

Burns Open House Discussion – May 25, 2010



Integrated Water Resources Strategy Spring 2010 Open House Events

Harney County Community Center, 484 N. Broadway, Burns, OR 97720

Facilitation provided by Amanda Benton, RARE Program (Rural Assistance for Rural Environments)

This document reflects public input gathered during the open house event held in Burns. Participants were asked to identify the water resource challenges facing their community as well as any policies, projects, or approaches that they would like to see as part of the Integrated Water Resources Strategy. The event facilitator also asked audience members to share their vision, hopes, and goals for the state and to provide any education or outreach ideas that would help the public gain a better understanding of water resource issues facing Oregon. The discussion that took place reflects a true brainstorming session where no efforts were made by agency staff to rebut, debate, or prioritize any of the ideas, suggestions, or comments shared during the event.

4:00 Session

Challenges

1. Defining the relationship between the water strategy and current water law.
2. Get the truth about climate change and its effects on water rights.
3. Instream water rights to maintain fish ignore the importance of recharging the aquifer.
4. First determine how putting the water back in the stream will affect the existing use of the water.
5. Ignoring the importance of agriculture to the local economy. The economy will decline if water rights are lost.
6. Acknowledgment and appreciation of past management and uses of water. For example, flood irrigation has many benefits.
7. A lot of the public does not understand the link between agriculture and the economy.
8. An integrated strategy can put the family farms out of business. The compliance burden should be considered. Do not put family farms out of business. Family farms cannot take more regulatory burdens.
9. Find funding that is not based on water user fees.
10. A strategy that is achievable.
11. Mandated water conservation. It opens the door to litigation that will sink family farms.

12. The fix-all is not an irrigation district.
13. Concerned regarding existing wells.
14. The year 2012 is not a reasonable deadline to do this right. The issues are so big. We need a lot of opportunity for input and this timeline is not enough.
15. Studies that need to be done take 5-10 years.
16. Concerns regarding efficiency and conservation language. Flood irrigation is efficient in a natural system where there is not storage. Recognize that flood irrigation is efficient and a good thing.
17. Avoid unintended consequences. It is difficult to believe that the input from this community will really make it to the Governor's desk or the Water Resources Commission.
18. The ability to sustain historical uses in the light of an ecological flow definition.
19. The ecological flow definition should not apply to the strategy. It applies to future storage projects with state funding.
20. Recognize that there is not opposition between ecological and agricultural uses.
21. Consideration and recognition of private property rights. Water rights are private property rights.
22. Un-adjudicated claims have not been dealt with. If there is a new system for controlling water, how will it affect the water rights that have not been adjudicated?
23. The Integrated Water Resources Strategy is necessary for Oregon because other states want our water. We need to have our act together to respond. Oregon's water should stay in Oregon.
24. The Water Resources Department can adopt rules and make rule changes. Rules do not have to be approved by the Legislature.
25. Accounting for the negatives effects of converting to efficient irrigation practices, such as pivot irrigation, on wildlife habitat and species (habitat for nesting and migratory birds).
26. Fed up with the west side of the state telling us how to do business.

Solutions and Opportunities

1. The Water Resources Department should maintain primary control over senior water rights. Do not allow the Department of Environmental Quality to control what happens with water.
2. Decisions on strategy should not be weighted toward the population centers. Include local decision-making.
3. Conduct a study on groundwater recharge. Identify what types of agricultural practices recharge groundwater effectively and efficiently.
4. State in writing that Oregon's water code will not be changed. Additional legal protection should be provided to those with senior water rights.
5. When there are transfers from out-of-stream to instream uses, those transfers should lose their priority date.
6. Modeling climate change should include precipitation data.
7. All solutions should be voluntary.
8. The Governor has a sustainability target and it should be a component of this strategy.
9. The locals need to talk to the Commissioners and provide them with local input.
10. Use incentives for preferred management activities.
11. Un-adjudicated claims should be completed before any new requirements are implemented.
12. Providing incentives or pay users to stop pumping. Water banking is an option.

