

HB 3321 – Assessing and Addressing Vulnerabilities of Small Community Water Systems

In Oregon, there are approximately 3,321 public water systems, 1,555 of which provide drinking water serving 3,330 people or less. Many of these smaller systems struggle with multiple challenges including maintaining regulatory and compliance standards, ensuring water supply reliability, aging infrastructure, climate change, water and sewer rates and ensuring financial stability to name a few. Three significant challenges facing these smaller water and wastewater systems is 1) ensuring a pipeline of trained and qualified operators, 2) ensuring that their governing boards or councils receive the necessary training so that they can fulfill their duties and responsibilities to their communities and customers, and 3) planning for system improvements and navigating state and federal funding opportunities.

Drinking water operators, especially small system operators are in high demand as the aging workforce retires and not enough replacements are filling those vacancies. Furthermore, many of these small system operators get recruited to operate larger systems as they gain experience. As a result, smaller systems have greater difficulty staying or remaining in compliance. This inability to keep qualified and trained personnel impacts the ability of the utility to operate smoothly, plan for future system improvements, address system challenges, undertake utility rate studies, and seek assistance. As a state, we need to do a better job ensuring that our smaller water and wastewater systems are being operated by trained personnel ensuring regulatory compliance, adequate capital planning, and are using best management practices to deliver these essential services to Oregonians.

HB 3321 directs the Oregon Association of Water Utilities to conduct a study of the needs and vulnerabilities of county-regulated small-community water systems (those serving fewer than 3,300 people) covering several topics. Specifically, the study will cover smaller system water supply reliability, source and treated water quality, operations and management and infrastructure among others. The bill provides funding for one training specialist, and two technical assistance providers – one focused on water system operations and the other focused on planning and financial technical assistance. This bill also dedicates funding for the design and construction of a water utility training center located in Independence, Oregon to provide technical, financial, and managerial support and resources to these county-regulated systems as well as other smaller community water and wastewater systems.

The training facility would include a formal classroom and wet lab, thereby providing hands-on training. The facility would be able to accommodate 50 to 60 attendees per class session. It would also include an online/virtual training capacity within the larger facility to provide the best opportunities for all small utilities to obtain this needed training. The training facility would be available to all water utilities and personnel in Oregon, but with focus on training needs for those utilities with populations of 10,000 and less and specific classes designed for those utility personnel operating utilities with 3,300 or less populations.

OAWU, based out of Independence, is a non-profit, member association with 12 full time employees, a 13-member board of directors, over 800 members and provides technical assistance, training, and representation to both members and non-members in Oregon. OAWU has the management personnel, finance and office support and field staff personnel in place to provide startup, oversight and completion of the tasks identified.

Oregon Association of Water Utilities (OAWU) has provided formal and in-field training and technical assistance to drinking water and wastewater utilities since 1977. In 2022, OAWU provided formal training classes with over 1,600 attendees, over 600 training hours with 60 classes, including 12 hours for tribal authorities. OAWU field staff have provided over 3,500 technical assistance hours and meeting with more than 2,900 water and wastewater utilities and cities this past year. However, there remains a substantial need in training and technical assistance for Oregon drinking water and wastewater utilities, operators, managers and boards and councils. This is especially true for the smaller utilities in the 3,300 and less category. For the last 15 years OAWU has administered the OHA-Drinking Water Authority contract providing training for the very Small Water Operator course for personnel operating 150 or smaller, ground water only systems.

