

Oregon Water Resources Department Environmental Justice Report

725 North Summer Street, Suite A

Salem, OR 97301

503-986-0900

www.oregon.gov/owrd/



2025 Annual Report to the Environmental Justice Council

OWRD's annual report to the Oregon Environmental Justice Council is required of the department under ORS 182.550 to:

Address environmental justice issues; and

Increase public participation of individuals and communities affected by agencies' decisions; and

Improve plans to further the progress of environmental justice in Oregon.

The following annual report is for the 2025 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

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

Acronyms:

ARPA (grants) = American Rescue Plan Act (grants)

DEQ = Department of Environmental Quality

ODE = Oregon Department of Education

OHA = Oregon Health Authority

OWRD = Oregon Water Resources Department

WARRF = Well Abandonment, Repair and Replacement Fund

Cover photo: Project tour of the [Mid-Coast Water Planning Partnership](#), 2025.

Agency Introduction

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

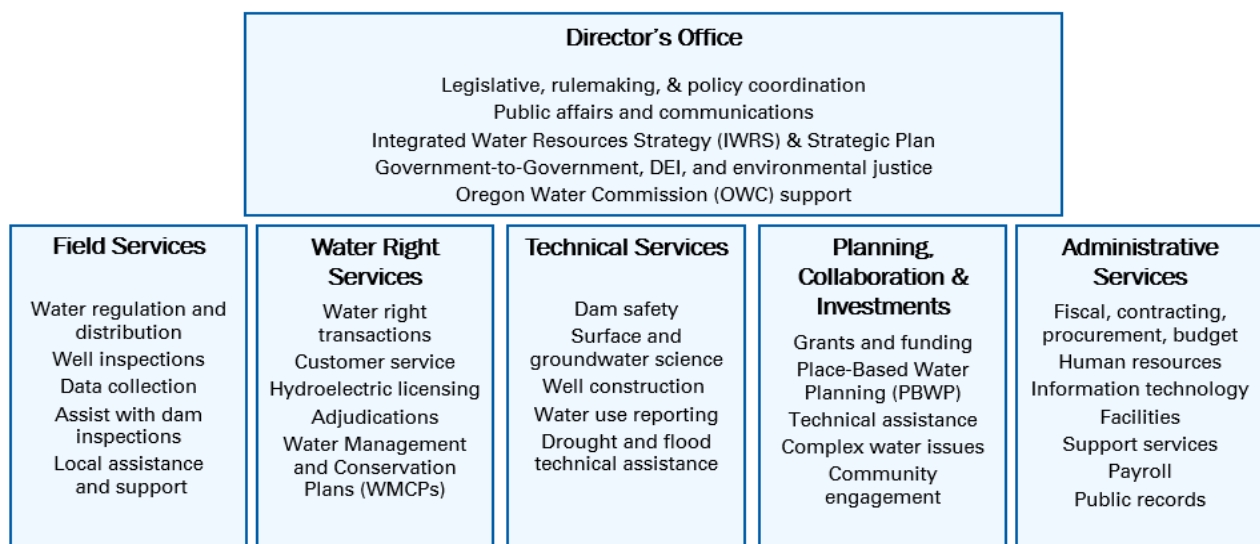
Director: Ivan Gall

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.

WRD Organizational Structure



Strategic and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice Plan

OWRD's [2025-2030 Strategic and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice Plan](#) (Plan) is now available on the agency website. The Plan is updated every five years and guides the Department's priorities for this duration. Environmental justice was deliberately included in the Plan, as well as in workplans currently under development for the agency.

The Plan consists of four priority areas:

- Priority Area 1- Act with Urgency to Protect Instream and Out-of-Stream Uses
- Priority Area 2- Assist the State and Communities to Prepare for Water Scarcity
- Priority Area 3- Adapt to Doing More with Less by Stretching Water Supplies
- Priority Area 4- Advance Agency Workforce and Operations

Each priority area has environmental justice components embedded in their workplans which intend to identify and address systematic inequity in Oregon water law. The Department has drafted three areas of action necessary to make progress on our agency's environmental justice goals.

- Educate the public on Oregon water law - its basis in western water law and the management of water as a shared public asset
- Embed environmental justice lens in Policy, Practice and Rulemaking
- Identify agency practices that inhibit environmental justice

Each area of action above has milestones targeted depending on whether additional legislatively authorized resources are received.

Environmental Justice Personnel

OWRD does not have staff dedicated to full-time environmental justice work.

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, 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. The Department requires a long-term, focused effort which would be best achieved by 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 and \$500,000 in base budget funding for training, translating materials, and support the engagement with and from BIPOC and Environmental Justice communities. In 2025, the Department submitted a policy option package to expand engagement and equity in complex issues which would have allowed the Department the ability to engage and communicate with under-resourced and under-represented communities. Ultimately, in both cases, the policy option packages were not funded through the legislative process.

