
Oregon Water Resources Department Strategic Plan

2019-2024

OREGON



WATER RESOURCES
DEPARTMENT

Water is one of our most precious natural resources.

All Oregonians experience the value of water daily. It is a fundamental building block to life. It drives our economy, is essential to agriculture, and supports industries across the state. It provides habitat for fish and wildlife, scenic value, and opportunities for recreation. Water shapes our cultures and communities. It is vital in the lives of Oregonians and crucial to our quality of life and well-being.

Yet, Oregon is experiencing water scarcity more frequently. As water has become fully appropriated and the state is faced with challenges associated with a changing climate and population growth, helping meet Oregon's current and future instream and out-of-stream water needs remains the Department's mission.

The Department is dedicated to providing timely decisions on water right-related applications and transactions; distributing water in the field in accordance with the water rights of record; collecting and analyzing groundwater and surface water data to support responsible management, decision-making, and planning; and helping individuals, businesses, and communities identify solutions to their water resource needs.

With this in mind, the Department identified its strategic priorities for the next five years:

- Modernize our management of Oregon's surface water and groundwater resources to meet instream and out-of-stream uses
 - Advance responsible groundwater and surface water management
 - Modernize water transactions systems and processes
 - Increase protection of public safety and health
 - Improve instream protections and increase water conservation
- Work to secure Oregon's instream and out-of-stream water future in the face of increasing water scarcity
 - Understand Oregon's expected future water supply
 - Equip basins to plan for their water future
 - Invest in Oregon's built and natural water infrastructure
- Foster a forward-looking team dedicated to serving Oregonians with integrity and excellence
 - Maintain technical excellence and improve customer service by investing in training
 - Improve agency communications

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

The Department has a rich history of working to help meet Oregon's instream and out-of-stream water needs. Oregon has many tools and approaches that give it an advantage over other states' water management. At the same time, we face increasing challenges and conflict over water as demands on our water resources increase, and our climate changes and population grows. Water is at the core of who we are as Oregonians and we must seize on opportunities to collaborate on water issues and identify innovative solutions.

The Department must position the State to capitalize on these opportunities and modernize its approach as it implements Oregon's water laws and the Integrated Water Resources Strategy (IWRS). This Strategic Plan will guide the Department as we work to carry out the IWRS and update and improve our practices to ensure that Oregon has healthy waters able to sustain a healthy economy, environment, and cultures and communities across the state.



Tom Byler

Purpose

This strategic plan was developed to help prioritize the outcomes the Department will work to achieve, track progress on those outcomes, improve as a positive and productive workplace, and improve communication. The plan serves as a launching point for these efforts. The document does not outline a comprehensive list of all that we will do, nor the many tasks staff undertake day-to-day, but rather highlights our strategic direction. It identifies the priorities for our work over the next five years.

How This Plan Was Developed

The plan was developed by the Department in consultation with the Water Resources Commission (Commission) and Department stakeholders. The plan builds upon the Department's existing vision, mission, and goals by identifying strategic priorities and objectives. These priorities were developed by asking Department management and stakeholders what strategic development they recommend we prioritize for the next five years. That input was shared with the Commission, who worked with the Department to develop a narrower list of priorities and corresponding objectives. These priorities and objectives were then further refined with input from Department management, staff, and stakeholders.

The Department took development of this plan as an opportunity to look inward at how we could improve internal coordination and communication, as well as invest in training, technology, and other resources to empower staff to reach our shared goals. Input was collected from staff via discussion sessions and a survey. Through this effort, employee development was adopted as a strategic priority.

The Department also identified core values, to help guide our work. All Department employees were invited to participate in an exercise to share their ideas for Department values. A team of staff then selected and defined the core values based on input from their colleagues, managers, and the Commission.



Commissioners and staff discuss the plan



Staff discuss core values



Commissioners and staff discuss the plan



Staff participate in a core values exercise

WHO WE ARE

Vision

To assure sufficient and sustainable water supplies are available to meet current and future needs.

