



February 12, 2025

Co-Chairs Helm and Owens
House Agriculture, Land Use and Water Committee
Oregon State Capitol
900 Court St. NE
Salem, OR 97301

Co-Chairs Helm, Owens and Members of the Committee:

The Oregon Association of Water Utilities (OAWU) was formed in 1977 as a non-profit membership association. OAWU now represents more than 800 cities, drinking water and wastewater utilities, individual and associate members. The Association currently employs sixteen staff members - four office/administrative personnel and twelve seasoned field staff working as Circuit Riders, Source Water Specialist, Wastewater Technicians and Trainers serving both members and non-members throughout the state. OAWU works to improve managerial, technical and financial stances and practices within utilities. The Association is governed by an active 13-member board of directors conducting regular business, annual long-range plan and goals setting, policy, budget and association direction. The Association accounting and record keeping must meet GAAP, OMB's Uniform Guidance 2 CFR part 200 and an undergo an Annual Federal Grant Compliance Audit.

OAWU brings volumes of resources to the table with our day-to-day experiences in trouble shooting, assistance and responding to questions and emergencies all over the state with every system type and style. We come alongside especially the small system personnel needing training or directions in the field, recovering their treatment plant operations or in meeting state and/or federal regulations, board training or assisting in providing options during major decisions that may monetarily impact that small system for years to come. The major areas of service are by way of onsite (including email and phone) technical assistance, classroom/virtual training, legislative representation and additional services such as leak detection, rate study/structure reviews and water management and conservation plans. We are experts at system operations and treatment plant evaluations and efficiencies, needs assessments, reviewing design plans from a management and operations perspective, trouble shooting, emergency response, and filling the gap when everything goes wrong.

Our work matters – be it public health, environment, financial, future plans, these and so many more areas of need and concern are real life needs and issues and are at the heart of our utilities and also very important to the four million plus Oregon residents who drink or use water every day. We make things happen and assist in a multitude of areas regarding drinking water or

wastewater and we are very good at what we do with a stellar reputation, work ethics, knowledge and experience. We go out of our way to assist during emergencies, even in the worst conditions, holidays, or greatest of challenges. The large to the very smallest system and utility call upon OAWU for assistance and/or training regularly building relationships that last a lifetime. During the 2024 year, OAWU provided over 3,239 hours of onsite technical assistance to utilities. We worked with more than 2,000 water and wastewater systems and trained more than 1,500 operators. Several hundred hours of formal training and five annual training and trade show type conferences.

OAWU provides services, assistance and training to all utility personnel, members and non-members, throughout this great state. We specially make mention of those 812 small and very small community water systems, those with a population of 3,300 and less, that have great personnel and boards and councils, but face greater hardships and challenges because of numerous factors out of their control. Possibly that system where everyone walked away also. Those that have had years of paying infrastructure debt and unable to pass or implement appropriate rates to continue to be efficient in operations and future needs. Costs are greater because of environment or the very rural and small customer base not having resources. The challenges of finding, training and retaining qualified personnel or the utility employs one person or a volunteer and needs help to simply take time off. The revolving door of training personnel and losing them to the larger utilities with greater salaries and benefits. The continual challenges of training operators, managers and boards. These are who need our assistance, support and expertise the most. The small and very small utilities needing what they so often can't afford or do not have the means or ability to even sometimes, help themselves.

The Small System Training Center, grant from HB3321 – the OAWU has selected a primary contractor with designated subs. The lot has been graded, and storm drain and runoff requirements met. Foundations and walls construction are soon expected. Completion of the 4,000 sq. ft. formal training center with a hands-on wet lab is expected the end of August 2025. This facility will be state of the art and one of a kind especially for small and very small systems needing formal training. It will also dovetail nicely with the planned Apprenticeship Program that is greatly needed. Training is one of the major needs that is a constant to keep operators and managers up-to-date, current with new technologies, increase abilities and knowledge and prepare for higher certification level testing.

Small System Trainer and Circuit Riders technical assistance personnel have been effectively providing training and assistance shortly after receiving the grant award. These experienced and dedicated technical assistance (TA) providers and trainers provided key assistance in areas as required: supply and reliability, source and treated water quality, utility board and operations management, infrastructure, droughts, floods and earthquakes, funding, regulations, regionalization, etc. In each of the nine focus areas of technical assistance, 195 to 247 services were provided – at each small or very small water system stop, the system may require/receive one or several of the various helps and trainings. An extremely successful first year that reveals there is much to do and many in great need of these services.

The Small System Needs Assessment Study for drinking water utilities with populations of 3,300 was completed within the timelines and distributed. The summary of findings reveal that the urgent improvement areas are distribution infrastructure, water supply infrastructure, water treatment

infrastructure and financial stability. The secondary improvement areas are drought, flood and earthquake preparedness and workforce capacity. Key strengths revealed are water supply reliability with secondary strengths being source and treated water quality, regulation compliance and overall management. Conclusions also noted that while utilities generally self-assess as performing well in the above listed areas, infrastructure failures impact performance in these areas as well. Addressing these challenges will require targeted legislative funding to help utilities sustain their current strengths while improving critical need areas. Additionally, OAWU observes that training needs is a consistent top priority for all utilities to keep a well-trained and knowledgeable workforce providing safe drinking water and properly caring for the financial investments made.

OAWU supports HB 3121 and believes it to be an efficient and well laid out plan of greatly needed assistance and training for the small and very small water systems and will help continue these noble efforts that positively impacts water, lives and our future in the rural areas. Preparing for emergencies and firming up our primary supply areas and infrastructure, keeping up with technology and the latest treatment, cyber security and training our workforce, preparing new, young people for this most important service. This bill will also help identify vulnerabilities requiring attention with future legislation. The Oregon Association of Water Utilities and the many small and very small utilities thank our state leadership and lawmakers for this opportunity and the momentum that has been started!

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. We ask that you support HB 3121.

Respectfully,

Jason Green
Oregon Association of Water Utilities