Pendleton Open House
Pendleton Convention Center
June 13, 2016
Meeting Notes

Q1 & Q2: How has the recent drought affected you? In what ways did the drought affect your community?

- Management of Lower Birch Creek drainage. It's a 303d listed stream with endangered steelhead. Used to have artesian wells operating at 125 psi of artesian pressure, but in the last few years, we've seen losses of 10-12 psi of pressure. In the last 2 years, we've lost all artesian pressure. Had 2 artesian springs in family for 150 years. 2014-2015 was the first time Birch Creek dried out on my property. In previous droughts, we still had water in creek. My neighbor's spring fed domestic well has dried up. Two irrigation wells started up two years ago, on either side of us. They were drilled 900 feet deep. Most people used to get water from springs that drained into the creek. Some springs drained into ponds that benefited wildlife, pond has now dried up. Pilot Rock is spring dependent. Spent thousands of dollars on riparian habitat, now losing plantings because of water level declines. Wants fee on water use. He has been an irrigator and understands what that would mean to irrigators.
- This highlights that it is not a few years of drought at issue, but cumulative impacts.
- I live in Umapine. Used to have artesian wells, but now, wells are dropping with a 3-4 feet decrease in water table every year, discovered by OWRD study. OWRD needs to help us stabilize the groundwater levels. Studying this issue for 10 years will not help us.
- NRCS Snotel sites showed good snowpack at 5,000 feet this year, but lower elevations didn't have snowpack. The water supply projections were based on high elevation snowpack sites, however, low elevations melted early. This resulted in inaccurate streamflow forecasts.
- Drop in the water table here is not just a drought problem. WRD continues to issue groundwater permits while not knowing how much water is actually available.
- Mountains were dry for last few years. This year when they got snow, the mountains sucked it up.

Q3: How did you respond to drought? Please share any successes or strategies.

- Pendleton initiated rate increases to pay for aquifer storage and recovery. This began 13 years ago, expanded efforts in 2011. Groundwater is still declining, but it's because we are hydraulically connected to basin downstream from Pendleton. It was a significant cost, but Pendleton is now a very drought resistant community.

Q4: What actions should be pursued to better prepare for future droughts?

- OWRD should be looking into aquifer recharge projects.
- Our area needs more monitoring of wells in the Blue Mountains, especially at higher elevations. It would tell us about background recharge of our source waters. It's very difficult to install measuring devices in existing wells. How far up the mountain is recharge occurring? High in the Blues, Meacham area, and Poverty Flats, and Walla Walla area in basalts.
- Better data for recharge projects. Water availability is based on an old period of record, but we shouldn't just use the last 10 years of streamflow data to determine actual water availability to know how to plan a reservoir or more aquifer storage.

- Tracer studies could help you determine the degree of groundwater and surface water interaction, and help WRD determine when regulation is necessary. In the Walla Walla Basin, there is a link between surface water and groundwater.
- We can't depend on the state to provide all of the funding. At some point, users are going to have to provide some of the funding, like a fee-based system. That money should get put back in to enhance the system.
- Access to Columbia River water, in exchange for well water in my community.
- We need a systemic approach to the issue. Conservation, storage and reuse projects are Band-Aids. The issue is so much bigger than a local study can handle. It's critical that we learn to manage in a way that is comprehensive.

Q5: What most concerns you about the future with regard to water?

- If you move river users to wells, they will use more water. They are no longer cut off when flows are not available.
- We have tried to build incentives to be more efficient with their use, such as through the Conserved Water Allocation program. WRD sees this program being used more often. WRD welcomes more ideas for incentives.
- Oregon is a conjunctive management state. We can regulate off junior water users. But it's not easy to prove. We need significant data. These community conversations help us prioritize our activities/studies across the state.
- I worry that WRD doesn't consider the effect of groundwater on surface water, except for in the Deschutes basin. Mining groundwater can cause a much bigger problem down the road.
- How do we deal with limited water supply and increasing demands? Those pressures and demands will be growing, especially in a changing climate. How do we provide adequate resources to meet needs?
- New water needs due to changing crops will be challenged to get water.
- Senior water users often don't conserve because they don't need to. They have water certainty.

Q6: Any other thoughts or comments you would like to share with the IWRS Project Team?

- We have to move quickly or we'll go past the time that we can do anything about it.
- Thanks for coming out to listen to us. Montana lost a major case with Trout Unlimited, forced state to put onus on applicant to prove that the groundwater use did not impact surface water supplies.
- Is it legal to transfer water rights from Ontario to Umatilla Basin? I don't know about Ontario, but we talked a lot about Wallowa Lake because it flows to the Columbia and could be used for mitigation.
- What about taking it out of the ground and selling it to the Umatilla Basin? Would need conversations and rule-making to do that. Water in the Snake or Columbia has additional considerations because it is shared with Washington/Idaho.
- Will ban be removed from Oregon to appropriate Columbia water? Oregon has restrictions on development of water from Columbia mainstem. It requires bucket-for-bucket mitigation. The driver is federal listings for endangered species. Washington and Idaho are facing the same issues. The development we see happening in Washington got in the door before federal listings.