

Oregon Water Resources Department Environmental Justice Report

725 North Summer Street, Suite A

Salem, OR 97301

503-986-0900

www.oregon.gov/owrd/

O R E G O N



WATER RESOURCES
D E P A R T M E N T



Butte Springs, water source for Medford Water Commission, Butte Falls, Oregon

Butte Springs, water source for the Medford Water Commission, Butte Falls OR

2024 Annual Report to the Environmental Justice Council

Table of Contents

Annual Report for the Environmental Justice Council: 2023	1
Introduction	4
Environmental Justice Highlights	7
Agency Environmental Justice Considerations (ORS 182.550 Section 1)	12
Public Participation and Meaningful Involvement (ORS 182.535 Section 2)	15
Environmental Justice Impacts (ORS 182.550 Section 3)	21
Agency Environmental Justice Progress (ORS 182.550 Section 4)	21
Environmental Justice Mapping Tool Involvement (ORS 182.550 Section 5)	23
Environmental Justice Council Engagement: 2024	23
Agency Environmental Justice Council Legislative Citations	23
Agency Meaningful Engagement Legislative Citations	24
Definitions	26

This agency annual report to the Oregon Environmental Justice Council is required of the department under ORS 182.550 to:

1. Address environmental justice issues;
2. Increase public participation of individuals and communities affected by agencies' decisions; and
3. Improve plans to further the progress of environmental justice in Oregon.

The following annual report is for the 2024 calendar year and will be submitted to the Oregon Environmental Justice Council and the Office of Governor Tina Kotek.

For questions about this report, please contact:

Sue Parrish, Community Engagement Coordinator: sue.r.parrish@water.oregon.gov – or -

Danielle Gonzalez, Policy Section Manager: Danielle.L.Gonzalez@water.oregon.gov

Introduction

Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) Mission Statement

The vision of the Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) is to assure sufficient and sustainable water supplies are available to meet current and future needs.

OWRD's mission is to serve the public by practicing and promoting responsible water management through two key goals:

- To directly address Oregon's water supply needs.
- To restore and protect stream flows and watersheds in order to ensure the long-term sustainability of Oregon's ecosystems, economy, and quality of life.

Agency Leadership

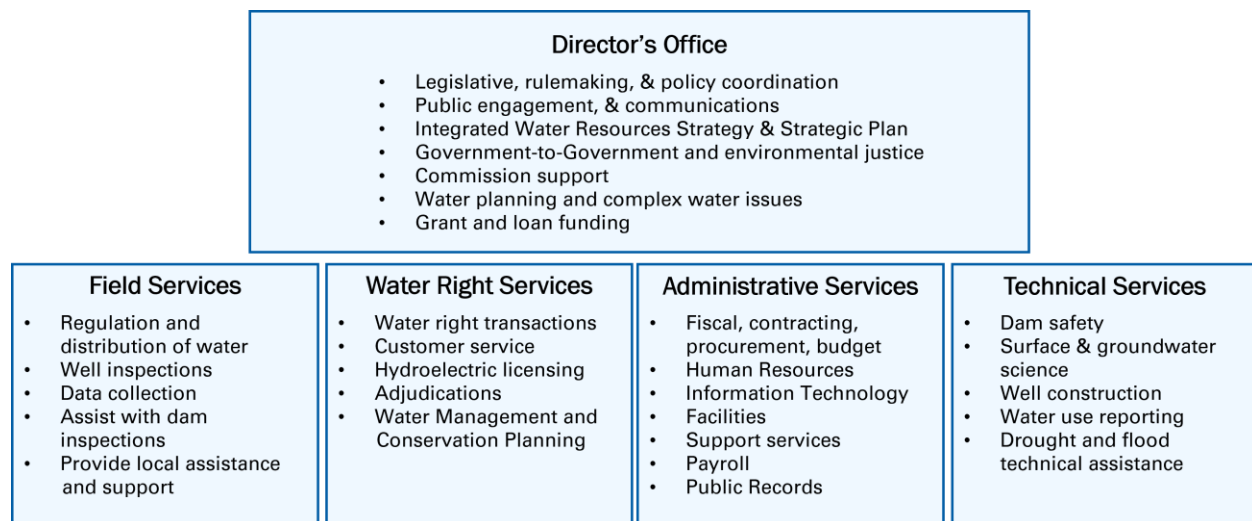
Director: Ivan Gall

Deputy Director, Water Management: Doug Woodcock

Deputy Director, Strategy and Administration: Racquel Rancier

[Oregon Water Resources Commission](#) is the seven-member voluntary advisory board for OWRD. Members are appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Oregon Senate.

Current Organizational Structure



Environmental Justice Personnel

Meaningful environmental justice work within natural resource agencies means acknowledging long standing statutes, administrative rules, policies, and practices that

precluded some from participating in the decision-making spaces. To modify approaches and engage fully in communities that have not been fully considered requires specialized change management experts with a strong understanding of environmental justice principles and mechanisms to dismantle the structures that continue to feed exclusion in decision spaces.

Dedicated professionals are required to build meaningful relationships with BIPOC, rural and other underrepresented or under-resourced communities or groups, identify data collection that can inform environmental justice work, evaluate communications, programs, policies, and services through an environmental justice lens, and ultimately to provide guidance, expertise, and advice to the agency. This work requires a long-term, focused effort best achieved by a permanent dedicated staff. OWRD does not currently have full time, permanent environmental justice staff.