Mission and Goals

To serve the public by practicing and promoting responsible water management through two key goals:

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

Core Values

Integrity – We are accountable for all that we do. We act with honesty and promote transparency.

Service – We are dedicated to providing outstanding service and treating everyone equitably in our management and stewardship of state resources.

Technical Excellence – We base our resource decisions on law, science, and expertise.

Teamwork – We are united in our mission, relying on one another and working together with the communities we serve.

Forward-Looking – We seek innovative and practical solutions to the water challenges of today and tomorrow.

WATER: OREGON'S SHARED RESPONSIBILITY, OUR UNIQUE ROLE

Under Oregon law, all water within the state belongs to the public. Prudent management and use of this precious public resource is a shared responsibility for both Oregon residents and visitors to our state. The choices we make impact the quantity and quality of water available for others today and in the future. The Oregon Water Resources Department has a unique role in the management of water: we are the state agency responsible for allocating Oregon's surface water and groundwater supplies to a multitude of instream and out-of-stream uses. We are responsible for determining the amount of water available for these diverse uses in basins and aquifers throughout the state, relying on our measurements of surface water and groundwater conditions to help make those determinations. We work with water right holders and domestic well owners to help manage their use. While OWRD's focus is water supply, we work with other state agencies such as the Oregon Departments of Environmental Quality, Agriculture, Fish and Wildlife, and others, to manage Oregon's water in an integrated manner to meet diverse and often competing uses.



Staff discuss the geology of the Harney Basin



Department staff and well driller prepare a camera to inspect a well

Department History

The availability of water has been a crucial component of Oregon's development. Before 1909, water claims were staked like mining claims and recorded in the county courthouse. Many claims were not recorded and disputes regularly arose over rights to use water. In 1909, the Legislative Assembly adopted the Oregon Water Code. Under the Code, all water belongs to the public for use by the people for beneficial purposes. With a few exceptions, farms, business owners, cities, and other users must obtain a water right to use water from any source, including streams, groundwater, and lakes. Oregon's Water Code is built upon the doctrine of "Prior Appropriation," meaning the first person to obtain a water right on a stream will be the last person to be denied water in times of low-stream flow.

Since 1909, the Legislature has updated various components of Oregon's Water Code, but the principle tenets of Prior Appropriation remain in place. Significant updates to Oregon's water laws included adoption of the 1955 Groundwater Act, which required water rights for the use of groundwater, and the 1987 Instream Water Rights Act, which recognized instream public beneficial uses such as for fish and wildlife, recreation, and pollution abatement.

"Everywhere in our state, we see healthy waters, able to sustain a healthy economy, environment, and cultures and communities."

- Oregon's 2012 Integrated Water Resources Strategy Policy Advisory Group Vision Statement

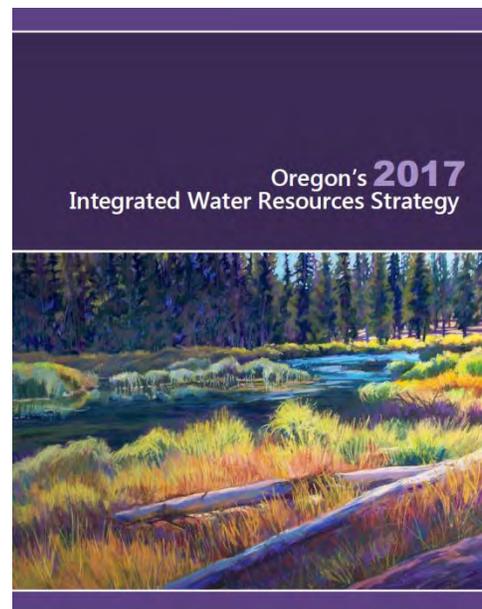
Oregon's Integrated Water Resources Strategy

In 2009, the Oregon Legislature tasked the Oregon Water Resources Department to work with other natural resource agencies to develop a long-term strategy for understanding Oregon's water resources and meeting instream and out-of-stream needs, including water quantity, water quality, and ecosystem needs. Oregon's first Integrated Water Resources Strategy (IWRS) was adopted in 2012 and then updated in 2017. The 2017 IWRS identifies 18 critical issues Oregon faces and provides over 50 recommended actions for how to address those issues.

