Technical Assistance to Rural Willamette Communities

The Department of Environmental Quality is the lead recipient of a $6 million grant as part of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Columbia River Basin Restoration Funding Assistance Program. In partnership with the University of Oregon's Resource Assistance for Rural Environments AmeriCorps program, or RARE, four graduate-level members worked with rural communities to reduce pollution in Oregon waters and meet clean water plans known as Total Maximum Daily Loads.

About this project

This project's long-term (5-20 years or longer) goal is to meet mercury water quality standards and achieve Willamette Basin TMDL allocations for unpermitted stormwater. This project used the Willamette Mercury TMDL and Water Quality Management Plan to guide the development and implementation of projects by RARE members in rural areas. Final reports documented activities and successful efforts to reduce mercury contributions, and materials will be shared with other communities in the Willamette Basin.

Photo courtesy of RARE AmeriCorps Program

What is a TMDL?

The Total Maximum Daily Load, or clean water plan, is a science-based approach to cleaning up polluted water so that it meets state water quality standards. A TMDL is a numerical value that represents the highest amount of a pollutant a surface water body can receive and still meet the standards. The federal Clean Water Act requires states or the EPA to develop a TMDL for each water body on the state's polluted waters list, also known as the 303(d) list (Integrated Report). DMAs implement a TDML to improve water quality. The TMDL process is just one strategy used to clean up polluted waters.

Resource Assistance for Rural Environments (RARE)

The RARE AmeriCorps Program empowered rural Oregon leaders since 1994 and has placed more than 600 members in every county in the state. Each year, the RARE AmeriCorps Program matched its members with rural communities across the state to take on meaningful and impactful place-based projects, chosen by communities. RARE members lived and worked in communities for 11 months and were provided training in community development, grant writing, communication, economic development, facilitation, and leadership. The RARE AmeriCorps Program concluded operations in July 2025.

Translation or other formats

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Benefits to communities

Communities who lack the resources to implement actions required to meet water quality standards in the Willamette Basin were included in this project. Additionally, toxic contamination of fish and water in the Basin creates a disproportionately high health risk for Tribal people and other people who consume high amounts of fish. Actions to prevent mercury from entering and spreading in Oregon waters will help recover native fish populations and allow people to eat more traditional amounts of fish without being exposed to disproportionately high levels of contamination.

Project outcomes

Four RARE members were placed in Willamette Basin rural communities to implement projects, programs, and/or policies to reduce mercury discharges from rural unpermitted stormwater sources. Educational and outreach materials and events were developed to increase community knowledge of or engagement with strategies to reduce mercury contributions to waterways.

Photo courtesy of RARE AmeriCorps Program

As part of this effort, DEQ committed to work with the University of Oregon's Institute for Policy Research and Engagement to develop and administer a program evaluation. The purpose of the evaluation was to determine which practices were most effective in meeting the requirements of the Willamette Mercury WQMP and to improve implementation of the partnership over the grant term.

For more information

Contact DEQ's Middle Willamette Basin Coordinator to learn more about this project:

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