In 2023, the Governor's Recommended Budget for OWRD included a policy option package proposing two positions responsible for leading the agency's efforts in advancing environmental and racial justice and diversity, equity and inclusion. The package also contained \$500,000 in base budget funding for training, translating materials, and to support engagement with and from BIPOC and Environmental Justice communities. This package was ultimately not funded by the 2023 Oregon Legislature, and there was not an opportunity to request it again in 2025.

Despite the lack of dedicated staffing, OWRD staff continue to leverage existing agency work and resources internally to move environmental justice priorities forward whenever possible. Some of the most notable staff contributions in 2024 include:

- **The Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Team**, an organized effort by 10-15 staff who spend approximately 8 hours/month each to move forward DEI practices across the agency (more on page 9).
- **The development of HB3293, Best Practices for Community Engagement**, which was an investment of approximately 25% of a Community Engagement Coordinator's time in 2024 (more on page 7). This work will be completed in 2025.
- **Community Engagement Foundations (CEF)** was an investment of 10-25% of each of three Community Engagement Coordinator positions in 2024 (more on page 8).
- **Environmental Justice Council Liaison**. One of OWRD's Community Engagement Coordinators spends an average of 10-15 hours a month participating as an EJC liaison.
- **Integrated Water Resources Strategy (IWRS) Implementation**. In 2024, the IWRS Coordination position was made permanent, ensuring that there is a dedicated staff person moving the activities in this multi-agency plan forward. There are numerous opportunities for the IWRS to have an environmental justice lens (more on page 7).
- **Strengthening public access to technical products and knowledge about water systems** in Oregon. This effort involves staff working across multiple sections and is difficult to calculate FTE contributions. Technical staff, field staff, and the community engagement and communications teams are translating technical

information to the lay reader, engaging a broader swath of the public, and having broader public engagement during rulemaking and more formal engagements.

While the agency doesn't have dedicated resources, we continue to make progress where we can with existing staff who care deeply about environmental justice in water.

Agency Budget and Revenue Sources

2025-2027 Governor's Recommended Budget for OWRD:

	2023-25 Legislatively Adopted	2023-25 Legislatively Approved (Feb 24)	2025-27 Current Service Level	2025-27 Governor's Recommended Budget
General Fund (GF)	\$81,331,457	\$88,114,428	\$80,870,715	\$88,047,620
Other Funds (OF) including Fees	\$34,866,859	\$40,381,452	\$18,203,884	\$21,984,845
Other Funds - Grants/Loans	\$139,200,425	\$139,200,425	\$107,400,000	\$127,400,000
Lottery Funds - Debt Service	\$15,856,857	\$14,102,838	\$24,352,512	\$24,352,512
Federal Funds	\$703,315	\$2,153,385	\$2,190,179	\$2,190,179
Total Funds	\$271,958,913	\$283,952,528	\$233,017,290	\$263,975,156
Positions / Full-Time Equivalent (FTE)	258/246.63	259/248.71	248/245.25	250/246.63

*Much of this budget information is from the [Governor's Recommended Budget](#), pp. 175-177.

OWRD's 2025-2027 current service level budget totals, is \$233 million dollars; \$101 million of which supports OWRD operations. The remaining \$132 million is a mixture of grants and pass-through funds intended to help Oregonians access water in safe and reliable ways. In the 2023-2025 biennium, grant funds were awarded through OWRD's numerous grant programs for a variety of purposes, including providing grants to low-income well owners to repair, replace or abandon a dry or declining household well, or grants to entities to evaluate the feasibility of water projects or implement projects addressing a water supply need, including irrigation modernization projects. A portion of the funds were pass through funds that supported municipalities with water infrastructure and irrigation modernization. The funds projected for the 2025-2027 biennium would be used for similar purposes.

For more information about OWRD's budget and legislative investments, please see [OWRD's 2021-2014 Legislative Investment Summary](#).

Agency Environmental Justice Highlights

OWRD has quite a few highlights to share related to environmental justice in 2024:

- **Integration of Environmental Justice into revised [Integrated Water Resources Strategy \(IWRS\)](#)** outlines our state's understanding of our water resources, and how to better meet our state's instream and out-of-stream water needs now and in the future through statewide multi-agency shared strategies. The inaugural IWRS was published in 2012, the second in 2017. In 2023, OWRD initiated the development of the next revision of the IWRS with assistance from many other natural resource agencies. In the upcoming version, public outreach and engagement efforts were specifically designed to broaden our reach to justice communities that have not historically participated in the IWRS process. OWRD hired a temporary employee with extensive background in environmental justice issues to help review the 2017 version of IWRS and make recommendations for the upcoming version of the IWRS. The IWRS project team is now integrating the necessary recommendations by adding environmental justice example actions for each of the IWRS sections.

The first draft of the current IWRS was released for public review and comment in March 2024, and then briefly put on hold while new natural resources directors from the participating agencies were appointed. In the summer and fall of 2024, leadership from six water-related agencies met to discuss agency-specific prioritizations for the next draft of the IWRS. Draft 2 is anticipated to be released for public review and comment in the first half of 2025.

- **House Bill 3293** (2021) provides six state agencies the ability to provide planning, technical and financial support for water projects with community engagement plans. By agreeing on best practices, participating agencies will better support meaningful engagement of all communities and with community members so their voices are heard and integrated into water project decision processes. The bill instructed the named agencies to coordinate and develop Best Practices for Community Engagement, focusing on disproportionately impacted communities and recognizing them in each agency's Oregon Administrative Rules to help guide community engagement. In 2024, these Best Practices were developed and informed by conversations with agency partners, local organizations, local governments, and others working in the field of community engagement. The engagements occurred through a series of virtual meetings, community roundtables, and a public comment period. OWRD staff led this process as required in the legislation. OWRD began rule making on these rules in Fall of 2024, which included holding two rules advisory committee meetings.