The IWRS is the umbrella document that spells out "what" generally needs to happen to understand our water resources and meet Oregon's water needs, but it does not provide the finer details of implementation. The Oregon Water Resources Department Strategic Plan is a supporting document to the IWRS and identifies what recommended actions the Department will seek to address in the next five years.

"Water is a finite resource with growing demands; water scarcity is a reality in Oregon. Water-related decisions should rest on a thorough analysis of supply, the demand/need for water, the potential for increasing efficiencies and conservation, and alternative ways to meet these demands."

- Oregon's 2017 Integrated Water Resources Strategy Policy Advisory Group Vision Statement



WHAT WE DO

The Department is charged with implementing Oregon's water allocation and distribution laws. This management of Oregon's water resources requires expertise in several areas to understand water supplies, issue rights to use water, manage those rights, and work to address future instream and out-of-stream water needs. Below is a summary of the Department's work to accomplish our mission.

Data and Information

- Collect, analyze and share groundwater and surface water data
- Manage a statewide stream gage network and process surface water data collected
- Perform investigations and studies of Oregon's groundwater resources
- Map Oregon's water rights
- Gather water use data
- Determine water availability

Water Right Transactions

- Process water right transactions, such as new permits, transfers, instream leases, certificates, extensions of time, limited licenses, permit amendments, and drought-related use permits
- Facilitate voluntary streamflow restoration
- License hydroelectric facilities



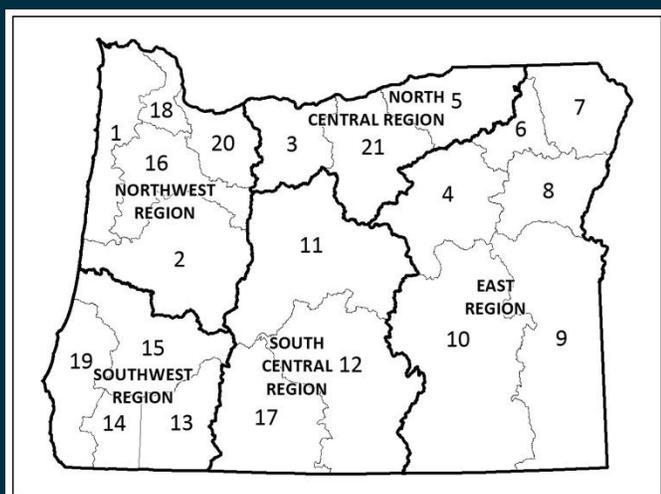
Department staff look at the West Fork Hood River Gage

Distribution & Regulation of Water

- Protect senior water rights
- Enforce Oregon's water laws
- Protect groundwater through well construction standards, compliance and enforcement
- License well drillers and coordinate continuing education requirements
- Ensure the safety of dams

Meeting Future Needs

- Participate in collaborative basin planning efforts
- Facilitate solutions to water supply challenges
- Provide funding to support water supply planning, studies, and projects
- Review and approve aquifer storage and recovery and artificial recharge projects



Numbers on map denote Watermaster Districts

OREGON WATER RESOURCES DEPARTMENT BY THE NUMBERS

- 21 Districts in 5 Regions
- ~167 staff (2017-19 Biennium)
- ~110,000+ miles of streams in Oregon
- ~89,000 water rights
- ~230,000+ wells
- ~970 dams subject to Department inspection
- ~260 gaging stations
- ~1,270+ observation wells

WHAT WE AIM TO ACHIEVE IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

This section identifies the Department's strategic priorities and objectives, presenting areas of focus for development and improvement as we provide our usual products and services. They follow the theme of modernizing the Department to tackle the water resource issues of today and tomorrow. The applicable Recommended Actions from the IWRS are listed with each objective.

