

High Desert Partnership & Harney County Watershed Council
Support for 2025-2027 Legislative Proposal to Manage Harney County Groundwater

March 10, 2025

Re: Addendum Harney County Groundwater Management Investment Request

Dear Representative Helm and Owens:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a water investment request for the 2025-2027 Legislative session. High Desert Partnership and Harney County Watershed Council have prepared the accompanying information as an addendum to the request submitted by the Watershed Council to support the Harney County Groundwater Plan Implementation during the 2025-2027 biennium.

Across the Harney Basin, water scarcity is proving to be the community's most important social, environmental, and economic challenge. Not since the timber industry collapse of the 1980's, have our local economies and rural way of life been challenged in such a profound way. Harney County Watershed Council has been undertaking a place-based approach to water resources planning since 2016 and have leveraged limited funds a number of times over. This group of farmers, ranchers, businesspeople, government officials, tribal members, landowners, conservationists and other interests have been working together to gather information, identify strategies, and determine water resources needs to help develop solutions that will meet those needs now and into the future.

High Desert Partnership is an organization that has a proven record in bringing people together to find common ground on some of the region's most complex, difficult, and divisive challenges. All too often collaborative initiatives are viewed as short-term strategies to simply get people to agree on a path forward. However, for the type of challenging issues faced in Harney County, they must in fact be viewed as long-term programs that need to be nurtured, adaptively managed, and socialized across generations. There must be resources to ensure that they can adapt to new information and changing circumstances, that there is opportunity to learn by trial and error, and most importantly, that the time and energy invested to bring together people with widely varying perspectives is sustained over time. In Harney County we recognize that how groundwater management is implemented can be a model for the state of Oregon. It is important that we get it right.

Recognizing that there is a proposed loss of more than a third of the economic support for the community from the proposed curtailment of groundwater use our organizations are now planning the implementation phase of the state recognized and approved groundwater plan for the Harney Basin. This level of impact will require the community to explore adaptive strategies to address the anticipated impacts. High Desert Partnership has put forward a framework to convene a Harney Groundwater Adaptive Management Group with community and OWRD participation on a regular basis for an extended timeframe. Working with the Department and the Harney County Watershed Council, this group will be guided by the adopted Division 512 basin program rules as well as the Harney Community-based Groundwater Plan. The group will focus on supporting monitoring, communication, coordination, collaboration, conflict resolution, and support partners in project implementation. It will follow an approach that has been tested and proven with other natural resources collaboratives in Harney County.

The proposed continued investment in Harney County to manage groundwater will result in the following:

- Formation of and ongoing support for an adaptive management collaborative group that brings together the diverse partners necessary to monitor groundwater trends and inform groundwater management actions over time to achieve desired outcomes.
- Maintain an ongoing community conversation around groundwater management, including coordinated public outreach.

- Increased data collection to support informed decisions around groundwater management and build trust within the community.
- Creation of an ongoing community conversation and collaborative forum to support implementation of the Harney Community-based Groundwater Plan, including the following actions:
 - identify projects and offer support partners who are assisting irrigators in voluntarily reducing groundwater use;
 - exploring alternative agricultural opportunities for lands that lose access to groundwater;
 - offer a central clearinghouse to connect permit exempt well users affected by declining groundwater levels to get the support and assistance they need;
 - support partner efforts to monitor and act to conserve and enhance groundwater dependent ecosystems.
- Monitor and oversee economic transition efforts, including work with other state agencies such as Business Oregon to ensure that the community can weather the foreseen economic impacts.
- Assist with prioritization of projects, leveraging funding and ensuring projects approved for implementation are completed, with ongoing accountability to desired outcomes.

Proposed Budget	Budget
High Desert Partnership - Convene Groundwater Adaptive Management Group, including full-time coordinator, contract facilitation, outreach and communications (focused on process design and support)	\$400,000
Harney County Watershed Council – Oversee and support partner identification and implementation of collaboratively supported actions identified in the Harney Community-Based Groundwater Plan and informed by and in support of the Groundwater Adaptive Management Group (focused on project implementation, management, and oversight) - see associated letter	\$700,000
TOTAL	\$1,100,000

Funding can be directed to High Desert Partnership, and we will work together with Harney County Watershed Council to disperse the funding. High Desert Partnership will convene the Adaptive Management group and Harney County Watershed Council will oversee implementation of groundwater plan projects. We expect both organizations to continue to seek additional funding through grants and donations. Both of our organizations have and will continue to partner with diverse groups to ensure the success of groundwater management and provide a model for how groundwater can be adaptively managed.