If future resources were made available, the Department has identified these immediate needs:

Environmental and Racial Justice Coordinator: OWRD has identified the need for dedicated environmental justice staff. This is critical to setting and articulating a vision for improvements; developing more consistent policies and procedures; and supporting consistent practices alongside the various teams and sections so we can multiply efforts across the agency.

Resources for training, communication and outreach to EJ communities: As OWRD outlined in 2023 and 2025 packages 105, having additional resources to intentionally set new goals and practices for engaging and meaningfully communicating with EJ communities would be beneficial. The agency has no dedicated budget for producing communications and necessary outreach materials for conducting DEI-EJ training within the agency.

Despite the lack of dedicated staffing and budget, OWRD staff continue to leverage existing agency work and resources internally to move environmental justice priorities forward whenever possible.

Agency Budget

A full breakdown of OWRD 2025-2027 Legislatively Adopted Budget and 2025 Legislative summary can be found [online](#).

	2023-25 Legislatively Adopted	2025-27 Current Service Level	2025-27 Governor's Recommended	2025-27 Legislatively Adopted*
General Fund (GF)	\$81,331,457	\$80,870,715	\$88,047,620	\$100,967,253
Other Funds (OF) including Fees	\$34,866,859	\$18,203,884	\$21,984,845	\$20,373,083
Other Funds - Grants/Loans	\$139,200,425	\$107,400,000	\$127,400,000	\$122,900,000
Lottery Funds - Debt Service	\$15,856,857	\$24,352,512	\$24,352,512	\$21,605,821
Federal Funds	\$703,315	\$2,190,179	\$2,190,179	\$2,190,179
Total Funds	\$271,958,913	\$233,017,290	\$263,975,156	\$268,036,336
Positions / Full-Time Equivalent (FTE)	258/246.63	248/245.25	250/246.63	247/244.25

*Numbers subject to change with further reconciliation.

2025-27 Legislatively Adopted Budget: During the 2025-27 Legislative Session, the Department received a total budget of \$268,036,336, representing an increase in overall funds compared to the prior session. Most of the increase was for grant programs and one-time awards passed through the Department to receiving entities. A notable staff reduction was the permanent loss of the Senior Water Advisor position, located in the North Central region which supported work related to the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation water rights settlement.

Current Environmental Justice Highlights

The 2025 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. 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 next IWRS. These recommendations led the project team to include environmental justice example actions for each of the IWRS 48 actions.

Two drafts were available for public review and comment in March 2024 and April 2025, respectively. The 2025 IWRS was adopted by the Water Resources Commission in September 2025. The development of an immediate 2-year workplan is now complete and will be used to guide interagency implementation of the IWRS for the remainder of the 2025-2027 biennium while planning and development begins on the 2027-2029 workplan. Approximately 14 agencies are contributing to the IWRS workplan.

OWRD Strategic Plan: With a new Director confirmed in the summer of 2024, OWRD completed its strategic planning process in 2025. The OWRD Strategic and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and

Environmental Justice Plan (Plan) brought together work from the Integrated Water Resources Strategy (IWRS) which had significant outreach in under-resourced and under-represented communities around the state. The Plan is an actionable document with identified milestones. OWRD is now developing agency workplans to guide and pace implementation over the next five years as part of the agency's portfolio.

How It's All Related



Environmental equity and justice were specifically identified by agency staff as an overarching theme of the strategic plan. Many of the strategies and activities mentioned in this report are foundational to OWRD's strategic plan and agency portfolio, 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 to implement the Plan.

Place-Based Water Planning (PBWP) (OAR 690-602) is a collaborative and inclusive process designed to:

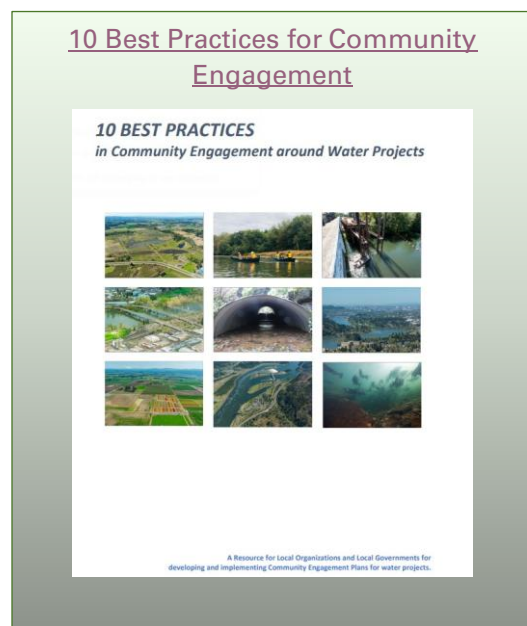
- Gather information to develop a shared understanding of water resources and identify critical issues and knowledge gaps
- Examine the existing and future in-stream and out-of-stream water needs for people, the economy and the environment
- Identify and prioritize strategic, integrated solutions to understand and meet instream and out-of-stream water needs
- Develop, implement and update a place-based integrated water resources plan