The public comment period for the rules extended from December 1, 2024 through January 15, 2025. The Oregon Water Resources Commission will consider the final

proposed rules for adoption at their March 2025 meeting. If adopted, some of OWRD's grant programs may include the opportunity to do community engagement using the Best Practices. The six [participating agencies will then incorporate the rules](#) into relevant programs and agency goals.

- **Community Engagement Foundations (CEF)** is a framework and set of tools intended to provide consistent guidance and support for staff involved in community engagement across the agency. This framework includes fundamental equity principles, such as identifying and engaging interested or potentially impacted parties early and often; expanding the parties with which OWRD generally engages; integrating questions into project planning that generate shared decision-making when appropriate; and providing transparent and culturally responsive communication throughout the process. A pilot framework with five Community Engagement steps and a workbook for staff to use have been drafted and will be piloted with agency staff in 2025.

Both CEF and Best Practices for Community Engagement described above have a focus on instituting community engagement best practices with equity in mind. Best Practices for Community Engagement was developed by six participating agencies agreeing to provide consistent guidance when funding community engagement as part of a natural resource-focused project. CEF is a framework for use by OWRD staff to provide consistent and transparent engagement when OWRD staff engage with community themselves. Though the principles overlap, the purposes and audience for the two projects are very different.

- **Place-Based Water Planning (PBP) Rulemaking** (OAR 690-602) is a collaborative and inclusive process designed to: (A) Gather information to develop a shared understanding of water resources and identify critical issues and knowledge gaps; (B) Examine the existing and future in-stream and out-of-stream water needs for people, the economy and the environment; (C) Identify and prioritize strategic, integrated solutions to understand and meet instream and out-of-stream water needs; and (D) Develop, implement and update a place-based integrated water resources plan.

In 2016, OWRD piloted this approach in four basins in Oregon and, in 2022, an [independent evaluation](#) of the pilot was completed. Also in 2022, a legislatively directed workgroup (focused on state-supported regional water planning and management) developed [recommendations](#) to guide the expansion of Place-Based Water Planning. The workgroup was composed of conservation groups, agricultural water users, municipal water users, environmental justice organizations, tribal interests and state agencies.

The Place-Based Water Planning Fund (ORS 537.872-537.873) was authorized by the 2023 Legislature as a permanent funding program and provided funding through HB2010. Workgroup recommendations and lessons learned from the pilot informed

the related Division 602 rulemaking, ensuring broad representation by people potentially impacted by the rules. The RAC meetings began in August 2024, with a plan for three meetings. A fourth meeting was added to ensure all feedback was shared and considered.

The rules were in a public comment period from December 1, 2024 to January 15, 2025. The Oregon Water Resources Commission will consider the draft rules for adoption at their March 2025 meeting. With rules in place, additional PBP groups can be funded through a competitive grant process later in 2025.

- **The DEI Team** is comprised of staff members interested in furthering diversity, equity, inclusion and environmental justice at OWRD. They have focused on processes and relationships that center respect and equity as a team and across the agency. As an agency reliant on the hard sciences, it can be more challenging to see how relationships impact the results of our work. Carefully centering relationships as the foundation to equity highlights the importance of relationship when engaged in science. This is an important step in developing a more inclusive and diverse workplace and effectively serving the state.

In 2024 the team launched a discussion group, Coffee and Conversations. They've hosted numerous topics: "The flooding of Vanport" discussion highlighted the disproportionate impact on minority communities, and "the Klamath Dam Removal" highlighted the importance of Traditional Ecological Knowledge in effective decision-making and restoration. In 2025, the team will continue Coffee and Conversations. They will also explore increasing interagency collaboration so they can more effectively learn from other DEI Teams and support those just forming. If there is a space created for this kind of inter-agency collaboration and support, they would very much like to know about it. And if there is not, a group that supported state agency DEI teams to coordinate, collaborate and learn together would be a great support to this group. The DEI team is also providing key input to OWRD's Strategic Plan update, which will include DEI and environmental justice considerations.

- **Well Water Access and Safety Activities:** OWRD has prioritized several programmatic developments and actions that support environmental justice for Oregonians reliant on domestic wells:
 - **Well Abandonment, Repair and Replacement Fund (WARRF)**: Since its establishment in 2022, WARRF has restored drinking water to over 200 homes reliant on well water. These funds are intended for low to moderate-income well owners whose well is dry, severely declining, or destroyed or damaged by wildfire. The average cost for restoring a well has been \$28,500.
 - **Harney Well Fund**: Eligible residents of the Greater Harney Valley Groundwater Area of Concern can seek assistance for a portion of the cost to repair or replace and abandon a dry, severely declining, or at-risk

household water well impacted by declining groundwater levels in the area. The first funding cycle for this program was implemented in 2024.

- **Well Safety Rulemakings:** Two well construction rulemakings helped modernize water well safety standards, providing safeguards against contamination in aquifer systems. New rules adopted in 2024 require well drillers constructing water supply wells to show proficiency in welding. New 2023 rules require that 1) OWRD provide a technical review of all new well reports, and 2) well drillers submit a map showing the precise location of each new well. This is significant, as over 3000 new wells are constructed in Oregon each year, and there were substantial gaps in OWRD's ability to ensure this infrastructure was safe for the public and the environment.
- **Supporting nitrate reduction and safe drinking water efforts in the Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area (LUBGWMA)** as part of a multi-agency collaboration working to address groundwater contamination in this area, located within Morrow and Umatilla Counties and within the title lands of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR).

