

Reducing Flood Risk in Oregon with State Funding for Flood Safety Infrastructure

HB 2307/SB 634

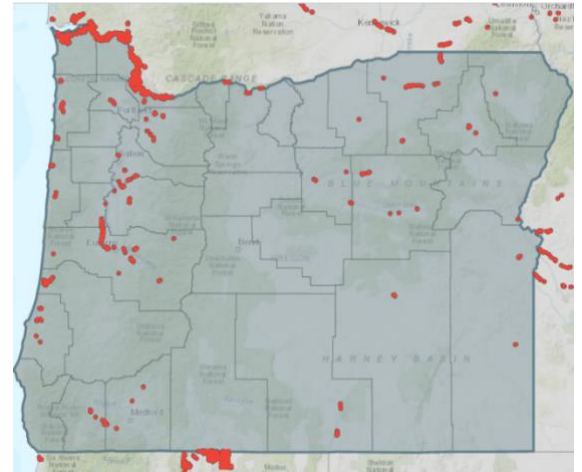


THE PROBLEM: AGING LEVEE INFRASTRUCTURE & COSTLY FEDERAL REQUIREMENTS

Levees were built across the country throughout the 20th century to help protect lands adjacent to oceans, rivers, and streams. In Oregon, there are well over one thousand miles of levees throughout the state. These levees provide critical protection to urban and rural areas alike. This infrastructure exists everywhere from Burns to Astoria, Klamath Falls to Portland, Milton-Freewater to Eugene, and everywhere in between. Unfortunately, local jurisdictions struggle to keep up with the necessary maintenance, let alone completing the work required to bring this critical infrastructure up to the modern-day federal safety levee standards that have evolved following Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy. Meeting the federal safety standards set by the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provides communities with many benefits including access to federal aid in the event of a flood and affordable flood insurance through FEMA's National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP).

Whether you live in a community with levees or not, this vital infrastructure is crucial to the way our state operates. For instance, the 27-mile levee system that runs along the Columbia River in the Portland metro area, protects essential infrastructure like the Portland International Airport, drinking water for nearly one million Oregonians, and multiple railroads, interstate highways, and distribution centers that help to move goods in, out, and around our state. Levees play an essential role in providing public safety and reducing the risk of flooding while furthering economic development and protecting parks, beaches, watersheds and native fish and wildlife within Oregon.

Sadly, we have too many examples of what happens when our levees cannot withstand the floodwaters they are meant to hold back. Many people have heard about the tragic 1948 flood that washed away the City of Vanport, killing at least 15 people and leaving another 18,000 more without homes. But just a year ago, Umatilla River floodwaters overtook a levee in Pendleton, wreaking havoc and damaging over 500 buildings.



Levees in Oregon according to the USACE National Levee Database, which catalogs levees that the Corps: had a role in constructing, helps maintain, or has enrolled in the Rehabilitation & Inspection Program. Unfortunately, they are missing data for Central Oregon.



When levee systems fail: the aftermath of the 1948 Vanport Flood and the 2020 Pendleton Flood

THE SOLUTION: CONTINUED STATE FUNDING FOR FLOOD SAFETY INFRASTRUCTURE

In 2015, the Oregon State Legislature recognized the importance of levee infrastructure by creating a levee-related loan fund under the Special Public Works Fund (SPWF) of Business Oregon's Infrastructure Finance Authority (IFA). Although the loan fund proved immensely helpful to the jurisdictions with the financial capacity to make debt payments, many were unable to take advantage of the funding because they are unable to meet the debt obligation, even at the IFA's modest interest rates. So, in 2019, the State Legislature created the Levee Grant Program and allocated \$15 million in lottery bond sales to the fund (HB 5030). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this bond sale did not move forward. In the 2021 session, the Legislature again allocated \$15M in lottery bond sales to the fund (HB 5006). Business Oregon completed the rulemaking and has awarded or obligated most of these funds.

This grant program provides vital funding to communities around the state to help make critical improvements to their flood safety infrastructure. Business Oregon has commitments for the full \$15 million available through the 2021 allocation. With continued need to adapt to a changing climate that brings stronger and more frequent storms and changes in federal flood safety regulations, the need remains strong for continued investment by the state in the Levee Grant Program.

Many communities are eagerly awaiting the opportunity to apply for this grant funding so they can afford to make critical improvements to their flood safety infrastructure. **House Bill 2307 / Senate Bill 634** allocate \$15 million in net proceeds from lottery bond sales to the Levee Grant Fund to continue supporting the investigation, planning, and construction of levee safety improvement projects. With continued grant dollars available for flood safety projects, more communities will be able to work on evaluating and improving this important public safety infrastructure. This will reduce the risk of flooding across Oregon, making our communities more resilient while providing important protection to people, property, and businesses, as well as parks, open spaces, and fish and wildlife around the state.

The bills require that at least 60% of the dollar value of grants awarded from the fund in each biennium be used to help rural or distressed areas, which is consistent with the rules of Business Oregon's Special Public Works Fund. It also makes a modest change to the definition of "levee project" by adding some more specific language to ensure all communities with levees and associated flood safety infrastructure are eligible for this funding.

The overall program permits public entities that operate and maintain levees and related infrastructure to access up to \$2 million per year with a minimum 20% local match to do the critical planning and make the necessary capital improvements while seeking certification and accreditation from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

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The Levee Ready Columbia partnership is made up of over twenty public, private, nonprofit, and neighborhood organizations working collaboratively to reduce the risk of flooding along the Columbia River in Multnomah County by ensuring the local 27-mile levee system meets federal safety standards and establishing a more modern and sustainable way of managing and funding the infrastructure and landscape. For additional information about LRC, please contact Colin Rowan, 971-804-0608, crowan@mcdd.org