Umatilla Open House Discussion – April 8, 2010

Integrated Water Resources Strategy Spring 2010 Open House Events
Umatilla City Hall, 700 6th Street, Umatilla, OR 97882
Facilitation provided by Jeff Blackwood and Tami Sasser, Umatilla Basin Watershed Council

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This document reflects public input gathered during the open house event held in Umatilla. 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. Checking the water levels of aquifers over time.

2. Dedicated and stable funding for agencies.

3. As water becomes scarce, we need to deepen wells, even for small farmers.

4. Understanding why Oregon pulls the least amount water out of the river.

5. Need a strategy that includes streamlining processes and better coordination between the Department of Environmental Quality and the Water Resources Department on water quality issues.

6. We need the US Geological Survey and state agencies to characterize the groundwater in the area. This is a key component.

7. Challenge to protect existing beneficial uses while addressing peak and ecological flows. In the future, what if agricultural uses are lost? Recognize beneficial and historical uses.

8. Water rights should not be ratcheted down over time.

9. The Deschutes region is focused on fish, which is having unintended consequences on other things (wetlands, etc).

10. Water reuse is difficult and needs to be looked at carefully. We need to know what is in the water. For example, we know there are issues with pharmaceuticals. Graywater can be used now, too. We need to look at both and see if we can do more.

11. Water policy managed from one area.

12. Basin rules need to be updated and locally-based.

Solutions and Opportunities

1. The Water Resources Department could share their information about aquifer levels in the area.

2. "Users fee" for irrigators and municipalities to fund quality and quantity projects (not schools or police).

3. "Highest and best use" is language used in the legislation. There will be more political pressure about this issue. Need to stay as politically active on this side of the state.

4. Need more local/regional control for decision-making.

5. Build incentives, such as establishing a lower fee if using a lesser amount of water than allowed.

6. "Best Available Science" should be peer-reviewed.

7. Over half the state is federal lands. The strategy should include the U.S. Forest Service. We already have the Pacific Northwest Aquatic Conservation Strategy. We need to work together to ensure we are focusing on the right things and spending money wisely.

8. Use of technology and innovation is strong in Oregon and we need to pay more attention to science and technology when talking about water use. We should develop an Oregon State Water Science and Technology Program here so others can look to us. Science-based, education-based, technology-based.

9. Many of the issues with water stem from the unknowns. We need to know the impacts of some of the pollutants in the water. We regulate because we do not know. We need to identify the unknowns, fill the data gap. In doing so, we will find out we have more flexibility with how we use water.

10. If climate change happens the way models predict, we need to consider off-site storage and other things to accommodate the coming changes.

11. The Water Resources Department has historically been a regulatory agency. It would be wise to branch out and develop water supply projects. Water storage projects are expensive—the Department should create a capitol division to develop off-site storage projects.

12. Get to a place where we can monitor water quality and quantity and stop continuing to pollute the water.

13. Modify the Columbia Basin rules to allow access to water during May, when we need it.

14. Flow restrictions in each basin should be based on ecological flows rather than calendar months since the weather is different every year.

15. Have Washington adopt Oregon's rules for the Columbia River.

16. The pollution concentrations have grown; flush them out with recharge.

17. Losing groundwater because we are making things more efficient. Any new policy decision needs to be more aware of any unintended consequences.

Education and Outreach

1. Need to prove what is happening to the water. Need to educate others about the water use now.

2. The average citizen does not know how bad the groundwater problems are here—need to get the word out.

3. Need to show the public the value of water economically. Industrial, growth, health, etc. Communities can die if there is not enough water.

Vision

1. There are many smart people in eastern Oregon regarding water. Incorporate the existing work that has already been done into the project and strategy.

5:30 Session

Challenges

1. Meeting the federal water quality challenges. Federal dollars to finance the water quality problems are shrinking. Will this strategy address that issue?

2. Funding to support the science/modeling needed to do planning.

3. This county has struggled with the lack of coordination between land use and water issues.

4. We need funding for agencies to do this work over the long-term, including funding for the other services they provide. The Water Resources Department is so dependent on general funds.

Solutions and Opportunities

1. Need to build into a plan the ability to address new needs or issues as they emerge.

2. Manage groundwater and surface water as a single resource.

3. Understand the agricultural inputs from groundwater use before development occurs.

4. Technical data and tools to advise decision-makers on whether there is enough water for a particular development.

5. Need a good public process for water planning. For example, let affected landowners (adjacent to property or beyond) know and make it easy for average person to have easy access to information and decisions.

6. There are years and years of data, but it is not coordinated among agencies. We need a place anyone can go (e.g., the online Oregon Map tool) to get all of the available data for any specific region. There is no need to re-create the data; agencies just need to share data.

7. Consider ways to increase the water that is available—additional storage (above/below ground)—in areas that are economically beneficial.

8. Additional funding for storage projects.

9. The public needs to pay for the costs of water projects and for the Water Resources Department.

Education and Outreach

1. There was a collection of data pulled together for the Umatilla County Task Force and placed online. That data can be accessible for this project.

2. Expand information about the economic value of water to the public. Show that the water used for agriculture is essential to grow produce.

3. Need to educate locals and the public about the importance and value of water.

Vision

1. How do we predict what we need to plan for in the future? We do not have consensus over much of anything right now. Need to be clear on how long we are planning.

2. The disconnect between land use plans and water plans. Land cannot be developed without water; therefore, we need fully integrated plans.