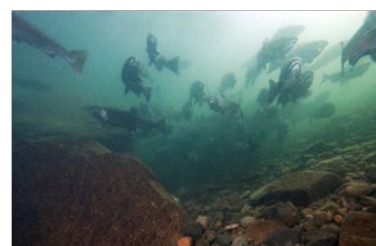
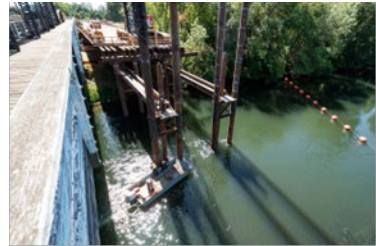


10 BEST PRACTICES

in Community Engagement around Water Projects



**A Resource for Local Organizations and Local Governments for
developing and implementing Community Engagement Plans for water projects.**

Oregonians' Connection to Water

Water projects in Oregon are diverse. They include watershed enhancement, water resource conservation and development, and water supply and wastewater treatment initiatives, among many others. Each project requires a tailored approach for engaging communities. With the 10 Best Practices in Community Engagement for Water Projects, the participating agencies hope to encourage local governments and local organizations to explore ways to meaningfully engage and involve communities thoughtfully within the work they are doing. This resource is intended for water projects seeking support for community engagement plans through agency specific water project funding programs or other water project support. This resource does not establish a universal requirement to use these best practices in every water project.

The state's economic vitality heavily relies on its water resources. In 2023, it was estimated that over 48% of the state's total economic output and nearly 44% of its employment are directly linked to water¹. The fundamental value of water extends across Oregon communities' lives, including in housing, infrastructure, health, manufacturing, agriculture, energy, recreation, as well as the food and beverage industries. However, as drought conditions in Oregon continue to increase in intensity and duration, and Oregon's population centers continue to grow, the state's water scarcity concerns and need for inclusive water project solutions ever increase.

Engagement improves projects and helps Oregon meet the water needs of its economy, environment, communities, and cultures. This involvement between communities and projects facilitates the exchange of invaluable knowledge and insights, enriching the effectiveness and relevance of each water project. Additionally, fostering community trust encourages transparency and cooperation among project organizers, regulatory agencies, and those impacted, thus promoting a sustainable and reliable water future for Oregon.

The following resource was developed to implement Oregon Revised Statute (ORS) 541.551 (Oregon House Bill 3293, 2021). By co-creating 10 Best Practices in Community Engagement for water projects, this resource and the directing legislation aims to promote meaningful inclusion of impacted communities, including disproportionately impacted communities, in water project planning. Each water project is different, in scale and scope. As such, community engagement will also vary and not all Best Practices may apply to each water project. Each agency will be conducting separate, but coordinated, rule-making processes to recognize Best Practices into designated water project support programs. These rules will provide additional guidance on how to use Best Practices in community engagement planning for specific agencies' grant and loan programs as well as for other water project support.

The collaborative efforts outlined in this resource between local governments, local organizations, communities, and state agencies underscore a collective dedication to enhancing Oregon's water projects. The success of Oregon's long-term water solutions hinges on broad community support, amplifying engagement across various water sectors, and promoting initiatives that benefit the environment, economy, and Oregon's diverse communities. It is the aim that these 10 Best Practices will act as a first step in this process and help to guide future water projects.

¹ Pilz, D., et al. (2023) The Business Case for Investing in Water in Oregon.
https://www.oregon.gov/owrd/WRDPublications1/230721_FINAL_Business_Case_for_Water_in_OR_Exec_Summ.pdf

ORS 541.551 (Oregon House Bill 3293, 2021 Oregon Laws) emphasizes the importance of engaging communities, especially those disproportionately impacted or underrepresented, in decisions related to the identification, scoping, design and implementation of water projects. The bill directed specific agencies to work together and create Best Practices in community engagement for water projects. As part of this process, each agency pursues their own procedures for acknowledging this work in the Oregon Administrative Rules. The bill provides discretionary authority to the agencies to provide support for water projects. However, it defines essential elements for community engagement plans when agencies do support water projects and outlines how these plans should integrate Best Practices for community engagement. HB3293 also identifies the need for continued coordination among agencies to ensure consistent and updated implementation of these Best Practices in community engagement every five years, overseen by the Water Resources Department.

