Ontario Open House Discussion – April 7, 2010

Integrated Water Resources Strategy Spring 2010 Open House Events
Ontario Holiday Inn, Sawtooth Banquet Room, 1249 Tapadera Avenue, Ontario, OR 97914
Facilitation provided by Linda Rowe - Malheur County Soil and Water Conservation District, and Adena Green - Owyhee Watershed Council

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This document reflects public input gathered during the open house event held in Ontario. Participants were asked to identify the water resource challenges facing their community as well as any policies, projects, or approaches that they would like to see as part of the Integrated Water Resources Strategy. The event facilitators also asked audience members to share their vision, hopes, and goals for the state and to provide any outreach and education ideas that would help the public gain a better understanding of water resource issues facing Oregon. The discussion that took place reflects a true brainstorming session where no efforts were made by agency staff to rebut, debate, or prioritize any of the ideas, suggestions, or comments shared during the event.

4:00 Session

Challenges

1. Lack of water.
2. How to maximize water usage during droughts.
3. Lack of funding. We could build dam projects if we had money.
4. Lack of funds for modernization or general improvements.
5. Water quality and invasive species.
6. Increase costs for permit application.
7. It is challenging to meet everyone's rules.
8. "Sound Science" is an issue.
9. People do not understand the role of water; it is essential for making land productive.
10. As people are moving toward a "healthier" lifestyle, they do not realize that all of the produce they eat needs irrigation to grow.
11. Conservation is scary. It would ruin his valley. "Overwatering" creates habitat and water for other uses and provides multiple benefits.

12. When looking at conservation, every basin has to be measured on its own merits. One shoe will not fit all.

13. Irrigation projects have created fall and wintertime water. We need to be careful not to negatively affect the existing projects we have.

14. A smaller dam in Vines Canyon is proposed already—but with the rules and regulations currently in place, it will never happen. However, the project is really needed now because so much water is just wasted.

15. One size does not fit all.

16. We need a coordinated, funding system to get studies and projects done.

17. Conflicting rules and regulations. Agencies need to be on the same page.

18. Costs at the Water Resources Department are a big bill.

19. Timing of permits at the various agencies is challenging.

20. Evaporation vulnerabilities (climate, soil, and irrigation issues).

21. Need to preserve aquifers and existing habitats – do not go too far with conservation.

22. Need to define conservation and make sure everyone knows the definition. Others think we are wasting water, but we are not. Any conservation policy needs to be based on location and water needs.

23. Understanding the physical difference between Western Oregon and Eastern Oregon.

24. Agencies have not fully grasped and dealt with the understanding that as rivers go to drier parts of the state, they lose water to surrounding landscapes.

25. Irrigation has helped increase groundwater levels, although this is either not accepted or considered by state agencies.

26. Lack of a definition for peak and ecological flows.

27. The Ecological Flow Technical Advisory Group does not have any agricultural representation.

28. Recognize what pioneers have done has been very beneficial to fish and wildlife.

29. Understanding how expansion of noxious weeds above a dam affects water supply.

Solutions and Opportunities

1. More storage.

2. The definition of conservation needs to include economic viability. We need to maintain what we have now – the cultural and historical use and management of water.

3. The Department of Agriculture did a survey in the 1990's for development of storage areas. We need to go back and look at that list and develop more storage.

4. Look at existing water laws and water rights and possibly change them to allow more water conservation. Although this process is not intended to do that, we still need to encourage people to conserve water.

5. Create tax incentives for those doing conservation projects out of their own pocket. Agriculture does not get credit for the habitat they provide or the water quality they preserve. We need some way to measure the good things they are already doing.

6. OSU Extension can help with solutions, including education and outreach. There are many examples of people working together on conservation projects, improving water quality, etc. The support of those projects has been hit or miss. DEQ's Groundwater Management Area group is a great group and includes interagency cooperation; we need more projects like this and more cooperation overall.

7. Create more opportunities for graywater reuse in residential areas.

8. Acknowledge the physical distinctions between western and eastern Oregon. We do not want western Oregon's rules on the east side of the state knowing that they receive more water than we do.

9. Expand the capacity to manage water—instream benefits should be noted.

10. Study the aquifer before we go too far. We should not be using resources now to figure out what is going to happen with climate change. Put the resources into projects with known facts.

11. Return flows need to be coded in law and people should get credit for them.

12. Need to encourage irrigation during peak flows to spread the energy of the floods.

Education and Outreach

1. Educate the people on what inputs are needed to grow produce.

2. Educate children in schools, more particularly for how to conserve water and what happens when water is misused.

3. Educate the Legislature on the importance of water in eastern Oregon.

4. Provide education on peak flows. Peak flows result in the only water available for storage in eastern Oregon.

5. Help people understand that water that falls in eastern Oregon is more valuable than water that falls on the coast.

6. Realization and appreciation of historical water management

Vision

1. Local food systems are good for the local economy.

2. More storage in the headwaters of eastern Oregon.

3. Including agricultural representation on the EFTAG group.

4. Taking everything into account, how the entire landscape works, to understand the importance of our water needs.

5:30 Session

Challenges

1. As a farmer here, one of the challenges is to maintain our economic viability as a farmer and be able to meet recreation and fish needs. As farmers, we've done a poor job of educating others of how we use reuse water. We recharge the groundwater in very dry areas. The challenge is to get the folks on the other side of the state to understand the challenges and differences that face our side of the state.