In 2016, OWRD piloted this approach in four basins in Oregon and a subsequent [independent evaluation](#) of the pilot was completed in 2022. That same year, a legislatively directed workgroup (focused on state-supported regional water planning and management) developed [recommendations](#) to help guide the future 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 OAR 690, Division 602 rulemaking, ensuring broad representation by people potentially impacted by the rules. A rules advisory committee of diverse interests met four times in Fall 2024, Division 602 (OAR 690-602) Rules were adopted for Place-Based Water Planning in 2025. Place-Based Water Planning guidance was updated under the new statute and rules, and public feedback on the draft guidance was solicited for 45-days in October and November 2025. The updated guidance and a new Place-Based Water Planning Grant solicitation are expected to be released in early 2026.

Best Practices for Community Engagement, known as **House Bill 3293** (2021), provides six state agencies the ability to provide planning, technical and financial support for water projects with community engagement plans. These six agencies participated in a collaborative process leading to best practices that agencies can share with applicants. These practices are meant to provide consistent expectations and practices for grantees to meaningfully engage their community members so individual and collective voices are heard and integrated into water project decision processes.



The bill instructed specific 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 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 rulemaking on these rules in Fall of 2024, which included holding two rules advisory committee meetings. After a 45-day public comment period, and

subsequent changes to the rules were made, they were adopted by the Oregon Water Resources Commission in the spring of 2025 as Division 601 (OAR 690-601).

The new rules are currently being integrated into OWRD's existing Feasibility Study Grant program. Eligible applicants will be able to apply for community engagement funds at the next available funding opportunity. Currently, OWRD is not expected to open a 2025-2026 grant cycle due to lack of funding.

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, including:

- Identifying and engaging interested or potentially impacted parties early and often
- Expanding the parties with which OWRD engages
- Integrating questions into project planning that generate shared decision-making where appropriate
- Providing transparent and culturally responsive communication throughout processes

The Community Engagement team continues to develop tools and an intranet site for staff to access and use to support engagement work. This site and related tools are expected to be completed in the first quarter of 2026. Staff will be offered training and additional assistance when accessing these resources.

Both CEF and Best Practices for Community Engagement described above focus on instituting community engagement best practices with equity, consistency, and transparency in mind.

The **Diversity Equity and Inclusion Team (DEI Team)** is comprised of staff members who voluntarily show interest in furthering diversity, equity, inclusion and environmental justice at OWRD. The team advises the agency and management about potential improvements in agency actions, processes, policies, programs, and decision-making that are supportive of the Department's objectives to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, environmental justice that impact services for vulnerable, underserved, and underrepresented communities. The DEI team provided key input to the agency's Strategic and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Environmental Justice Plan, which includes DEI and environmental justice considerations. Their work has made impacts around the agency, including refinements to a permit compliance project the agency is working on, a DEI statement for recruiting announcements, added DEI-focused interview questions for all position interviews, added cultural holidays and celebrations to the agency staff newsletter, and two engaging regional office inclusivity-focused team building activities.

The team also provides valuable opportunities for staff to learn about relevant topics about diversity, equity, and environmental justice with a water-related lens. In 2024, the DEI Team launched a discussion group, Coffee and Conversations. They have hosted numerous topics, including "The flooding of Vanport" discussing the disproportionate impact on minority communities and "the Klamath Dam Removal" highlighting the importance of Traditional Ecological Knowledge in effective decision-making and restoration. In 2025, the team continued Coffee and Conversations, including a discussion about the "Groundwater Contamination of the Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area and the Role of Government" and the "What & Why of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Justice at OWRD". The team continues to explore increased interagency collaboration opportunities with other water agencies so they can more effectively learn from other DEI Teams and support those just forming.

Water Banking is a water management tool available in the Deschutes Basin that supports locally driven water management. The Deschutes Basin Board of Control (DBBC) collectively manages the irrigation districts in the basin. One of the irrigation districts with junior water rights, the North Unit Irrigation District (NUID) is agriculturally productive. They distribute water to more than 950 farms

and produce nearly half of the world's carrot seed. Their junior water right status, along with species-specific requirements of conservation plans, put their continued operations at risk. The DBBC has highlighted this issue for action among the many different and sometimes conflicting interests in the region to ensure NUID has enough water to function

In response, Deschutes Basin interests put forward legislation, HB 3806 (2025), which introduces two new mechanisms by which water may be temporarily and voluntarily shared with North Unit by pooling water assets and ensuring water can stay in the stream for habitat needs. Statute allows this new apportionment arrangement until 2034 when it will be re-evaluated.

This is an example of local community partners collaborating with each other and the state to meet the collective needs of their community's water users.