Priority: Modernize our management of Oregon's surface water and groundwater resources to meet instream and out-of-stream uses

While this work has been core to the agency's mission for over a century, opportunities exist for improvement. With increased knowledge of water resources, and advancements in technology, we identified the following ways to improve how we manage water.

Objective: Advance responsible groundwater and surface water management

Responsible water management is water management decisions informed by data and information. Potential outcomes of this objective could include: increased number of stream measurements and groundwater level measurements collected and processed, elimination of the backlog of unprocessed surface water and groundwater data, improved verification of permit conditions for new permits, better equipped Watermaster and other water management staff, increased installation of water use measurement devices and use of the data, evaluation of groundwater management areas, and completed reviews of policies such as those for groundwater availability and water use measurement.

IWRS Recommended Actions 1.A, 1.B, 1.C, 2.B, and 10.F



Staff entering and mapping a water right application into a Department database

Objective: Modernize water transactions systems and processes

It is important to periodically evaluate processes and procedures to check for improvements and efficiencies that might be gained from modifying practices or considering new information. The Department seeks to ensure the accuracy and quality of processing, while also maximizing efficiency. Potential outcomes under this objective could be updated processes and procedures for water right transactions, new tools, improved processing efficiency for water right transactions, as well as increased customer accessibility.

IWRS Recommended Actions 2.E and 10.G



Staff taking a streamflow measurement

Water law is deeply rooted in Oregonians' livelihoods, cultures, and well-being. The importance of water in our lives is unquestionable. Yet our current and future challenges require that we modernize our current systems and stretch ourselves to innovate. Through this Strategic Plan, we seek to honor our roots, while looking ahead for opportunities to improve.

Objective: Increase protection of public safety and health

The Department is charged with regulating well construction and the safety of dams. These actions help protect the public's safety and health by lowering the risk of dam failure and preventing commingling and contamination of aquifers. The Department also helps the state prepare for, respond to, and mitigate for impacts of drought. Outcomes under this objective could include: an increased number of high-hazard dams with completed and exercised Emergency Action Plans, greater seismic resiliency, improved drought preparedness, and increased well inspections and well log reviews.

IWRS Recommended Actions 5.5 and 7.C

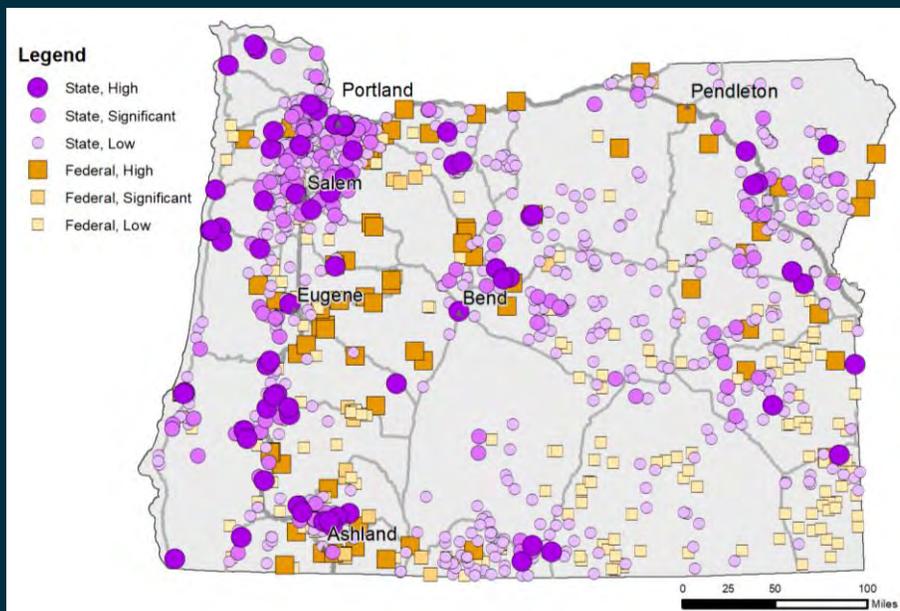
Objective: Improve instream protections and increase water conservation

