

Water Definitions

The purpose of this document is to support a shared dialogue around Oregon's water.

Below are a list of terms and their definitions that are commonly used by the Oregon Water Resources Department and other water partners when discussing water science, management, and conservation.

Alluvial Fan: A fan-shaped area of sand, gravel, and sediment deposited by a river where it exits a canyon

Aquifer: A defined unit of underground rocks or sediments that contains and transmits water

Channel Loss: Water that leaves a stream or irrigation channel and soaks into the ground

Condensation: A water changing from a vapor to a liquid, such as rain

Conduit: A pipe for transporting fluids, such as water

Conservation: Saving, not wasting

Contamination: Unfit for use; pollution

Distributary: A smaller channel that branches off from a main river and carries water away from it

Diversion: Water taken from a stream or river for irrigation or other uses

Drought: A long period of dry weather with less precipitation (such as rain or snow) than normal, which leads to water shortages

Evaporation: The changing of water from a liquid to a vapor and rising into the air

Evapotranspiration: The process where water moves into the air from both the land and from plants.

Groundwater: Water underground, such as in wells and aquifers

Intake: An opening which allows water into a conduit

Irrigation: Supply water to agricultural lands by way of ditches, pipes, or streams

Irrigation Channel: A ditch, canal, or pipe that carries water to irrigated farms and fields

Perennial Stream: Streams that flow all months of most years

Permeability: Describes the ability of any fluid, such as water, to flow, or move, through a solid earth materials such as rocks or sediments

Precipitation: Water vapor falling from the atmosphere as rain, hail, sleet, or snow

Pump: A machine that assists the flow of water in pipes; used to boost water to a higher elevation

Minimum Streamflow: The lowest streamflow needed to support fish, wildlife, and water quality

Recharge: Water added to a groundwater system, such as through infiltration of rain or snow melt

Reservoir: A tank, pond, or lake where water is collected and stored until needed

Seepage: Water moving between a stream or canal and the surrounding ground, spreading through soil or rock rather than flowing where you can see it

Seepage Run: A set of synoptic streamflow measurements used to find where water is gained or lost

Spring: place where groundwater naturally flows out of the ground onto the surface

Streamflow (Discharge): The amount of water flowing in a stream, measured in cubic feet per second (CFS)

Surface Water: Surface water can be a stream, lake, river, pond, wetland, ocean, or reservoir

Synoptic Measurements: Measurements taken at many locations along a stream or across an area at about the same time, creating a snapshot of conditions across the whole system

Transpiration: Process by which water that is absorbed by plant roots and then released as water vapor into the air through plant leaves

Valve: A device that controls the flow of water through a pipe

Water Cycle: Often called the hydrologic cycle; the circulation of water from the ocean, sky to the earth and back which includes precipitation, transpiration, and evaporation

Water Meter: A device used for recording the amount of water passing through a pipe

Watershed: An area of land from which water drains to a single water body like a river

This list is not meant to be comprehensive or include all possible water terminology use in Oregon's water planning. For more information on specific terms or topics please reach out to the Department.

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