OWRD staff provide the following support:

- Expansion of OWRD's inspection program to ensure that new, abandoned, and altered wells in the LUBGWMA are constructed properly.
- Additional well assessments to develop a better understanding of how well construction and aquifer characteristics may be influencing water quality.
- Technical assistance for Morrow and Umatilla counties' Drinking Water Investigation project, which is evaluating opportunities to connect well owners to existing municipal water systems.
- Update to the conceptual model for the aquifer system within the LUBGWMA in collaboration with DEQ and ODA. The conceptual model report was last released in 1995. This update will include new data that have been collected since the original report release.
- Continue to collect groundwater level data through OWRD's well monitoring network. Staff will also look for opportunities and partnerships to expand the network throughout the LUBGWMA.

In addition to the support above, OWRD submitted a \$2.5 million federal appropriations request to conduct domestic well inspections, drill state monitoring wells and for data collection. The appropriations request ultimately stalled before the end of the U.S. Congressional term and the appropriations request died at the end of the session.

- **Dam Safety Program** pursues federal funds each year that help address safety-related issues that keep not only the dam owner but the many communities and residents who live downstream from the dam safe. In 2024, the Dam Safety Program expended additional funds from a federal 2021 ARPA grant on design and analysis services. OWRD worked with consultants and dam owners to evaluate options and fund solutions that addressed the issue and were supported by the dam owner . Although this funding served all dam owners with safety-related issues, it was particularly beneficial for small communities and individual dam owners who can struggle to procure these services on their own.



John Day River, John Day Fossil Beds National Monument, OR

Environmental Justice Considerations (ORS 182.550 Section 1)

Environmental Justice Consideration Process

OWRD does not yet have in place a formal system for tracking environmental justice issues internally. It would be beneficial to have project management software that could better capture environmental justice issues as they are identified. OWRD does not currently have project management software to track the agency's portfolio of work.

There are tools being developed for OWRD staff that will imbed environmental justice in OWRD practices and processes.

- **Engagement Spectrum:** OWRD has been exploring engagement frameworks that best suit agency engagement needs. OWRD has now reviewed the *Ladder of Participation* suggested by the EJC reviewer along with other frameworks and is developing one that provokes staff to think about the experience and role of external parties when planning engagement work. This will be introduced to agency staff as part of the Community Engagement Foundations in 2025.
- **Presenting traditional ecological knowledge alongside scientific data:** This was a question EJC had in response to OWRD's 2023 report, so we are providing an update here.

A framework being developed will be introduced to staff in 2025. It will be a tool for identifying the information needed in various situations, from the defensible scientific data required in a court case to the importance of including community observations when partnering on an issue of common concern. In the meantime, OWRD is leveraging opportunities to introduce its staff to different "ways of knowing". A recent presentation from CTUIR, for example, titled "Aligning environmental management with ecosystem resilience: A First Foods example" was shared broadly with staff with an invitation to think about including these kinds of perspectives in our work. And the DEI Team hosted a conversation that shared information about the recent Klamath Dam removal and highlighted the role traditional ecological knowledge played in decision-making. Providing learning experiences that support these shifts while developing processes that support continued growth is an area of active focus at our agency.

There are also steps being taken by agency leadership to work within existing law to improve equitable access to water across the state. Here are a couple examples:

- **Groundwater Allocation Rule Changes:** As groundwater levels are declining in many areas around Oregon, OWRD recently went through a rulemaking process to modify the evaluation criteria it uses to allocate new groundwater permits. Under the updated rules adopted by the Water Resources Commission in September of

2024, water is considered available if the groundwater levels are reasonably stable, the proposed groundwater pumping does not further deplete a hydraulically connected over-appropriated surface water source, and the aquifer can produce the water at the full amount requested. If the Department is not able to make site-specific determinations based on existing data, a finding will be made that no water is available for the requested use and the application will be denied. In practice, this means fewer new water right applications will be granted. If a new allocation is denied because water is not available, other approaches - such as conservation and transfers - will be explored to meet water needs.

These rules provide more protection against declining water levels, including well owners, existing water right holders, and species reliant on adequate water in-stream. OWRD continues to look for opportunities to work towards meeting in-stream and out-of-stream water needs in Oregon, including those most vulnerable to water scarcity impacts.

- **Strategic Planning and Continuous Learning:** Agency leadership recently reviewed the EJC response to our 2023 report and have prioritized the following actions for 2025:
 - Articulate and educate about western water law and its impact on equitable distribution of water.
 - Gather information to better understand how other states are working toward equitable distribution of water resources and environmental justice within the context of current law.
 - Provide training for staff regarding the difference between racial equity and environmental justice, particularly in the context of the often highly technical work of OWRD staff.

Environmental Justice Community Considerations

How does your agency define environmental justice communities?

OWRD uses the definition of “environmental justice community” found in ORS 182.535(4), which states that an “‘environmental justice community’ includes communities of color, communities experiencing lower incomes, communities experiencing health inequities, tribal communities, rural communities, remote communities, coastal communities, communities with limited infrastructure and other communities traditionally underrepresented in public processes and adversely harmed by environmental and health hazards, including seniors, youth and persons with disabilities.” To help ensure that these communities are considered/engaged, OWRD aims to use the questions found in the [2021 Governor’s DEI Action Plan](#), Racial Equity Toolkit (pp. 35-40).

