



The League of Women Voters of Oregon, established in 1920, is a grassroots nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government. We envision informed Oregonians participating in a fully accessible, responsive, and transparent government to achieve the common good. LWVOR Legislative Action is based on advocacy positions formed through studies and member consensus. The League never supports or opposes any candidate or political party.

February 7, 2023

To: Chair Golden, Vice Chair Girod and Members of the Committee
[Senate Committee on Natural Resources](#)

Re: [SB 70](#) **Converting Farmland in Malheur County - OPPOSE**

The League of Women Voters of Oregon supports our statewide land use planning program. We also have strong positions around water quality and quantity. In 2021, we [warned](#) against converting 200 acres of agricultural land to rural residential housing while the City of Ontario is seeing growth where needed infrastructure—sewer and water facilities should be.

Since then, the [Eastern Oregon Border Board](#), with funds provided by Oregon’s budget, has created a Competitive Housing Incentive Program—a program that does NOT use these 200 acres because the land that was slated for conversion is in whole or in part inside irrigation districts—making this land ineligible for this conversion. We do understand that residents have taken advantage of this substantial Incentive Program in places where homes can be built under the land use program.

The League expressed concerns in 2021 not just about the loss of agriculture land—land suitable for cattle, one of the highest value agriculture “crops” in Oregon. But we also focused on water. Outside of the city, these residents would need to install septic systems that could eventually reduce water quality. (There is a Groundwater Management Area in Malheur County related to pollution, according to the Dept. of Environmental Quality.) And wells would be allowed under our exempt well laws to put straws into potentially fragile groundwater areas. These “straws” could create future challenges for the agricultural industry dependent on groundwater since much of our surface water is over appropriated.

We note that, in other hearings in 2021, Rep. Mark Owens provided that well users are accessing “paleowater” in his Harney County area and not recharging. Over 170 domestic well users reported a decline in the yield and rate of their wells in his Harney County area in the last 10 years. Oregonians provided \$500,000 to help with this crisis.

In Klamath County, more wells are going dry. Oregon has again provided funds to help these well owners, but we should not create even more potential crises such as those. These homes would be allowed to have water wells that will draw from groundwater that we don’t even know exists. The League continues to advocate for more groundwater studies, so we know what water is available for use. The limited water in farmland should go to the vital agricultural industry—critical to Malheur County’s and the state’s economy.

We do not need to set up yet another conflict over water between those who produce our food and housing development, especially when there is plenty of land inside the Ontario Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) for housing development. In recent years, Ontario has expanded its Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) to bring in about 600 acres from its urban reserve, leaving about 1500 acres still available in the Ontario Urban Reserve, in addition to vacant residential lands already in the Ontario UGB. Ontario needs investment in infrastructure inside its UGB to support economic development. We encourage your support for the city and reject this proposal.

The January 31 U.S. Drought Monitor Oregon [Drought Map](#) tells the story: **Malheur County is in either “moderate”** (*some damage to crops, pastures; streams, reservoirs or wells low, some water shortages developing or imminent; voluntary water-use restrictions requested*) **or “severe”** (*crop or pasture losses likely; water shortages common; water restrictions imposed*) **condition—and this was the end of January! We ask that you not move SB 70 forward.**

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss this legislation.



Rebecca Gladstone
LWVOR President



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Natural Resources Coordinator