Education and Outreach

1. The Governor or someone unbiased should come and talk to the stewards of the land on water rights. The local stewards of the land should create the curriculum.
2. The Water Resources Department needs education on the different areas in Oregon because they are different.
3. In Harney County, fish, wildlife, and game management all rely on historical water uses (flood irrigation).
4. Appreciate agriculture benefits to water and water rights.
5. Agricultural and ecological goals can compliment one another.

Vision

1. Make sure that agriculture in Oregon has the opportunity to move forward economically and efficiently. Agriculture should be a priority.
2. Protection of the prior appropriation doctrine.
3. This area is pristine and water should be managed to maintain it.
4. This basin is very diverse and unique. It is one of the only closed basins in the whole country. Water does not flow out of the basin. We have a limited water supply with a historical, cyclical water cycle where sometimes there is too much water and sometimes not enough. Base decisions on historical knowledge of the community. Flooding is vital to wildlife. Look at what we had before pioneers came to this area.
5. Continued agricultural presence in Harney County.
6. Do not "fix" problems that are not broken.
7. There is not a fix-all for the entire state. Need to take different needs from different parts of the state.
8. Maintain flexibility.
9. Locally-based strategies (map on page 6 is incorrect).
10. Cooperation through incentives, not regulation.

5:30 Session

Challenges

1. How to identify and measure water in Oregon, such as exempt uses and exempt wells. Concerned regarding where this process will go with measurement.
2. Nervous about all of the maps because they are open to interpretation and can mean something different for everyone.
3. A plan that is integrated between agencies will lead to conflict. Plans that exist today, including the comprehensive land use plans, are in conflict. This is a big challenge. Integrating the plans that exist today with Integrated Water Resources Strategy will be challenging.
4. How to resolve conflict between agencies.

5. Unclear how the plan will be used. The strategy will be fodder for litigation.
6. Changing, buying, or marketing water to change the use can have a detrimental impact on the culture and history of a community.
7. The wrong person buying a piece of property can prevent water from getting to where it needs to be.
8. Landowner cooperation.
9. Varying levels of chemicals and the content of groundwater. Concerned regarding groundwater quality in Harney County.
10. Some of the water quality problems today are background. Distinguish between natural and background water quality issues.
11. Participating in this process. The people and community in this area are “meeting-ed out.” Keeping the level of interest and engagement up throughout the process will be a challenge.
12. Cannot assume that the people on the west side are not dealing with water issues.
13. Implementing a plan without having a detrimental effect on the community (agriculture).
14. Population.
15. Agency personnel over-enthusiastic about this issue.
16. Zealous regulators.
17. Setting up a strategy that would allow environmental groups to hijack it.
18. Multiple agencies involved will be a real stretch – it will be hard to function.

Solutions and Opportunities

1. Write a plan that enable things to happen and not a plan that restricts things from happening. This will put an end to some of the litigation.
2. Using the current groundwater study to leverage cooperation among neighborhoods and the community.

3. Take what we learn here and provide it to other parts of the state so they can use it. We are further ahead in Harney County, so educate the rest of the state.
4. Make sure that water is not wasted. Define waste.
5. Come up with ways to improve irrigation and stop some of the water waste (excessive use, evaporative losses).
6. Protect Oregon's waters for Oregon. Take possession of it and plan. Fear that Oregon will be required to give extra water away. Need to have reserves for droughts and other needs.
7. Maintain flexibility and reserves for droughts and floods.
8. Secure Oregon's water with other states. Make agreements with Idaho for water.
9. People try to rewrite history, however, keep in mind and incorporate the historical use into plans and policy. Many good things have happened in the past.

Education and Outreach

1. Telling the story of Harney County living in rural Oregon is important. It can help get people interested.
2. Opportunity in the strategy to help people understand what social and environmental justice means. Need to define terms.