



February 25, 2021
House Committee on Water
Representative Ken Helm, Chair

Informational Testimony on House Bill 3092
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Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 3092, which would establish a grant program to share in the cost of repairing or replacing domestic wells impacted by groundwater declines in Greater Harney Valley Groundwater Area of Concern. The Department has provided some feedback to the 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

The Greater Harney Valley Area has seen a significant amount of groundwater development for irrigation over the years, with rapid development occurring in the 1970's and then again in the late 1990's into the 2000s. In 2004, the Department began including measurement, reporting, and decline conditions on all new permits. Due to declines in areas of particular concern, such as the Crane and Weaver Springs areas, since 2014 the Department has installed dedicated observation wells, deployed automated water-level recorders, and expanded manual quarterly water-level monitoring. There are an estimated 95,680 acres of primary and supplemental irrigation groundwater rights in the Greater Harney Valley Area, based on mapped place of use.

In 2015, initial groundwater level data and aquifer recharge estimates indicated annual groundwater use and other discharges of groundwater likely exceeded annual recharge in the Greater Harney Valley Area. The Department stopped issuing new groundwater permits to allow time for further data collection to understand whether certain portions of the basin could sustain further development.

With the assistance of new funding provided by the Oregon Legislature, the Department embarked on the Harney Basin Groundwater Study in 2016. The groundwater basin study findings will be peer reviewed and published later this year; however, preliminary results from the study confirm that groundwater pumping is depleting groundwater storage and has resulted in declining groundwater levels across the basin. The rate and magnitude of groundwater level declines in some areas of the basin with more intensive groundwater use are worse than anticipated. The Weaver Springs area presents the most extreme example, where groundwater levels have declined 8 to 12 feet per year for the past several years, with total declines since the 1960s in excess of 100 feet. However, several other areas of the basin show groundwater level declines of 2 to 4 feet per year with total observed declines between approximately 10 and 40 feet.

Department regulatory action and/or voluntary reductions in groundwater use are necessary to achieve reasonably stable groundwater levels in many of these areas; however, remediating current groundwater level trends will take years.

Supporting Collaborative Solutions

The Department has a strong interest in working with and supporting the community in identifying and implementing solutions that address water needs and declining groundwater levels in the Harney Basin.

In 2015, the Department received authorization (SB 266) from the legislature and funding to pilot a collaborative approach to water planning. Place-based water planning is a voluntary, locally initiated and led effort in which a balanced representation of water interests within a basin or watershed work in partnership with the state to understand their instream and out-of-stream water needs and identify and implement solutions to meet those needs. Undertaking place-based water planning is recommended action 9A of [Oregon's Integrated Water Resources Strategy](#).

The Harney Basin was selected as one of the four areas to pilot the place-based approach and receive support and funding from the Department. The Harney County Community-based Water Planning Collaborative (Collaborative) is working to collaboratively develop a local integrated water resources plan that will help secure the basin's water future. Approximately 40 to 45 diverse stakeholders engage in the Collaborative's regular meetings. These stakeholders have come together to understand Harney County's critical water issues, including declining aquifer water levels, and to explore a variety of potential solutions.

Impacts to Domestic Well Owners from Declining Groundwater Levels

The groundwater declines in the Greater Harney Valley have already affected some domestic well owners, and will likely impact others in the future. An OSU survey commissioned by the Collaborative in 2019 found that of 472 respondents with a residential well on their property, 9% reported there was not enough water to meet their exempt use needs, while 29% had noticed a decline in well yield or rate.

Owners of deficient, damaged, or aging wells, or a well impacted by declining groundwater levels, may not be able to afford to pay the costs to abandon, repair, or replace a well. The Department does not have a mechanism for providing financial assistance to landowners needing to address these types of well issues.