As we face growing pressures on our water resources, water conservation is essential to stretching our supplies to benefit the environment, our economy, and our way of life as Oregonians. The Department has a role in incentivizing instream flow protections and promoting water conservation. Potential outcomes of this objective may include increased outreach on instream flow restoration and water conservation opportunities, increased stream monitoring, refined mitigation programs, and increased water use measurement.

IWRS Recommended Actions 10.A and 11.B

DAMS AND DAM SAFETY IN OREGON

Dams in Oregon are regulated by the Department or a federal agency. The Department regulates dams that are not under the jurisdiction of a federal agency, and are over ten-feet tall and store more than 9.2 acre feet of water. High hazard dams are those where there is a high probability of the loss of life if the dam fails. A significant hazard rating indicates that if the dam fails, infrastructure would be damaged or destroyed. Low hazard dams are those that if they fail, they have a low probability of loss of life and property damage. Dams with a higher hazard rating are inspected more frequently by the Department.



INSTREAM PROTECTIONS



Dry bed in Sun Creek in Klamath Basin

Photo Credit: Trout Unlimited



Sun Creek after water transfer & restoration

Photo Credit: Trout Unlimited

Priority: Work to secure Oregon's instream and out-of-stream water future in the face of increased water scarcity.

Oregon's water resources face a number of pressures such as climate change, increasing population, and aging infrastructure, which threatens the ability to meet future instream and out-of-stream water uses. The Department will work to help secure Oregon's water future in the following ways.

Objective: Understand Oregon's expected future water supply

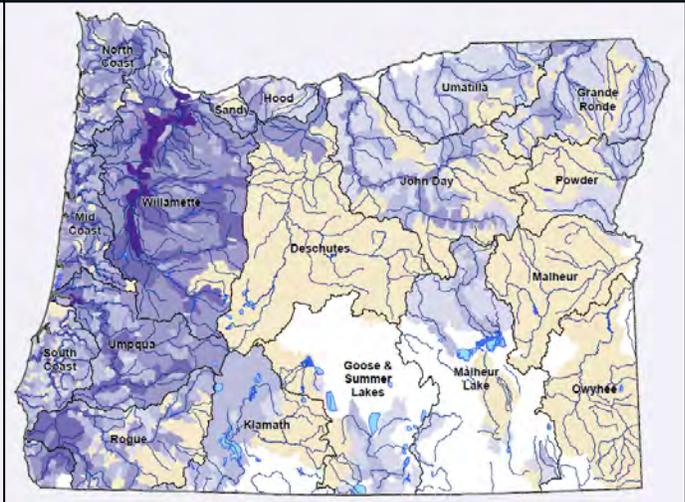
The Department's water allocation decisions are based in part on water availability. The timing and volume of water available over the course of the year is changing and it is important for the Department to understand these shifts and respond appropriately. Example outcomes that demonstrate success for this objective could include: updated and/or new tools for communities to understand their water resources and an updated Water Availability Reporting System.

