nate Shaw  
Dao Strom  
J. DiMenna