

Issue Statement for WRC Integrated Water Resource Strategy

“A problem well stated is a problem half solved.”

Charles F. Kettering



Issue #1. The need for an integrated water resources strategy.

Oregon is currently one of two western states without a formal water management strategy. And, it is one of many without an integrated strategy that takes into account water quantity, water quality, and ecosystem needs. An integrated water resources strategy is needed, as we develop a vision of what Oregon’s livability and economic viability will look like for future generations based upon adequate high quality water supplies. While no two basins are identical, they all have similar hydrologic elements, such as river systems, aquifers, springs, ecosystems and human settlement patterns. They have other similarities too, including a need to coordinate with neighbors, a need for local solutions to local challenges, and a need for funding. An integrated strategy should provide relevant and consistent guidance to each of the basins, despite their differing characteristics. Implementation of such a strategy should consistently move Oregon toward the preservation, restoration, and development that is necessary to achieve the desired vision of healthy water supplies from all available sources.

A Limited Supply of Clean and Abundant Water. While water supply is renewable, it is also limited, and should be managed on a sustainable-use basis. The water cycle is scientifically accepted and verifies that no additional or “new” water can be found or produced. Water is a finite resource, much like gold, coal, oil and natural gas, and pundits have begun to characterize water as the “new oil.” There are many gripping examples of water scarcity throughout the United States and around the world.

Although the state of Oregon, in general, is not in a state of immediate water crisis, it does not have an endless amount of water to serve all demands as they increase.

There are gaps between water availability and water demand, resulting in water shortages in some areas of the state. Many Oregon communities and economies, along with Oregon's fish and wildlife, face water scarcity today. Most of the state's surface waters are fully allocated during summer months, and there are several areas that have been designated as "critical groundwater areas," or "ground water limited areas." These pressures will likely be intensified, given the projected increase in Oregon's population growth, and change in the form and timing of precipitation forecast by climate change researchers.

The degradation of ground water and surface water quality also decreases the volume of fresh water available to consumers, and to replenish streams and aquifers. Freshwater bodies have limited capacity to process the pollutant load from expanding urban, industrial, and agricultural uses. Water quality degradation can be a contributing cause of water scarcity.

Without planning our future use of water in balanced and judicious ways, Oregonians will likely cross a water scarcity boundary without even knowing it.

The Value of a Strategy. An integrated strategy would provide a blueprint for the state to follow as it prepares to meet Oregon's water needs: instream and out-of-stream; above ground and below ground; now and in the future.

An integrated water resources strategy will need to recognize the inextricable link between water quantity and water quality by addressing economic and environmental needs. Water is the backbone of a healthy economy, and Oregon's economy is closely tied to its water resources and its economic needs come from industry and commerce, agriculture, recreation, tourism, electric power, and residential development. Oregon's ecological needs come from the fish and wildlife that depend on clean and abundant

water and healthy habitat found in watersheds (drainage basins), rivers and their tributaries, wetlands, floodplains, aquifers, lakes, estuaries, and the ocean.

An integrated plan or strategy serves several purposes:

- Encourages planning and management on a natural water systems basis; gains a higher level of commitment through a dynamic process that adapts to changing conditions;
- Balances competing uses of water through efficient allocation that addresses social values, cost effectiveness, and environmental benefits and costs;
- Promotes water conservation, reuse, source protection, and supply development to enhance water quality and quantity;
- Encourages participation of all units of government and stakeholders in decision-making through a process of coordination and conflict resolution;
- Fosters public health, safety, and community goodwill; and
- Addresses the institutional barriers that exist which reduce the ability to effectively manage water resources.

Building on a Foundation of Data. The public and private sectors in Oregon have produced a plethora of plans and studies focused on water quantity, water quality, and other water-related issues from environmental, business, socio-economic, hydrological, and geological perspectives. The Water Resources Department has begun to pull this collection of data into a centralized, usable format, through its on-line inventory of potential storage sites, potential conservation programs, and its 50-year water demand forecast. An integrated water resources strategy would continue to build upon this collection of existing studies, along with new information as the basis for developing “what if” scenarios, partnerships, and tools that help state and local policymakers determine how to meet Oregon’s long-term water needs.

Developing a Strategy through Collaboration. The Water Resources Commission has the statutory authority to develop an integrated water resources strategy, with the Department as the implementing agency. But another essential part

of an integrated water resources strategy is the collaborative process of building the plan. Water is a subject in which everyone is a stakeholder and must be given an opportunity to participate in and shape the process. A participatory approach is an effective means for achieving consensus and long-lasting agreement. Real collaboration takes place only when stakeholders and the interested public are part of the decision-making process. Incorporating the views of a wide variety of governmental agencies, special interest groups, and the public will be a challenge, but is key to the success of such a strategy.

Conclusion. A successful integrated water resources strategy would result in a persuasive visualization of what Oregon's water and landscape should look like and be like for future generations. Such a strategy should have as a starting point, clear and compelling goals and a vision. It should develop tools with statewide relevance, and options for local implementation.