



March 18, 2025

TO: House Committee On Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources and Water

RE: Letter of Support for House Bill 3116 - Appropriation of Moneys to the Water Resources Dept. for Place-based water planning

Dear Co-Chairs Helm and Owens, Co Chair Finger McDonald and Members of the Committee, Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide support of HB 3116 and thank you for your continued efforts to help solve the critical groundwater issues that are facing our communities and our agricultural producers. For the record, my name is Brenda Smith, director at High Desert Partnership. I have been involved in the place-based planning effort from the very beginning when as a board member of the Harney County Watershed Council applied for one of the first pilot project grants. For nearly a decade a diverse group of partners in Harney County have been harnessing the power of our communities to help solve our water issues. We are now at the cusp of implementing the plan that has been developed in Harney County.

Over the past 20 years, High Desert Partnership has emerged as a nationally recognized leader in solving complex rural challenges through collaboration. We are an organization that has a proven track record in bringing people together to find common ground on some of the region's most complex, difficult and divisive challenges. Often these 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 and for water, they must in fact be viewed as long-term programs and investments 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, ensure 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.

Our organization is interested in convening a Groundwater Adaptive Management group using a step-by-step framework to develop an adaptive management plan that brings together multiple partners at the intersection of the rules that will be adopted for managing reductions in groundwater and the state recognized groundwater plan developed through the Harney County place-based planning effort. The benefit of High Desert Partnership convening this group is that it is a pathway for the Harney County Watershed Council to implement the groundwater plan within the new rules that are facing groundwater use in the basin. An adaptive management plan also allows for gathering information on specific areas being managed to identify effective strategies while promoting efficient use of funds. In addition, having management strategies supported with credible data is valuable if management choices are challenged. In concept, the convening of a Groundwater Adaptive Management group within a regulatory setting

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involves both Oregon Water Resources Department responsibilities, community responsibilities, and a working relationship between the department and the community. Our adaptive management proposal is based on the current iteration of a groundwater management approach discussed in the Division 512 Rules Advisory Committee as presented by the water resources department. The community role is envisioned as a means to review both the voluntary groundwater use reduction actions and impact mitigation activities. It is also envisioned that there would be a convening of a community partners group focused on both regulatory implementation and voluntary actions on an annual basis. This approach would require an ongoing water resources department engagement with a community-based group in the implementation of the Harney Community-based Groundwater Plan and the 512 Rules. The resources requested by both High Desert Partnership and Harney County Watershed Council will produce the following benefits:

- Maintain an ongoing community conversation around adaptive management with the water resources department.
- A pathway for data collection and data summary for the group to make informed decisions around groundwater management.
- A methodology to support partners who are assisting irrigators in voluntarily reducing groundwater use.
- Aid exempt well users affected by declining groundwater levels.
- Monitoring to conserve and enhance groundwater dependent ecosystems.
- Monitoring and overseeing economic transition efforts, including working with other state agencies such as Business Oregon.
- Prioritizing projects, leveraging funding and ensuring projects approved for implementation are completed.
- Support efforts across the basin to reduce groundwater use.

We appreciate your consideration in the continued investment in place-based planning for all of these communities who work to be part of the solution.

Sincerely,

Brenda Smith

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Director, High Desert Partnership

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