Well Water Access and Safety is a prioritized function for OWRD, as many rural Oregonians depend on groundwater resources from wells for their domestic use. In recent years, several programmatic developments and actions 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 240 homes reliant on well water. These funds are intended for low to moderate-income well owners whose well is dry, including those experiencing severely declining water levels or damaged by wildfire. The average cost for restoring a well has been \$26,500.
- **[Harney Domestic Well Remediation Fund](#)**: Eligible residents of the Greater Harney Valley Groundwater Area of Concern can seek assistance for part 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. Six homeowners have repaired or replaced their wells with a Harney Domestic Well Fund grant.
- **Well Report Reviews**: Two well construction rulemakings helped modernize water well safety standards, providing safeguards against contamination in aquifer systems. Newly adopted rules require well drillers constructing water supply wells to show proficiency in welding. Updated rules also require that OWRD provide a technical review of all new well reports and require well drillers to submit a map showing the precise location of each new well. This is significant, as over 3,000 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. In 2025, this has led to the identification of over 1650 deficiencies to be addressed, and over 1,700 new well maps showing the precise location of wells. This information enables the department to prioritize efforts in high-risk areas to support safe well infrastructure for surrounding residents.
- **Nitrate reduction and safe drinking water in the Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area (LUBGWMA)**: OWRD participates in 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). [Click here](#) for more information about this collaborative effort.

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.
- Inspection of irrigation systems to ensure that proper backflow prevention devices are installed where necessary. In 2025, over 600 systems were inspected.
- 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 has been collected since the original report release.
- Continued collection of groundwater level data through OWRD's well monitoring network. Staff also look for opportunities and partnerships to expand the network throughout the LUBGWMA.
- In addition to the support above, OWRD has twice submitted a \$2.5 million federal appropriations request to conduct domestic well inspections, drill state monitoring wells and for data collection in the LUBGWMA. The appropriations request was approved by Congress in January 2026 and will move forward after the President signs the bill.

The Dam Safety Program pursues federal FEMA 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. Between 2021 and 2025, 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 safety issues in cooperation with dam owners. Although this funding serves all dam owners with safety-related issues, it is particularly beneficial for small communities and individual dam owners who can struggle to procure these services on their own.

Through the end of 2026, the ARPA grant is also funding two statewide extreme precipitation studies. Future analysis work based on these studies will help identify areas downstream of dams that would be flooded if the dams were to fail. Future federal funding availability will likely impact this program area.

Agency leadership moves environmental justice forward using the EJC feedback about OWRD's 2023 report. OWRD welcomes the opportunity to continue to strengthen its environmental justice activities and have taken steps within existing resources.

Staff Training: In May 2025, OWRD contracted with the Aparna Group to hold two training courses (the same one offered twice), which focused on the difference between racial equity and environmental justice, particularly in the context of the often highly technical work of OWRD staff. The training also covered the history of water management in Oregon from an environmental justice lens and then provided space for people to talk about focused topics in small groups.

Over 80 people voluntarily participated in the training, and a summary of staff input regarding a range of topics – built infrastructure, access to clean and affordable water, indigenous water justice, to name a few - was provided back to the department. A subsequent survey was largely positive. Suggestions for improvement included more of a focus on what our agency can act on under existing water law and how we can expand the number of staff who participate in these types of training and events.

Learn from other states: In early 2025, agency leadership discussed and approved an investment to gather information about how other states are working toward equitable distribution of water resources and environmental justice within the context of western water law. Unfortunately, this action has been put on hold for now due to unforeseen budget constraints among state agencies. If there is an opportunity to wrap this into existing policy work, every attempt will be made to link that work together.

Public Participation Practices

Identifying and Prioritizing 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 and engaged, OWRD aims to consult the questions found in the [2021 Governor’s DEI Action Plan](#), Racial Equity Toolkit (pp. 35-40).

Internal Processes and Tools Internally to Support Meaningful Engagement

The **Community Engagement Intranet** site (see pp. 8-9) is expected to provide tools for meaningful engagement for all OWRD staff. The internal site provides practical tools and tips for meaningful public engagement. One of the tools expected helps to identify and engage communities disproportionately impacted, and often with less voice, than other communities. The intent is to listen to these communities early in an engagement process and integrate their voice into both engagement and decision-making as appropriate. The site will be introduced to staff in the first quarter of 2026 with training provided later in the year.

This includes tools such as:

- An engagement spectrum designed specifically for OWRD that provides relevant examples and encourages staff to include communities in decision-making whenever possible.
- A guide for preparing for engagement that provides steps and tools for listening to communities. This asks staff to identify communities both directly and indirectly impacted by an issue.

Piloting new approaches to meaningfully engage communities

Meaningful engagement in disproportionately impacted communities is both resource intensive and valuable to our work. As OWRD continues to grow its engagement approaches, staff are piloting new ways of engaging with communities within existing resources.