IWRS Recommended Actions 1.A, 1.B, 1.C, and 5.5A

WATER AVAILABILITY

August Available Streamflow
Calculated at 80% Exceedance

January Available Streamflow
Calculated at 50% Exceedance



Surface Water Bodies		Available Streamflow (CFS)	
	Lakes		No Data
	Streams		No Water Available
	Administrative Boundaries		0.1 - 10
	OWRD Basins		10.1 - 100
			100.1 - 1000
			1000.1 - 10000
			>10000

Objective: Equip basins to plan for their water future

Communities and those with an interest in a basin often are actively pursuing or hope to undertake water planning to secure their water future. They often need assistance planning, accessing and analyzing information, and identifying the water management solutions that would best address their critical water issues. The Department seeks to partner with basin interests to help secure their water future. Potential outcomes to demonstrate success for this objective may include: an improved understanding of current and future water supply, development of basin characterization reports, an updated Water Availability Reporting System, and an increased number of basins/communities with a water plan (e.g., drought contingency plan, place-based plan, water management and conservation plan, etc.).

IWRS Recommended Actions 9.A, 9.B, 9.C, 13.C



Staff hosting a community meeting in Milton-Freewater

Objective: Invest in Oregon’s built and natural water infrastructure

Oregon’s water infrastructure helps store and deliver water as well as provide other services and benefits. Today that infrastructure is aging and needing repair, replacement, or removal. With increased water scarcity, new or modified built and natural water infrastructure may be needed to help meet instream and out-of-stream water needs. Potential outcomes of this strategic objective include: an updated funding program for feasibility studies and water projects and an analysis of other potential funding sources for natural and built infrastructure.

IWRS Recommended Actions 10.E, 11.A, 13.D, 13.E



Bridge Creek Springs near the City of Bend’s water source



Downstream of Cougar Dam on the South Fork McKenzie River



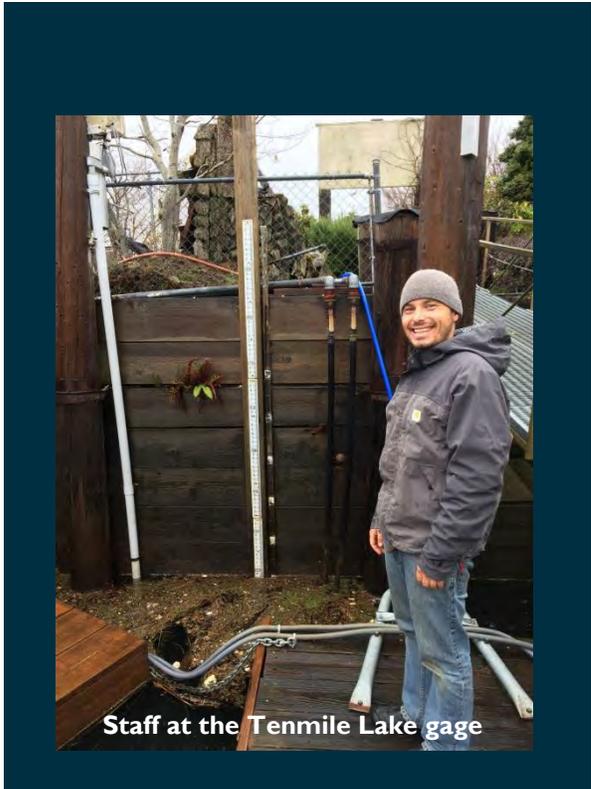
New pivot and lands under the Allocation of Conserved Water Program in Wallowa County

Priority: Foster a forward-looking team dedicated to serving Oregonians with integrity and excellence

The Oregon Water Resources Department is a small agency with the large responsibility of managing Oregon’s water resources for the benefit of all Oregonians, present and future. This is only achievable when we have provided staff with the support needed to succeed and work effectively as a team. As such, the Department identified investing in its managers and staff as an important way to achieve our other strategic priorities.