What tools does your agency use to identify and prioritize environmental justice communities?

As mentioned in Environmental Justice Highlights, OWRD staff have recently developed the Community Engagement Foundations, which lays out the steps to engage with a broader swath of partners and participants than those who've typically engaged with the agency to date. There will be trainings in 2025 regarding these practices.

In the workbook, staff are walked through a series of questions, such as "Who locally should be involved in decision-making?" and "Who may be indirectly impacted that have yet to be considered?" Staff are then encouraged to go listen to the community by joining local events, or connecting with new contacts suggested by local people to inquire on potential impacts.

And, as mentioned above in Considerations, asking a series of additional questions in OWRD's racial impact statements as a part of rulemaking has expanded the scope of potential interested parties with whom OWRD should seek to engage.

Public Participation and Meaningful Involvement (ORS 182.535 Section 2)

Increase Public Participation of Individuals and Communities Affected by Agency Decisions

The three Community Engagement Coordinators hired since 2021 are working with local partners to increase meaningful participation, provide more proactive support as possible, and achieve more geographic equity across the state. Focused in the North Central, Eastern and Southwestern regions, they provide the following:

- **Events reflective of local norms** and ways of exchanging ideas and information. This could include awareness of timing, location or format for successful events, or issues of specific concern to that community.
- **Proactive engagement** seeks to address an issue surfacing before it leads to regulation. For instance, OWRD staff worked with the Wasco Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) to respond to escalating complaints about wells going dry by holding a Community Coffee event. The event was held following a local meeting to leverage local interest and meet at a time and place convenient for local residents to speak to issues of concern. OWRD committed to return in the spring of 2025 to reflect back what was heard and offer an initial scope for a groundwater study, which will then be co-designed by OWRD and these local partners. A locally-led group, the Inland Rogue Water Resiliency Group, was also formed in 2024. This group formed with leadership from the Jackson SWCD and support from OWRD. The SWCD identified local water interests, who met and expressed unanimous concern about water availability and the need to address these concerns before the Inland Rogue is in crisis. They're now organizing and may decide to apply for PBP funds later in 2025. Hosting (or supporting) a local event that addresses issues of local concern before they are a crisis is a more preventive approach that OWRD is intentionally moving toward when possible.
- **Scientific information curated for the specific audience** being addressed. OWRD has highly technical information that is important but often difficult for the public to digest. OWRD staff are working closely together to develop region-specific information that is more understandable to a lay audience. For example, in 2024, engagement and technical staff produced handouts used at engagement events about the interaction between groundwater and surface water, the specific hydrogeologic features of a given area, or how wells work in the context of a given area's groundwater system. These handouts were created for readers at the middle to high school level and took into account community norms and conditions.

These shifts in approach are often leading to increased participation in regional meetings. OWRD has also made numerous improvements to the public's access to information online. A couple improvements of note:

- OWRD has rebranded its materials and provided guidance that makes its materials more accessible to people with visual disabilities (this was one of the shifts to using this font). These shifts were made based on the following guidance - [Understanding Accessible Fonts and Typography for Section 508 Compliance | Section508.gov](#)
- OWRD has begun making improvements to our agency website to allow for easier public navigation. Links to items available for public comments are all now available on OWRD's main page. There is also a policy option package in the 2025-2027 Governor's Recommended Budget for a 0.5 FTE for a dedicated website coordinator for continued website improvements.
- With legislative investments from HB2010 and in partnership with the Bureau of Reclamation and OSU Extension, OWRD placed thirty additional [AgriMet stations](#) in Oregon in late 2023-early 2024. These weather stations provide irrigators online data for monitoring real time water needs of various crops for the most efficient use of water when irrigating. These stations work in tandem with [OpenET](#), which provides online data about the amount of crop water used (evapotranspiration) for all agricultural fields in Oregon. The School Team and Community Engagement staff are currently working to develop curriculum that will teach about these efficiencies and the science behind it to middle and high school students across the state.

Public Engagement Policy Processes

Does your agency have a public engagement process for promoting community participation in agency decision-making processes?

Addressing a backlog in rulemakings has led to improvements in OWRD's rulemaking processes. OWRD staff are focused on improving communications and engagement with communities potentially impacted by the rules. The following changes have occurred in this biennium:

- Policy and engagement staff are working together to develop a Rulemaking Process Guide that imbeds community engagement throughout the rulemaking process. This Guide will be followed by all staff engaged in rulemaking.
- Broadening representation on Rulemaking Advisory Committees and holding more meetings to increase input.
- Utilizing GovDelivery to communicate about the rulemaking process – this allows the public to choose what information they want to receive and receive it automatically.

- Updating rulemaking information on our website - all prospective rules are now together with summary, contact information, engagement opportunities and timelines, and all information related to each bill.
- Imbedding equity-centered questions that identify environmental and fiscal impacts - and people impacted by a rulemaking - earlier in the rulemaking process.
- Seeking and integrating input from the public and interested parties, over many meetings and discussions, into policy developments, policy option package development and agency requested budget requests.

Engagement varies based on how a decision-making process is statutorily defined. Statewide rulemakings or regulatory actions have a more defined process for engagement and OWRD continues to refine its approaches to maximize opportunities for public input and consultation. Our agency rulemaking processes are under internal review with the goal of providing process consistency across the agency.