Here are a couple successful examples from 2025:

- **Backflow Prevention Device Informational:** The North Central region held an educational event for groundwater right holders who use chemigation or fertigation during irrigation. These events focused on sharing information and building open dialogues among the irrigation community, industry partners, and state regulatory agencies (e.g., local companies who sell and/or install backflow devices were encouraged to host tables to provide product information and direct access to equipment. This event was considered a success by the Department and the local irrigation community. Three similar events are now planned for 2026 in Umatilla County.
- **Rogue Water Forum:** OWRD engagement staff supported regional partners in the “Inland Rogue” (Jackson and Josephine Counties) to bring together diverse water interests to identify local concerns related to water and encourage proactive planning. A locally led event in September convened over 110 participants to learn from each other and identify shared issues of concern among an array of diverse perspectives. Efforts such as this are helping support local communities to develop a shared understanding of their water situation and identify local actions they can take together to build resiliency and sustain their water supply into the future.



Rogue Water Forum participants share their concerns and perspectives in small group discussions.

- **Walla Walla Watershed Open Houses:** The OWRD North Central Region, alongside the Confederated Tribes of Umatilla Indian Reservation and the Washington Department of Ecology, has continued to partner with the community-led Walla Walla Basin Advisory Committee to host open houses. These events cultivate a shared understanding of the community's water story and future by highlighting local actions and decision-making processes. Over 125 community members attended the 2025 event where presentations, panel discussions, and information tables were hosted by twelve community organizations. This is the third open house of this kind held in the community.



Residents share their thoughts and views about their local water situation at the Walla Walla Open House.

- **County Fairs:** The North Central region continues to participate in the Umatilla County Fair with a multi-generational interactive booth. The focus of the booth is to share information about the communities' water through hands-on science model demonstrations, informational booklets and handouts (in English and Spanish), and STEM based children's crafts (e.g., water cycle mobile, and groundwater origami). This informal setting allows the Department to speak directly with a large and diverse set of community members, with the fair averaging about 60,000 attendees.

Casting a Broader Net for Communications and Education

OWRD staff are putting tools into place to improve communication with traditionally interested parties and partners and expand our communications beyond these long-standing interests. OWRD has worked closely with water rights holders or seekers, and with people with a high level of expertise around water – Certified Water Rights Examiners, water consultants/scientists, conservation organizations, irrigation districts, etc. As water becomes a scarcer and more precious commodity throughout the state, the number of people interested and/or impacted is increasing. In response, OWRD is diversifying its venues and strategies for communicating with the public.

This is a place of active development for OWRD, and there are several activities implemented in 2025 intended to improve and expand OWRD digital communications:

- **GovDelivery** – has now replaced a staff-managed email listserv, creating a public portal where anyone with an email address can stay informed about topics they care about. OWRD encourages anyone interested to sign up [here](#).
- **Policy and Partnership Newsletter** – This quarterly newsletter currently reaches our traditional partners, who are now receiving steady updates about agency activities. Now that there's an option to sign up for the newsletter on GovDelivery, OWRD can grow its reach over time. Anyone is welcome to sign up [here](#).
- **Digital and Social Media** – Communications staff are building a presence on LinkedIn and YouTube. OWRD staff previously had no avenues to use social media, so this is a first step to communicating in a much broader way, including producing water supply educational videos for public access through YouTube.

OWRD is taking active steps to better translate technical information into plain language and find avenues to engage the public with it. OWRD's professional scientists are developing highly technical information from which the department bases water management decisions. Translating this information for the public helps develop a shared understanding and address water issues of common concern.

- **Outreach Trailer and Water Table:** The OWRD outreach trailer and traveling water table bring hands-on water education to communities, especially in regions with limited local resources. They can travel to schools, community centers, and public events, providing equitable access to interactive learning. Participants explore groundwater and streamflow concepts in a tangible way, making complex science more understandable and engaging.

- **[Newsletter series in Walla Walla Groundwater Study:](#)** By breaking complex groundwater science and milestones into short, digestible pieces, a newsletter series supports transparency, understanding, and sustained engagement throughout the groundwater study. It is distributed through email, print, and partner distribution channels.
- **[AgriMet and OpenET curriculum:](#)** OWRD and Siskiyou Field Institute created a high school level, four lesson curriculum unit now available on ODE's Oregon Open Learning Hub. The lessons can also be utilized by OWRD's technical staff as a guide when translating technical information to a level accessible for the general public.
- **[AgriMet video:](#)** OWRD created a 9-minute video that provides accessible information for irrigators and other water users about water management data, tools and technical assistance available throughout Oregon that enable the agricultural community to make the most of the water that's available.