Sincerely,

Brenda Smith

Karen Moon

Brenda Smith, Director High Desert Partnership & Karen Moon, Coordinator Harney Co. Watershed Council

2025-2027 Legislative Proposal

Harney Basin Collaborative

Background

The Harney Basin Community-Based Water Planning Collaborative (Collaborative) has been working diligently for nearly a decade to address water resource management challenges through Place-Based Planning. As part of these efforts, the Collaborative has developed a groundwater plan to tackle critical groundwater issues in the basin. Progress toward implementation has already begun with the establishment of the Harney Valley Groundwater Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, a domestic well remediation program, and coordination with other collaborative initiatives led by the High Desert Partnership.

In recognition of the pressing need for resources, Representatives Helms and Owens have requested water-related funding priorities from stakeholders and organizations across Oregon for the 2025-2027 biennium. In response, the Collaborative has reviewed its Groundwater Plan to identify both specific and general funding needs to address the basin's urgent groundwater challenges.

Proposal

The Collaborative has developed a list of potential projects consistent with the 2025 Water Package and, after careful deliberation, consolidated budget items for submission to Representatives Helms and Owens (Table 1). The Collaborative is confident that the proposed funding levels can be effectively applied within a single biennium.

While Representatives Helms and Owens requested the identification of one project investment in specific categories—capacity, data collection, monitoring, groundwater governance, ecosystem health, water security, and outreach—the Collaborative determined that providing budget estimates for overall strategy implementation would be more impactful. Each line item represents an opportunity to address multiple strategies for both groundwater issues, if funding is secured. We urge our representatives to champion the implementation of these strategies, which seek to balance instream and out-of-stream needs, rather than individual projects, as prioritizing single initiatives within a collaborative framework would be highly challenging.

¹Table 1. Potential Funding Items to Move Forward in the Harney Basin.

Line item	Reference to Supporting Materials (Groundwater Plan)	Expected Benefits/Outcomes	Anticipated Costs	Entity	Level of Support	Funding we are pursuing/expect to pursue for line items
Facilitation and Project Management	Chapter 2 - Groundwater Plan (pg. 17)	Ensures seamless implementation of the Groundwater Portion of the Integrated Water Plan, including coordination across stakeholders. Facilitates adaptive management strategies to optimize groundwater use and conservation. Expected benefits include improved resource allocation and governance.	\$140,000	Harney County Watershed Council	High	OWEB Organizational Collaboration Grant
Filling Data Needs	Chapter 8 - Groundwater Plan (pg. 73)	Supports data collection to address key gaps in water use and availability. Provides a scientific basis for	\$150,000	Depends on the data gap. Could	High	Various sources depending on the data, USGS, OWEB Monitoring, OWRD, BOR,

¹ This table, based on needs described in the Collaborative's Groundwater Portion of the Integrated Water Resources Plan, was created by project staff, and informed and revised by Collaborative members during meetings held on 12/30/25, 1/9/25, and 3/12/2025. It is intended to be used by Rep. Helms and Owens as input for the 2025 water package. Budget estimates are based on best available information. It is assumed that funding can be used to leverage match from other funding sources.

		sustainable water management and enhances decision-making for agricultural, ecological, and community needs.		include SWCD, HCWC, HDP, MNWR, HBWC, TNC, OWRD, ODFW, etc.		USFWS
Project Planning & Design	Implementation Frameworks for Groundwater Planning Phase	Inventory and identify priority groundwater dependent ecosystems for conservation purposes.	\$85,000	Depends on the project. Could include, HCWC, HDP, MNWR, HBWC, TNC, OWRD, ODFW, etc.	High	OWEB Technical Assistance, OWRD
Project Implementation	Chapter 9 - Groundwater Plan (pg. 75)	Provide funding to identify alternative crops and perennial cover crops. Expected benefits include addressing consequences of impacts to water quality and quantity, and ecological and economical impacts, in	\$240,000	Depends on the project. Could include SWCD, HCWC, HDP, MNWR,	High	OWEB Restoration, OWRD

		light of reduced water supply.		HBWC, TNC, OWRD, ODFW, etc.		
Public Outreach and Landowner Engagement	Chapter 7 - Groundwater Plan (pg. 64)	<p>Inform the community about the benefits of implementing the Groundwater Portion of the Integrated Water Resources Plan.</p> <p>Expected outcomes include a more informed public. Additionally, a potential increase in community participation for water management that meets community, ecological, and economic needs is achieved.</p>	\$85,000	Harney County Watershed Council	High	OWEB Outreach
TOTAL			\$700,000			