Describe the current level and quality of public participation.

As described throughout this section, OWRD is currently in a period of active growth regarding public participation and meaningful involvement in policy-related engagements. OWRD held a number of public events and activities held in 2024 that show a lot of growth and promise. For instance, two well-attended open houses were held for the Walla Walla Basin that had scientific materials tailored specifically for that community and engaged local community members in discussion about that information. There are a lot of bi-state policy decisions in the works and these events provided essential education and ongoing community discussion, particularly around the concept that water management doesn't stop at state borders.

Selected Audiences

Has the agency performed an analysis to determine the interested parties and groups impacted by agency decisions?

An agency-wide analysis has not been conducted in recent years. Periodic analysis of those potentially impacted by a project or decision is typically done at the project level or as a result of a rulemaking effort. As the agency continues to grow and evaluate engagement processes, developing a consistent system for cataloguing this information would help clarify who should be at the table when it comes to an agency decision or project.

Additionally, OWRD uses the GovDelivery Platform so individual members of the public can sign up for a variety of topics and receive up to date information relevant to their desired content. The cost for this platform is currently nearly half of our dedicated agency communications budget.

With what interested parties or groups does your agency engage?

An informal assessment of agency community engagement was conducted in December

2023 to explore the engagement activities taking place around the agency, and with whom OWRD generally engages. Per this assessment, agency staff regularly engage with landowners and other individual members of the public (particularly those with water rights or interests in water), other agencies, local governments (and their representatives), conservation groups, municipal water suppliers and irrigation districts. Other partners identified were tribal nations, universities/researchers, other community organizations, K-12 schools, realtors, Certified Water Rights Examiners, well drillers, policy makers, funders, cannabis growers, neighbors (often a complainant), and water haulers. Staff working in a region were much more likely to mention community-based partners. Statewide staff mentioned working with coalitions of community-based partners, such as place-based planning groups and political interest groups.

When intentionally engaging with communities with locally tailored approaches, OWRD is experiencing some initial success engaging a broader swath of the public. For instance, OWRD held an event in Bandon in December at a local coffee shop with a meeting space, leveraging a weekly community event they hold, and utilizing local contacts to spread the word. Over 70 local residents participated from this rural community, including domestic well owners, cranberry growers (irrigators), ranchers, realtors, local businesses and organizations, the mayor and municipal employees, and locals just curious about the status of local water supplies.

OWRD is building its capacity to engage with children and youth through its School Team, comprised of staff from across the agency who have an interest in supporting outreach to youth and K-12 schools. The team just received official approval this year to operate on behalf of the agency and is setting up systems to support engagement of youth across the state. They're now coordinating use of educational water models and activities by regional offices, and developing curriculum about water science that is tied to state science standards. This will enable more regional staff to provide education to school-aged youth.

The Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) also works closely with Oregon's nine federally recognized Indian Tribes on issues related to water supply, watershed management, and water distribution, including water rights held or claimed by the Tribes and/or tribal members. In 1997, OWRD adopted a Government-to-Government policy statement that focused on two main points: we must honor and protect existing tribal rights to use water, and we must continue to forge partnerships to share responsibility for water management. Those partnerships are improved through regular communication and participation in the Natural Resources Working Group and the Cultural Resources Cluster Group. Annually, OWRD submits a [Government-to-Government](#) annual report to Oregon's [Legislative Commission on Indian Services](#), summarizing OWRD work with Oregon's nine Tribal Governments.

Examples of our tribal work are contained in the Government-Government annual report.

Public Engagement Policy

Describe policy if applicable. If not applicable, describe progress towards development.

At this time the Department does not have an agency-wide public engagement policy. Once the Community Engagement Foundations has had a chance to get established, agency leadership will evaluate the feedback and decide whether further guidance is needed.

Meaningful Engagement

What is the extent of meaningful engagement?

As described throughout this section and in the Highlights, this is currently an area of significant growth and focus at our agency

As OWRD increases and expands engagement, staff are hearing from ongoing collaborators who want more engagement in the process. How OWRD staff engage with parties with expertise and a vested interest in water while also engaging with anyone potentially impacted (most of whom know very little about water management) is an area of growth for the agency. Having an equity coordinator would provide the capacity to make progress on this important growth point.

Follow-up

Does your agency follow up with participants after decisions are made?

OWRD has varying degrees of follow up based on the issue and staff capacity. Staff consistently follow up with funding applicants, Rules Advisory Committees, and those asking for specific technical assistance or customer service. OWRD's follow up for broader public participation processes has generally been to respond to comments and share with its Commission, which welcomes Public Comment. In many cases individuals heavily involved in one topic are interested in others and the relationship with OWRD continues.

How OWRD staff follow up with communities is also an area of growth. Community Engagement Foundations has made it a focus of the last step in its Workbook, "Evaluate goals, develop lessons learned, and communicate results both internally and externally." While the Foundations are rolling out, the practices are already being introduced around the agency. For instance, at the Bandon event a survey was sent out following the meeting via a group email to participants with follow up links specifically addressing participants' interests and questions. Participants now have staff emails and quite a few have followed up about issues of interest or concern.



South Coast Watermasters talk about local water issues with Bandon community members, December 2024

"Our Bandon outreach resulted in the Coos/Douglas Watermasters office handling multiple calls and site visits. There are also two upcoming Coos County outreach meetings in the works in response to requests for additional assistance." – Susan Douthit, Watermaster, Douglas and Coos Counties

Environmental Justice Impacts (ORS 182.550 Section 3)

Determine the effect of agency decisions on environmental justice communities.