Meaningfully Involving Communities in Agency Decision-Making

Addressing the backlog of rulemakings has led to improvements in the consistency and transparency of OWRD's rulemaking processes. OWRD staff are focused on improving our organization to better communicate and engage with communities potentially impacted by the rules, legislative concepts and policy option packages. The improvements continue this biennium:

- Continuing to develop an internal guide on the agency's rulemaking process that embeds community engagement throughout the rulemaking process.
- Developing an external rulemaking guide to help onboard the public and advisory committee members with the statutory authority, the goals, the process, and the timeline of the rulemaking to ensure consistency among the different rulemakings and transparency among all the committee members.
- Broadening representation and the number of people on Rulemaking Advisory Committees and holding more public meetings and hearings to increase input. One recent rulemaking had nine public hearings in person and hybrid to allow each person who wanted to comment ample opportunities to do so.
- Utilizing GovDelivery to communicate about the rulemaking process enables the public to choose what information topics they want to receive and receive it automatically.
- Updating rulemaking information consistently on our website where all prospective rules are now together with summary, contact information, engagement opportunities and timelines, and information related to the rulemaking
- Seeking and integrating input from the diverse public interests 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 meaningful public input and consultation. The agency will also be aligning best practices for rulemaking processes with a guidance document soon to be released by the Governor's Natural Resources Office.

Opportunities for Improvement

Recent rulemakings have required significant engagement and contract resources for outside facilitators and water economists. These roles help to ensure diverse voices are at the decision-making tables and armed with accurate socio-economic impact information for consideration. This is a gap in our current staffing skillsets and resources would be needed to fill those gaps internally without having to repeatedly seek contractual relationships that take agency time and resources for contractors to get up to speed.

OWRD could also benefit from dedicated environmental justice staff to help integrate the various strategies and activities identified here, leading and coordinating an environmental justice vision on behalf of the agency. With many people holding a small piece of environmental justice work but no dedicated staff person to provide coordination and leadership, the shifts made are often at the individual rather than systems level. That said, and as noted throughout this report, staff throughout the agency are working hard to consider environmental justice impacts in the course of their work.

With legislative investments made at OWRD in engagement, communications and planning staff in recent years, numerous new strategies are being piloted, as described in this report. Agency staff will continue to hone and grow these efforts with environmental justice in mind.

An environmental justice opportunity the agency is working on improving is the gap between the complex science that is foundational to OWRD's water management activities - from rules development to supporting place-based planning – and the public's understanding of water systems. With legislative support (HB2018, OR Water Data Portal, HB2010), OWRD is increasing its capacity to do community engagement, public outreach, and translate complex science to increase the public's utilization of the latest scientific information related to water. Additional outreach capacity and communications budget could better support the need for aligned strategies across the state that can be fully implemented.

As mentioned earlier, the agency would also benefit from understanding what other state agencies responsible for water availability and management are doing to further environmental and racial justice in the context of Western Water Law. Much of OWRD's activities are guided by Western Water Law, which dictates that some people will have priority over others based on the date of their water right. In some cases, this may be before Oregon's statehood. This results in inequitable access to water, which is especially pronounced in rural areas of the state. As water becomes more scarce and demand grows, understanding how other states and regions address environmental and social water supply inequities would strengthen the agency's ability to achieve its mission.

Tribal Engagement through Coordination and Consultation

The Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) engages with Tribes on many issues related to water management, working most closely with Oregon's nine federally recognized Tribes: Burns Paiute Tribe, Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, Coquille Indian Tribe, Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians, and Klamath Tribes.

In 1997, OWRD adopted a Government-to-Government policy statement to guide the Department's engagement with Oregon's Nine Tribes, emphasizing two objectives: (1) we must honor and protect existing Tribal rights to use water, and (2) we must continue to forge partnerships to share responsibility for water management.

Partnerships with Oregon's Nine Tribes are strengthened by regular engagement with Tribal staff and leadership as well as active participation in the [Legislative Commission on Indian Services](#) Natural Resources Working Group and Cultural Resources Cluster. Tribal engagement may occur informally through coordination at the staff-to-staff level or formally through consultation at the government-to-government level. Examples of OWRD's Tribal coordination and consultation activities are described in the [2025 Tribal-State Government-to-Government Annual Report](#).

Environmental Justice Council Mapping Tool and other Activities

Environmental Justice Mapping Tool

OWRD participated in all three of the Mapping Tool agency engagement meetings held in 2025. Following those meetings, OWRD staff recommended two indicators for the mapping tool:

- **Water infrastructure indicator:** This indicator would identify communities whose water infrastructure is particularly vulnerable, leaving access to drinking water at risk. Data was found to support this indicator at both OWRD and Oregon Health Authority (OHA) although the data is not in a format that is useable for this purpose at this time. This indicator is expected to be prioritized for the next version of the mapping tool as OHA will work with relevant agencies to identify what needs to happen to use the available data for this purpose.
- **Drought indicator:** Following a recommendation from OWRD's surface water team, this indicator is being included in the current version of the tool. This data will provide long-term, severe and exceptional drought information (SPI-12),



OWRD's Shauna Yeh joined the EJC and OHA at OMSI's Pasifika and Asian American Community Science Night August 2025

which are indicators of hydrological impacts like low streamflow, reservoir levels, and groundwater recharge. This will enable the EJC and others to identify communities who are disproportionately impacted by severe drought.