Key Terms based on community feedback and definitions provided in ORS 541.551:

Water Projects include watershed enhancement, in-stream flow protection or enhancement, water resource conservation or development, or water supply and wastewater treatment and disposal projects.

Water Project Support is planning, technical assistance, or financial support provided by state agencies related to a water project (to eligible grant and loan recipients).

Local government is as defined in ORS 174.116.

Local Organization is an organization operating in an area affected by a water project, including federally recognized Indian Tribes, nonprofit organizations, a special government body (as defined in ORS 174.117), or other organization identified by a provider of water project support as eligible to receive support.

Providers of Water Project Support include the following named agencies: the Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD), the Oregon Health Authority (OHA), Oregon Business Development Department (OBDD, dba Business Oregon), Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), and Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB).

Disproportionately Impacted Communities (for the purpose of water planning) may include rural communities; communities of color, tribal communities; coastal communities; areas with above-average concentrations of historically disadvantaged households or residents with limited access to educational opportunities or attainment; areas with high unemployment, high linguistic isolation, low levels of homeownership or high rent burden or sensitive populations; or other communities that face barriers to meaningful participation in public processes.²

Community Engagement Plan is a plan to meaningfully engage and provide suitable access to decision-making processes for disproportionately impacted communities, under-represented communities, tribal communities, and all persons regardless of race, color, national origin, or income in planning for water projects using identified best practices.

² This definition should be considered alongside other State definitions similar to Disproportionately Impacted Communities, such as Environmental Justice Communities as defined in ORS 182.535 Section 10 (4).

Exploring Community Engagement for Water Projects

Community Engagement is the process of working with groups of people who can be affiliated by place, interest, or lived experiences to address an important societal issue, such as water.

Communities are impacted by decisions made about water regardless of who is making them. Plans and projects that incorporate communities needs and input can increase resiliency and flexibility of Oregon communities, while increasing success of the project. By incorporating community knowledge and lived experiences, projects can generate durable and creative ways to address Oregon's water related problems.

Community Engagement should be designed to include meaningful engagement for impacted communities and provide suitable access to decision-making processes for water. Water projects should seek out and facilitate the involvement of members of disproportionately impacted communities. Community involvement is important for water project success and when done meaningfully has a positive influence over how decisions are made.³

State agencies are increasing efforts to collaborate and consult with tribal communities on water issues. State agencies and the 9 federally recognized Oregon Tribes have a unique and special relationship with one another. Federally recognized Tribes are recognized as sovereign with control of their governance, land, and resources. Although agencies may engage with individual tribal members as part of their broader communities, Tribal Nations as sovereigns have a unique status that is different from interested community members. This recognition establishes a formal government-to-government relationship between Oregon's agencies and these Tribes.

Although community engagement can take many forms, it is important to thoughtfully plan out engagement to ensure a holistic approach to the project. The following questions can be used by local organizations and local governments during the development of Community Engagement Plans and subsequent implementation of Best Practices in water projects.

The Best Practices in Community Engagement around Water Projects are intended to guide community engagement plans for a variety of agency granting and loan programs and other forms of water project support. This process is separate and distinct from Oregon's Place-Based Water Fund (ORS 537-873), in part, due to its focus on water projects, which are not eligible for grants from the Place-Based Water Planning Fund. In Place-Based Water Planning, OWRD consults with agencies (i.e., DEQ, Department of Land Conservation and Development (DLCD), OHA, OWEB, ODA, and ODFW) to understand each agency's capacity to participate in Place Based Planning and support planning collaboratives through consultation, assistance, or provision of information.

³ As defined in ORS 182.535 Section 10 (7)

WHO should do Community Engagement?

