



May 4, 2023

To: Senate Committee on Natural Resources
Re: Support for SB 85-4 Amendment

Dear Chair Lieber and members of the Rules Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify supporting Senate Bill 85-4 amendment.

My name is Kristin Ostrom, and I am the Executive Director of Oregon Rural Action, a grassroots, community-led nonprofit organization working for the well-being of people and the environment in rural eastern Oregon.

We support SB 85-4 amendment as a step in the right direction and look forward to further strengthening water quality reforms to ensure our laws protect our environment and rural communities from the impacts of industrial confined animal feeding operations.

It's been over a year since Oregon Rural Action began door-to-door testing domestic wells in the Lower Umatilla Basin. It was first designated in 1990 as a groundwater management area due to high nitrate levels from large-scale agriculture, including industrial confined animal feeding operations.

In partnership with local public health, local testing found the water undrinkable for hundreds, up to 5 times above the federal safe drinking water level. Following initial testing, Morrow County declared a water emergency in June 2022 and began providing bottled water to residents. In July 2022, the Environmental Protection Agency called for a state-coordinated response to address the immediate health risks, including testing, treatment, and water.

Our current regulatory system has not worked to protect the quality of the region's water or people's health.

Yesterday, Governor Kotek toured the area and met with residents. Thank you to Senator Hansell and Representative Levy for joining the Governor touring the area.

The Governor heard residents speak of their experiences in Spanish and English, unknowingly drinking the contaminated water for decades, cooking with and boiling the water, and their health concerns.

Basin residents shared stories of cancer, miscarriages, lost friends and neighbors. Nitrate consumption is known to cause "Blue-Baby Syndrome" and is linked to numerous adverse health effects, including spontaneous abortion, birth defects, thyroid problems, and various cancers.

Community members also voiced their deep frustration with the state. For decades, state agencies with the regulatory authority to protect the groundwater knew the excess levels of nitrate, documented increasing levels from large-scale industrial agriculture, and failed to tell people about the risk. The current regulatory system and groundwater management approach failed to protect the groundwater - the primary source of drinking water for area residents.

Following yesterday's tour and meeting with community members, the Governor promised to test all domestic wells in the Lower Umatilla Basin, find an immediate and permanent safe source of drinking water, and pledged to address decades of groundwater pollution.

The SB 85-4 amendment is an initial step in that direction, strengthening our laws to protect our region's groundwater and rural and environmental justice communities' access to safe drinking water.

We support the passage of SB 85-4 amendment.

Sincerely,
Kristin Anderson Ostrom
Executive Director