OWRD continues to work closely with the EJC on both the mapping tool and other environmental justice issues and opportunities.

Potential Consultation or Other Support from the EJC

OWRD does not have a specific need for consultation with EJC Council members as of this report. The Council is in discussion with OWRD about sharing and discussing the recent revision of the Integrated Water Resources Strategy. Though the IWRS Coordinator is an OWRD employee, the strategy involves most of the agencies who submit annual reports to the Environmental Justice Council.

See Appendix for a list of shared needs from participating state agencies. Among those stated in this Summary, OWRD particularly could benefit from the top two identified; “Increase Funding and Budget Support” and “Staff Capacity and Training”.

Legislative Citations relating to Environmental Justice or Meaningful Engagement

The following bills passed by the legislature have relevance for environmental justice:

[HB 2069](#) (2025): Extended the sunset date on 2023 legislation establishing the Task Force on Tribal Consultation, from December 31, 2025, to December 31, 2026. The bill also increased Task Force membership from 15 to 17 Tribal, agency, and legislative members. The Task Force is charged with identifying and clarifying requirements for state agencies to conduct Tribal consultation. The bill directs the Office of the Governor to provide staff to support the Task Force and includes a one-time appropriation of \$70,000 in support. OWRD awaits agency recommendations from the Task Force, which could help the Department standardize and improve its consultation process.

[HB 3806](#) (2025): Authorizes the Commission to approve a pilot surface water banking program for the Deschutes River Basin, sunsetting January 2, 2034. The Habitat Conservation Plan for the Spotted Frog sets up quotas for keeping water instream that may result in less water to junior users in the basin. This spurred a need for alternative water sharing solutions. This legislation was brought forward by local water interests wanting to address this challenge. The bill allows for split rate and split duty water use, provided the duty does not exceed 4.2-acre feet per acre. The Bank must be approved by the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs (CTWS). The bill allows entities in the Deschutes River Basin to fund a position at the Department to support this work. DRC is currently working on a charter in consultation with the CTWS and OWRD, with the aim of putting the charter before the WRC for consideration in June 2026. For more information, see page 10.

[SB 1154](#) (2025): Modifies processes for managing ground water quality contamination concerns, including the declaration of ground water quality concern areas and ground water quality management areas (GWMA), remediation and backflow prevention devices in those areas.

[HB 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. Agencies are required to recognize best practices in Oregon Administrative Rules to help guide in community engagement by water project developers. HB3293 also allows - 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 finalized the [Best Practices](#) in early 2025 and agencies are now in the process of integrating the practices into their programs as applicable. Please see page 8 for more information.

[HB 2010](#) (2023) established the Place-Based Water Planning (PBWP) Fund and defined how OWRD may use the fund to support Place-Based Water Planning (ORS 537.872 & 537.873). New rules were adopted by the Water Resources Commission in spring 2025 to establish procedures for OWRD's administration of the fund and program (OAR 690-602). Place-Based Water Plans are "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" (ORS 537.873(1)(e)(E)). The fund allows OWRD to award grants to groups to do the pre-work to prepare for planning, to develop and update Place-Based Water Plans, and to coordinate implementation of state-recognized plans. All applications to the grant opportunity will be evaluated on the applicant's "proposed approach to public participation and environmental justice communities" (OAR 609-602-600). One allowable cost of PBWP grants is 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 in 2023. OWRD is planning to release a PBWP Handbook and open a grant solicitation for the new fund in early 2026. Please see page 7 for additional information about PBWP.

In terms of inter-agency coordination, 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, aid and engage in planning.

[HB 2010](#) (2023) 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 no more than eight years. The bill 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 contribute to the update and help implement the IWRS. The legislature established a permanent IWRS Coordinator position to implement the IWRS, develop updates, and coordinate among various state, federal, and local agencies, other states, Indian tribes, stakeholders and with the public.

[HB 2018](#) (2021) was enacted to work through 2032 to develop and publish foundational data for 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 work with multiple sections across OWRD to develop meaningful community outreach that is 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.

OWRD is currently developing meaningful public engagement strategies that distill complex science to digestible information for the general public. The community engagement team continues to provide multiple avenues – as outlined in this report – for communities to engage with the information and share their experience and understanding of the issues with OWRD.

[HB 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. The Task Force focused on cultivating a shared understanding of the importance of water and future management needs. One outcome was recognition of the importance of Tribal engagement in Oregon water planning. The Summary Report also identified key themes and recommendations, including a request for implementation of Task Force recommendations. OWRD, the Governor's Office, and Tribal leaders are planning a Tribal Water Policy Forum to commence Spring 2026, which would meet regularly and focus on water issues, including Task Force recommendations and IWRS implementation.