- ✓ **Local organizations and local governments, working alongside disproportionately impacted communities, to conduct water projects.** Although the size, scope, and extent of community engagement will vary, water projects should aim to meaningfully engage and collaborate with disproportionately impacted communities.

WHAT goes into Community Engagement?

- ✓ **Common Ground** – Building a foundation of trust, respect, and supportive communication is valued. Active listening is also key to understanding and includes both verbal and nonverbal messages being shared. This may include accommodations for people who lack access to meaningful communication due to a disability, such as visual or hearing impairment or neurodivergence, as well as providing materials in languages commonly used by the disproportionately impacted community.
- ✓ **Awareness of Community** – Striving to ensure differences among communities are recognized and valued within water projects. Individuals should think about interactions and how the water project may physically, socially, economically, environmentally, culturally, or emotionally impact a community. Respect may be expressed differently depending on the community and individual.
- ✓ **Cooperative Norms** – Working towards shared understanding of acceptable and unacceptable ways of interacting with communities. Creating openness and responsiveness in water projects to changing community and environmental questions, needs, and concerns.

WHEN to do Community Engagement?

- ✓ **Beginning** - Communities should have opportunities to be engaged from the initial project design. The scope of community engagement should be scaled according to the needs of the community, the environment, and the water project.
- ✓ **Middle** - Some water projects are larger than others and may require a longer and more involved engagement process, while other water projects are small and may require a shorter planning and implementation process. Community engagement should be done even if a water project has already started.
- ✓ **End** - Engagement should continue throughout the project, including during evaluations and monitoring. This allows for communities to provide reflective input on the project. It may also allow for adaptive management of the project.

WHERE to do Community Engagement?

- ✓ **Small scale** – Engagement should occur locally in the places and communities where water projects are occurring.
- ✓ **Large scale** – Some projects have a larger geographic impact and, in those cases, larger scale engagement of those interested and affected should occur. Projects in one area can often impact larger watersheds or groundwater systems, and these impacts to both the environment and economies should be considered.
- ✓ **Format** – Not all disproportionately impacted communities can meaningfully interact in every format of engagement. It is important to consider reducing engagement barriers. This may include providing opportunities for virtual interactions for those who cannot physically attend gatherings as well as holding gatherings at times outside of traditional business hours such as nights and weekends. Other accommodations may also be needed to ensure participation by participants with dependents.

WHY conduct Community Engagement?

- ✓ **Increase participation of disproportionately impacted communities** in conversations about water projects and decision-making processes that may impact them now or in the future.
- ✓ **Expand understanding** of the “big picture.” Water influences various processes in multiple diverse ways. Actions in one area can impact other areas and processes, such as water affordability, water quality, and water availability.
- ✓ **Mitigate potential** for conflicts from water projects and explore creative community driven solutions to solve shared problems.
- ✓ **Improve outcomes** for Oregon’s communities, cultures, environment, and economy. It is important to consider that some water projects are not suitable for all communities, and this may result in some projects needing to be placed on hold, delayed, or halted to achieve the best interests of the larger community.
- ✓ **Ensure practices** that maximize participation of disproportionately impacted communities and exclude past historical practices that may have marginalized or reduced participation.

HOW to conduct Community Engagement?

- ✓ **Use Best Practices in Community Engagement!** These 10 Best Practices act as a resource for water projects on how to interact with each other and communities regarding water. Because each water project and community are different, not all Best Practices necessarily apply to every community or project in the same ways. Those pursuing water projects should strive to ensure that the benefits of water projects extend to the broader community whenever possible.

Applying BEST PRACTICES in Water Projects

How Best Practices are used will change over time depending on the water projects' size and scope, as well as the needs and desired outcomes of disproportionately impacted communities. Not all Best Practices may apply to each water project or community.

These Best Practices were formed from synthesizing State-wide Initiatives with conversations with agency partners, local organizations, local governments, and others working in the field of community engagement.

To implement Best Practices, local organizations and local governments should take actions that guide the design and implementation of water projects. Each water project is different requiring its own set of unique actions to be taken by local organization, local governments, and communities to create meaningful engagement. As water project milestones are accomplished, new actions can be added to water projects to sustain engagement.