Does your agency measure the impacts of agency decisions on environmental justice in Oregon communities? Why or why not?

As stated previously in this report, OWRD staff are actively working to engage a broader set of constituents and develop processes that better evaluate our impact on these communities. The Community Engagement Foundations mentioned above will include recommendations for identifying who could be potentially impacted both directly and indirectly and developing engagement strategies accordingly. However, the challenge for the agency is that water touches every single person in the state. There are certain entities that regularly engage and are directly affected, but the implications ultimately affect everyone. OWRD does not have a budget to support engagement or communications work with a broad statewide impact, so it will need to be strategic and prioritize work as it moves forward.

Environmental Justice Progress (ORS 182.550 Section 4)

ORS 182.550 Section 4: Improve plans to further improve environmental justice in Oregon;

How is EJ built into agency strategic plans?

With a new Director confirmed in the summer of 2024, OWRD has now initiated its next strategic planning process. The OWRD Agency Strategic Plan and ensuing engagement will be discussed at the March 2025 Water Resources Commission meeting.

In 2023, an early preparatory document for the development of the agency strategic plan was developed. The engagement needs were outlined along with initial internal and external partners. Early field visits for internal staff begin in February 2025 to set the stage of local input into the overall agency plan.

Environmental equity and justice will be an overarching theme of the strategic plan. Many of the strategies and activities mentioned in this report are expected to be foundational to OWRD's next strategic plan, with continued equity work as a key focus. For example, the

IWRS provides a snapshot of the work happening across agencies, and recommended strategies for moving equity forward. The community engagement and place-based planning staff continue to bring forward the impacts of water management on communities and their needs as we prepare for the plan.

What does your agency need to further develop and implement environmental justice policies at the agency?

Though there was not an opportunity to request a dedicated staff person for DEIJ for the upcoming budget, OWRD did submit a request (Package 105; Expanding Engagement & Equity in Complex Issues) which sought to broaden the scope of \$600k in general funds appropriated via package 801 in the 23-25 biennium. This would enable the funds to be used for facilitation, outreach and engagement, communications, trainings, translations, and other consulting services, with an emphasis on centering equity. OWRD sought this expansion to better accomplish the goal of addressing Oregonian's water needs and working to engage the people we serve in the solutions. This request was not included in the Governor's Recommended Budget.

The following would greatly support OWRD in developing and implementing environmental justice policies across the agency:

- **Environmental and Racial Justice Coordinator:** As stated previously, OWRD has already identified the need for dedicated environmental justice staff. This is critical to setting and articulating a vision for EJ; developing more consistent policies and procedures; and supporting consistent practices alongside the various teams and sections so we can multiply our efforts across the agency.
- **Resources for training, communication and outreach to EJ communities:** As OWRD outlined in package 105, having additional resources to intentionally set new goals and practices for engaging and meaningfully communicating with EJ communities would be beneficial. The agency also has a limited budget for producing communications and necessary outreach materials for conducting DEI-EJ training within the agency.

Environmental Justice Mapping Tool Involvement (ORS 182.550 Section 5)

How is your agency participating in the development of the environmental justice mapping tool?

One of OWRD's Community Engagement Coordinators will be an agency liaison for the Environmental Justice Mapping Tool Working Group and will connect OWRD staff to opportunities to provide input or engage with the tool as it develops.

Environmental Justice Council Engagement: 2025

How would your agency like to engage with the EJC in 2025?

OWRD will continue to prioritize staff time for a liaison to engage with the EJC. Once the IWRS is adopted, its coordinator will likely seek consultation from the EJC to ensure that the plan centers environmental justice and equity into agency workplans as it moves into the implementation phase.

Environmental Justice Council Legislative Citations

Please share agency impacted legislation from the last legislative session where Environmental Justice Council or Environmental Justice Task Force engagement is cited in the legislation.

There was no OWRD legislation in 2024 that directly mentioned engagement with the Environmental Justice Task Force or Environmental Justice Council.

Meaningful Engagement Legislative Citations

Please share agency impacted legislation that includes language regarding meaningful engagement.

How do agencies collaborate when multiple agencies are listed?

[House Bill 3293](#) (2021) instructed the named agencies (Oregon Water Resources Department, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Department of Environmental Quality, Oregon Department of Health, Oregon Water Enhancement Board, and Business Oregon) to coordinate and develop Best Practices for community engagement for the development and implementation of water projects the agency funds. Agencies are required to recognize best practices in Oregon Administrative Rules to help guide in community engagement by water project developers. HB3293 also encourages, but does not require, the six agencies to make financial support available to local organizations and local governments to create community engagement plans related to water projects. The six named agencies started coordinating on the development of the Best Practices in spring 2023 and intend to engage others externally before finalizing the Best Practices in 2024.

[House Bill 2010](#) (2021) created the Place-Based Water Planning Fund and provides OWRD permanent authority to support place-based integrated water resources planning (place-based water planning). OWRD piloted this approach with four places across the state since 2016. Place-based planning is a collaborative and inclusive process that is designed to: (A) Gather information to develop a shared understanding of water resources and identify critical issues and knowledge gaps; (B) Examine the existing and future in-stream and out-of-stream water needs for people, the economy and the environment; (C) Identify and prioritize strategic, integrated solutions to understand and meet instream and out-of-stream water needs; and (D) Develop, implement and update a place-based integrated water resources plan.