The following bills were also passed in 2025 by the legislature and may be of interest to Environmental Justice Council members:

[HB 2801](#) (2025): Provides permanent authority for the Department to process temporary transfers and instream leases for determined claims in the Upper Klamath Basin and repeals that authority upon completion of the adjudication.

[HB 3364](#) (2025): Expands eligibility of several OWRD funding programs and streamlines to application review and recommendation process to the Water Resources Commission.

[SB 761](#) (2025): Authorizes a pilot program, sunseting January 2, 2030, allowing the Walla Walla Irrigation District to split the rate and duty of a water right temporarily between an existing use and an instream use.

[HB 2803](#) (2025) and [HB 2808](#) (2025): The Department faced fee revenue shortfalls for staff in the Well Construction and Licensing section, Dam Safety section, and Water Right Transactions Division. These programs are core to the Department's mission of responsibly managing Oregon's water resources and maintaining public safety. Two bills were passed to address the shortfalls to maintain existing staffing levels for the 2025-2029 period.

[HB 3342](#) (2025) and [HB 3544](#) (2025): The Department water right transaction workloads and long processing times impacting the public were a major focus during the legislative session. Fee

increases were required to 1) maintain existing service levels; 2) implement policy improvements aimed at reducing processing times, minimizing and reducing future backlogs; and 3) ensure a clear, consistent process that promotes timely and informed decisions, while providing due process. These two bills were passed to improve our water rights transaction processes.

Appendix



Executive Summary Advancing Environmental Justice in the State of Oregon: Summary of Agency Needs

The following priorities have been identified to advance environmental justice in the State of Oregon based on Agency Annual Reports submitted in January 2024.



Increase Funding and Budget Support

Increased funding is crucial to support environmental justice efforts. This includes budget support for staff positions, community engagement activities and events, community compensation for participation, legal costs, training, translation services, tools, and specific program initiatives.



Staff Capacity and Training

Increase staff capacity by funding new positions dedicated to environmental justice, as well as providing new and existing staff with the necessary training. Many natural resource agencies would benefit from staff dedicated to environmental justice to set and articulate a vision for environmental justice, develop agency-level policies and procedures, and support practices across teams. Providing new and existing staff with enterprise-wide, required training on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging concepts will establish a level-setting foundation. This would enable agencies to build off this foundation with more advanced training in environmental justice (e.g. identifying communities, environmental justice assessments, environmental justice engagement strategies, etc.) and related training such as facilitation, conflict management, plain language, and culturally relevant communication.



Enterprise-wide Policies and Guidance

The establishment of enterprise-wide policies, associated funding, and clear statewide direction on contracts and contracting to address priorities such as language translation and interpretation, community engagement vendor contracting, community compensation for participation, and administrative and legal support. This comprehensive approach is essential for the effective implementation of environmental justice policies.



Leadership and Interagency Collaboration on Tools and Resources

It is important for agency leadership to consistently advocate for and resource environmental justice policies, opportunities for interagency collaboration, and guidance for staff.

State agencies currently participate in the DAS Office of Cultural Change quarterly DEI Cohorts which is a current example of interagency collaboration. Agency leadership continued participation in the DAS Office of Cultural Change quarterly DEI Cohorts can support this effort, but this alone will not address collaboration needs related to environmental justice.

Agencies need interagency collaboration to share resources, best practices, and tools to effectively engage with environmental justice communities including GIS and data collection tools, translation services, communication platforms, and outreach materials.

Coordination of agency community engagement also addresses concerns about overburdening community-based organizations and community member capacity when seeking feedback for public processes such as rule making, listening sessions, focus groups, etc.



Environmental Justice Council



Summary

Oregon has sixteen natural resources agencies listed under House Bill 4077, and all the agencies listed below are required to submit annual reports to the Environmental Justice Council for the previous year in January the following year.

They include:

- Department of Agriculture (ODA)
- Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)
- Department of Land Conservation and Development (DLCD)
- Department of Geology and Mineral Industries (DOGAMI)
- Department of State Lands (DSL)
- Department of Forestry (ODF)
- Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW)
- Department of Energy (ODOE)
- Department of Transportation (ODOT)
- Oregon Health Authority (OHA)
- Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD)
- Public Utilities Commission (OPUC)
- State Fire Marshal (OSFM)
- State Marine Board (OSMB)
- Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB)
- Water Resources Department (WRD)

Annual reports submitted in January 2024 for calendar year 2023 are available on the [Environmental Justice Council website](#) for review.

These agencies all demonstrated various levels of funding, staffing, and readiness to implement the Oregon standard of “meaningful involvement”. Specific details regarding agency needs can be found on each of the agencies respective 2023 annual reports.

This document is intended as an executive summary of the needs from most natural resources agencies. Each agencies needs may differ and are reflected in their individual annual reports.

2024 annual reports will be submitted in January 2025, and they are expected to be available on the Environmental Justice Council website no later than March 1, 2025 for activities covering calendar year 2024.