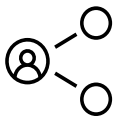
These [10 BEST PRACTICES](#) represent the culmination of input from many voices throughout Oregon.



- 1. Identify disproportionately impacted communities with interest in engaging in water project planning.** *Although it may be difficult to identify all interested parties, water projects should thoughtfully consider those who may benefit from or may be harmed by the water project, and those who have important perspectives to share based on their connection with the project location, project partners, and community. The identification of disproportionately impacted communities and local demographics using established systems is a critical first step to meaningful community engagement.*



- 2. Define the water project purpose and goals, including what will be done to involve disproportionately impacted communities.** *Communities may be impacted both positively and negatively by the work and the project. Negative project impacts from the project purposes and goals should be mitigated as much as possible prior to starting the water project.*



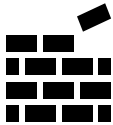
- 3. Develop new, or assess current, decision-making frameworks to identify opportunities to enhance access to the decision-making process for disproportionately impacted communities.** *Engagement should be designed to inform water project processes and outcomes and incorporate communities' perspectives and needs. Frameworks should be scaled to the water project goals.*



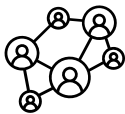
4. **Invite tribal communities in Oregon to participate in the water project, acknowledging their preferences and capacity for collaboration.** *An invitation to participate in community engagement plans should not be in lieu of other forms of tribal consultation, outreach, or engagement with federally recognized Tribes in Oregon. Tribal Nations as sovereigns may wish to participate as government partners, rather than as interested community members in water projects.*



5. **Co-create water project capacity opportunities that are inclusive, including to disproportionately impacted communities.** *When possible, invest in community-based organizations to build their own capacity to engage and maintain authentic relationships among communities and the water projects. Community investment can take many forms including compensating community members for their participation.*



6. **Build collaborative relationships with disproportionately impacted communities and ensure all parties' voices are heard in the water project.** *When possible, water project actions should be focused on the best interest of the community and center on community needs, priorities, and voices. This may include structuring project budgets and timelines to account for resources associated with conducting engagement.*



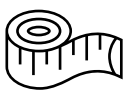
7. **Coordinate with the community and across water project participants to leverage resources, staff, and data.** *Water projects should clearly identify ways to optimize community engagement considering effective use of community members' time and resources.*



8. **Ensure water project communications and information are shared in a timely, transparent manner, and in languages and formats commonly used or preferred by disproportionately impacted communities.** *Transparency and accountability of water projects should be incorporated into all aspects of the water project.*



9. **Evaluate community engagement effectiveness before, during, and after the water project, based on communities' and projects' purposes and goals as well as capacities, and adapt future projects as appropriate.** *This ensures community feedback is integrated timely and projects are adaptively managed. Water project evaluation will take different forms depending on the project scope of work and the level of community impacts.*



10. **Strive to monitor and document the positive and negative impacts of the water project on disproportionately impacted communities and their environments.** *Reconnecting with communities after projects are completed ensures lasting relationships and leads to improvement of future water projects. Monitoring should occur on scales that are appropriate for the goals and impacts of the water project.*

This resource outlines Best Practices in Community Engagement that may be used by local organizations and local governments, working alongside impacted communities, to conduct water projects.

Agencies Project Vision Statement:

Through the collaborative development of Best Practices in Community Engagement, the named agencies in HB3293 (ORS 541.551) aim to promote meaningful inclusion of disproportionately impacted communities in decisions related to the identification, planning, and implementation of water projects. If agencies make support available for the development and implementation of community engagement plans for water projects, those resources are dedicated to plans that follow Best Practices for Community Engagement.

RESOURCE DOCUMENT SOURCE MATERIALS

Source materials reviewed for this document are complementary to ORS 541.551 and came from a wide range of sources including state agencies, community-based organizations, national organizations, and peer-reviewed articles. References are available on request.

** Photos included in this document are for examples of water projects. Images are publicly available from Oregon State agencies' web media sources.*