The bill notes that place-based integrated water resources plans are to be "developed using an open, equitable and transparent process that fosters public participation and meaningful engagement with environmental justice communities, consistent with the requirements of ORS 182.545." The established fund allows OWRD to provide grants to groups to do the pre-work to prepare for planning, to develop place-based plans, and to coordinate implementation of state-recognized plans. In addition to those three general categories of grants the bill specifically notes that OWRD may provide financial assistance to facilitate "associated public participation, including participation by members of environmental justice communities, through education, outreach, financial support and other activities." A one-time deposit of \$2M was put into the fund. OWRD is undertaking rulemaking and program development in the 2023-2025 biennium.

HB 2010 specifically calls out that the Water Resources Commission may establish requirements for promoting public participation and engaging environmental justice communities in its rules. In terms of inter-agency coordination, prior to funding award OWRD is required to consult with the

Department of Environmental Quality, Department of Land Conservation and Development, Oregon Health Authority, Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, State Department of

Agriculture and State Department of Fish and Wildlife to understand agency capacity, provide assistance and engage in planning.

House Bill 2010 (2021) also made changes to the provisions related to the Integrated Water Resources Strategy, including extending the requirement to review and update the IWRS from five years to at least eight years. The bill also requires biennial workplan development for water-related activities and requires the IWRS to include provisions to promote meaningful engagement with environmental justice communities and to promote partnerships with tribes, state and federal bodies to implement recommended actions. There are several other agencies who implement the IWRS, as well as the update. The legislature established a permanent IWRS Coordinator position to implement the IWRS, develop updates, and coordinate among state, federal, and local agencies, and educational and non-governmental organizations.

House Bill 2018 (2021) was enacted in 2021 to work through 2032 to develop and publish ground water budgets for all major hydrologic basins in Oregon. This includes multiple layers of data related to ground water levels, recharge and consumptive use. The legislation also directs OWRD to engage communities. Community engagement staff are now working with multiple sections across OWRD to develop meaningful community outreach that will be coordinated with other OWRD outreach and engagement activities that can benefit from water budget information, such as place-based planning, the Water Availability Reporting System update, and the Oregon Water Data Portal.



A new Agri-Met station in Pine Grove, OR provides partners and the interested public with robust ongoing weather data to aid water planning decisions.

This is an opportunity to develop meaningful public engagement strategies that broaden public awareness and participation regarding the latest water science and planning for a sustainable water future.

House Bill 5506 (2023) provided \$100k one-time general funds to Portland State University's Oregon Consensus to continue facilitation of the Tribal/State Water Task Force to discuss issues related to water supply, watershed management, water distribution, and tribal water rights. The Task Force started meeting in September 2021 and released its [Summary Report](#) in February 2023. As the Task Force has focused on education and ensuring that all parties have a greater understanding of the importance of water and the future needs of water, it became clear that there are a number of shared values about water between both the Tribes and the state. This included recognizing the importance of Tribal engagement in water planning in Oregon at all levels. The [Summary Report](#) also identified key themes and recommendations which promote meaningful engagement.

Definitions

Environmental Justice: (ORS 182.535 Section 3)

“Environmental justice” means the equal protection from environmental and health risks, fair treatment and meaningful involvement in decision making of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, immigration status, income or other identities with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies that affect the environment in which people live, work, learn and practice spirituality and culture.

Environmental Justice Community: (ORS 182.535 Section 4)

“Environmental justice community” includes communities of color, communities experiencing lower incomes, communities experiencing health inequities, tribal communities, rural communities, remote communities, coastal communities, communities with limited infrastructure and other communities traditionally underrepresented in public processes and adversely harmed by environmental and health hazards, including seniors, youth and persons with disabilities.

Meaningful Involvement: (ORS 182.535 Section 7)

“Meaningful involvement” means:

- (a) Members of vulnerable populations have appropriate opportunities to participate in decisions about a proposed activity that will affect their environment or health;
- (b) Public involvement can influence a decision maker’s decision;
- (c) The concerns of all participants involved are considered in the decision-making process; and
- (d) Decision makers seek out and facilitate the involvement of members of vulnerable populations

Environmental Burdens: (ORS 182.535 Section 2)

Environmental burden” means the environmental and health risks to communities caused by the combined historic, current and projected future effects of:

- (a) Exposure to conventional pollution and toxic hazards in the air or in or on water or land;
- (b) Adverse environmental conditions caused or made worse by other contamination or pollution; and
- (c) Changes in the environment resulting from climate change, such as water insecurity, drought, flooding, wildfire, smoke and other air pollution, extreme heat, loss of traditional cultural resources or foods, ocean acidification, sea-level rise and increases in infectious disease.

Community Engagement Plan (ORS 541.551(a))

For the purposes of implementing ORS 541.551, means a plan to meaningfully engage and provide suitable access to decision-making processes for disproportionately impacted communities,

underrepresented communities, tribal communities and all persons regardless of race, color, national origin or income in planning for water projects using identified best practices.

Disproportionately Impacted Communities (ORS 541.551(b))

For the purposes of implementing ORS 541.551, “Disproportionately impacted communities” may include:

(A) Rural communities;

(B) Coastal communities;

(C) Areas with above-average concentrations of historically disadvantaged households or residents with low levels of educational attainment, areas with high unemployment, high linguistic isolation, low levels of homeownership or high rent burden or sensitive populations; or

(D) Other communities that face barriers to meaningful participation in public processes.