

To: House Committee for Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resource and Water

From: Audrey Eldridge, Resident

Re: Support of House Bill 2168

Date: January 21,2025

I strongly support HB 2168, which, in part, is an act to assist the **approximate 25% Oregonians** who rely on private wells for their drinking water or septic systems for the treatment of the household wastewater. I know firsthand how much rural residents need this type of resource and that Oregon State University Extension Service is the right organization to provide this service.

Rural residents have many skills to manage their households and look after the health of their family. But often, those skills do not include an understanding of the regional and local groundwater systems that contribute to their well water, or how to maintain a wastewater system. When buying a rural property, one might get a manual for the heating systems, or the kitchen appliances, but rarely is there anything for the homeowners to rely upon to understand how to manage their drinking water and wastewater systems.

Private wells in rural areas often can be contaminated from activities located far out of control of the homeowner. Groundwater Management Areas, such as the Southern Willamette Valley and the Lower Umatilla Basin, experience widespread groundwater contamination from nitrate. This is a health hazard, and this contaminant, like many others, does not impart any taste or observable change to the water. Unless a water test is conducted, those families will not know if their well is contaminated.

While I was a DEQ Groundwater Management Area Coordinator for the Southern Willamette Valley (2002-2015) OSU Extension hosted dozens, if not hundreds, of community gatherings. These would include: an engaging presentation of the care of these private systems; free nitrate testing during the event; information on how often to test their well water and what to test for; and data on when to pump the septic tanks and what to do in case of a failure – for either system. OSU Extension also provide guidance for the treatment of contaminated drinking water to help protect the health of that family. While a state agency (such as DEQ) is not always seen as the first go-to for rural residents with questions, OSU Extension has been a consistent trusted resource of information and guidance.

Please let me share a personal experience of one OSU interaction that resulted in a major impact on a young family's life. OSU was conducting an evening community event in Harrisburg. While OSU led a presentation on wells and septic systems, I assisted with the well water nitrate testing of samples brought to this event. This is a free service provided by OSU and can often yield results in 30 minutes or less. One of those samples showed nitrate present at over 2 times the public drinking water standard. [*Note: Drinking water standards are established for public water*

*systems that are required to be tested regularly, and to report those results to their customers. There are no established standards for private water systems.]*

The person who brought in that sample was the mother of both a toddler and a breastfeeding infant. High levels of nitrate in drinking water can impact breastmilk, and younger children drinking water with elevated nitrate are also at high risk. OSU Extension was able to talk with the mother and her husband, who were terrified at the prospect of telling the landlord about the drinking water contamination issue for fear they would be evicted. Over the next few days, OSU Extension helped them figure out a way to install a cost-effective treatment unit for their drinking water, protecting their family without fear of losing their rental.

OSU has been willing to travel to rural communities and set up gatherings at times that work for them – even if this means working evenings. Bringing such a needed resource to all rural corners of Oregon would be a benefit to so many. Rural residents have much on their plate and could use a trusted partner to help understand their drinking water and wastewater systems.

I urge you to support House Bill 2168.

Thank you  
Audrey Eldridge  
Former DEQ SWV Groundwater Management Area Coordinator  
Albany, Oregon