



March 4, 2021
House Committee on Water
Representative Ken Helm, Chair

Informational Testimony on House Bill 2257
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Thank you for the opportunity to provide information related to House Bill 2257, which appropriates moneys to the Water Resources Department for the purposes of facilitating enrollment of lands in the Harney Basin in the federal Conservation Reserve Program, one hydrologist position, and measuring groundwater levels in Harney Basin. The Department has provided some feedback to Representative Owens on the bill and potential changes that might ensure it meets the intended outcomes. This testimony is provided for informational purposes and the Department is not taking a position on the bill.

Groundwater Challenges in the Harney Basin

In 2016, the Harney Basin Groundwater Study was launched as a cooperative study between the Oregon Water Resources Department and the U.S. Geological Survey to improve Oregon's understanding of the Harney Basin groundwater system. Preliminary results from the Groundwater Study show that groundwater is being used faster than it can be replenished, meaning that the current volume of groundwater pumped each year is unsustainable. Department regulatory action and/or voluntary reductions in groundwater use will be necessary to achieve reasonably stable groundwater levels in the Harney Basin.

Local and statewide stakeholders have identified the need to reduce groundwater use in the basin and are exploring voluntary mechanisms to help water users reduce their groundwater use, including opportunities to partner with federal agencies.

Conservation Reserve Program

The U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is a federally funded voluntary program that contracts with agricultural producers to provide specific conservation benefits. The CRP hosts the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) that provides incentives for voluntary non-use of groundwater. This program has been used in other states to address groundwater declines caused by over pumping. With CREP, high-priority conservation goals are identified by the state, and then federal funds are supplemented with non-federal funds to achieve those goals. U.S. Department of Agriculture provides up to 70% of the funding with a 30% non-federal cost share.

CREP Implementation in the Harney Basin

House Bill 2257 appropriates funds to be used for non-federal cost-share in a groundwater CREP to reduce groundwater use in the Harney Basin. A portion of the funds would be used for a new position

that would assist with determining eligibility for the program, monitor compliance, and measuring groundwater levels to track project and management outcomes over time.

This program, if funded, would provide financial and technical assistance to landowners in the Harney Basin who voluntarily agree to reduce their groundwater use, with a long-term goal of reducing the rate of groundwater declines in the Harney Basin.