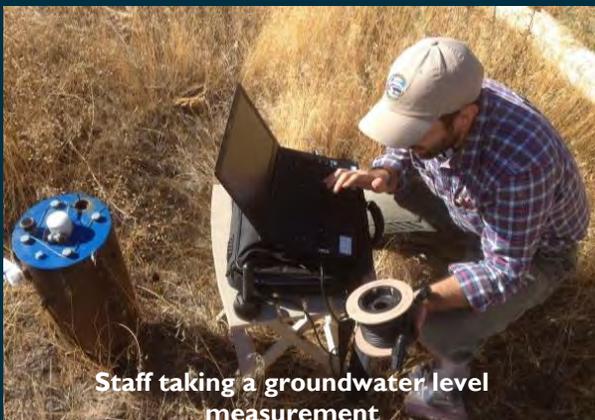
Objective: Maintain technical excellence and improve customer service by investing in training for staff

Further developing the expertise and experience of staff by providing regular training will maintain and build on the excellent work and service we provide. Cross-training, succession planning, desk manuals, and other efforts can provide development opportunities for staff, increasing employees’ understanding of how their work contributes to the agency’s mission. It also helps to retain institutional knowledge and prepare the Department for staff retirements. Key results of this objective may include: development of succession plans, employees demonstrate knowledge and capabilities to use best practices, an increased number of positions with a back-up, and all positions have an onboarding plan and/or desk manual for transfer of knowledge.



Objective: Improve agency communications

Communication is critical to our work and can be a challenge. We can improve upon our procedures and practices to promote the flow of information to those who need that information. This can include improved communication between managers and staff, between various divisions and sections in the Department, as well as between different offices. Potential outcomes that could demonstrate success under this objective include: improved inter-division communication, increased understanding of existing and new agency policies and programs, and a greater understanding of each other’s work.



HOW WE WILL IMPLEMENT THIS PLAN

This document charts the Department’s strategic direction and serves as only the beginning of the journey. To implement this plan the Department will:

- **Identify tactics as a team** – The Strategic Plan describes the overall strategic direction the Department will take over the next five years but does not specifically identify how we will do it. The Department will work to identify the specific initiatives, tactics, and efforts it will undertake to achieve the listed objectives. Implementation will be phased as we identify which efforts to tackle first.
- **Pursue resources, as needed, but make as much progress as we can within existing resources** – Some of the outcomes in this plan may require additional resources to make further progress. The Department will continue to pursue those resources but will also identify targets for what we can expect to achieve with our existing resources.
- **Adapt as needed** – Over the course of the next five years, unexpected challenges or issues may arise. The Department will adapt to meet those challenges. This will be done thoughtfully, weighing the importance of the new issue against these priorities and objectives.
- **Communicate progress** – The Department will provide periodic updates on the progress it is making on its strategic priorities.



CONTACT US

For more information about the Water Resources Department visit us online at

<https://www.oregon.gov/OWRD>

Or contact us at one of our offices.

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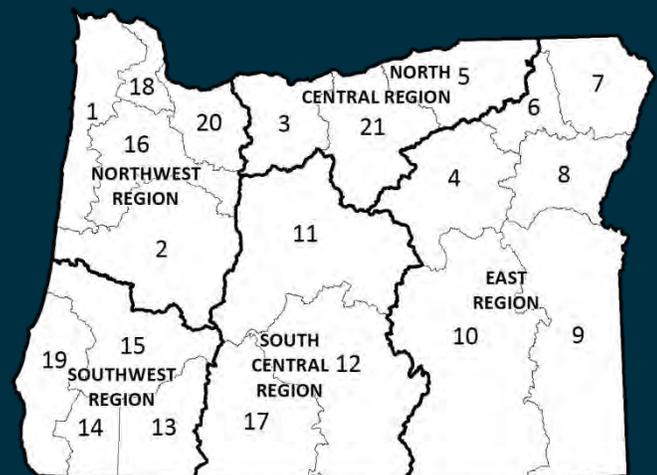
503-986-0900

Find your local Watermaster or Region Office

and their contact information by visiting

<https://www.oregon.gov/OWRD/aboutus/contactus/Pages/RegionalOfficesandWatermasters>

[Directory.aspx](https://www.oregon.gov/OWRD/aboutus/contactus/Pages/RegionalOfficesandWatermasters)



Numbers on map denote Watermaster Districts