2. Fear of losing the locally driven solutions.

3. The primary challenge of implementing an actionable agenda is whatever actions are taken, or whatever use is made, it all needs to protect the allocation of water that has already been made. Make sure that anything that is done with the strategy is done with recognition and protection of existing allocations. This is a fundamental challenge that will have to be met when developing any strategy.

4. What folks need is certainty. We cannot build a productive community if we do not know if the water will be here tomorrow.

5. When you look at water quality, there are individuals who do not live in this region who think they understand the nature of the area. We need to recognize the climate of the area. For example, maybe the temperature has always has been historically high (we do not know).

6. Concern that the IWRS is not including private industry or the private sector. Although, we continue to see government involvement in our lives. There is no involvement from the private sector in any of these solutions.

7. Look at the 2008 OSU roundtables to see the differences between the priorities in place (Newport vs. Ontario). There are dramatically different climates, economics, and heritage of people. Recognize that the IWRS cannot be centrally controlled in Salem. It has to be controlled on a regional, basin-wide basis.

8. Increasing costs for the variety of permits needed to complete water quality improvement projects. I'm worried that those costs will get out of hand and nobody will want to do these projects.

9. Improving water quality is a challenge that should not come entirely at the expense of the landowner. People from the cities are "water users," when they eat the food we grow.

10. Wild horses, along with cattle, cause riparian degradation. Cattle are now excluded from Murderer's Creek because of the riparian problems.

11. The state is broke and we have no resources.

12. We did a cost analysis on measurement devices in the Klamath Basin. Some of these measurement devices are 22,000 dollars and require maintenance. The legislature was talking about passing those costs onto the water users. This would be devastating to the water user. People on the west side don't understand that back country ranches depend on a sudden rush of water and the resulting difficulties of measuring inflow and outflow.

13. Instream water rights have led to a big east-side/west-side divide. You will see a huge backlash from the public and water users. I do not think these agencies need to see any of that controversy.

14. The legislature is driven by certain interests and we are scared to death of what the legislature will do to us. There have been some interests who have directly (or indirectly) cut our head off. That is a big problem for us. For example, during testimony for the water use measurement bill (and flows), it was obvious that they were trying to run us over. Some of our biggest problems are urban versus rural issues

15. The agencies are so anti-free enterprise that nobody can do anything. For example, my son now needs a permit and license for the same amount of land that I ran for 50 years.

Solutions and Opportunities

1. Because the Owyhee drainage basin has its headwaters in Nevada and Idaho, we need cooperation between states. The state needs to be involved in the solution to build better relationships (water quantity). We also need cooperation between states to address water quality issues, such as mercury coming down the Owyhee River that originated from legacy mining out of Idaho.

2. Move beyond forest restoration. Consider rangeland restoration as a means to protect sage grouse. Remove the juniper to create more water. Water storage and fire suppression influence the protection of sage grouse.

3. Recognize that you as a farmer and the person that owns that one fishing boat can find common ground. When we fall into that trap of us against them– we are at risk. Every time eastern Oregon does that, it loses. We need to find a way to connect to the fisherman in Newport. They are just like us.

4. The tools to affect change need to be clearly understood by everybody. Changing the use of water is dramatic; therefore, the tools need to be clear.

5. Provide certainty that our water rights are protected in any strategic plan.

6. There was very interactive cooperation between agencies in the Malheur project. Maintaining a cooperative effort between agencies is important. No future project will benefit just agriculture anymore. To get a project funded, it has to benefit a majority of people and uses.

7. Make sure that there is comprehensive understanding of all uses of water and the priorities among the regions. Address misunderstandings of how we use water.

8. Solutions should be win-win and they should be voluntary.

9. Solutions could be incentive driven.

10. There is a market for horse meat, although Oregon is probably the only state without a slaughter house. Building on this market could reduce our water use. Determine much water a horse uses as compared to livestock. Horses are not contributing anything to the economy. Consider adjusting our own priorities.

11. As a water user and farmer, I would like to use the water to make a profit. We need to prioritize agriculture. Onion has a $100 million farm gate value. This figure does not

include packing sheds and other farm jobs. This is a huge industry here. We do not have industries like Intel, HP or Nike. Instead, we depend on our agricultural businesses. We need to make western Oregon aware of our situation and emphasize the importance of water to agriculture.

Education and Outreach

1. The Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Extension Services, and local experiment stations are getting good information out to water users. These services need to be well supported.

2. As we move toward a basin wide approach, there has to be a way to educate the other areas. In Malheur County, a situation without water has a much bigger economic impact. Many people do not recognize that. We need to communicate how water is important in each region.

Vision

1. A local participatory democracy to determine solutions for water resource problems; a better model than a statewide mandated project.