

House Committee on Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources, and Water

TESTIMONY
March 26, 2025

Support HB 3800 – Balanced Approach for Saving Harney Basin Groundwater

My name is Andy Root, I am an irrigator and landowner in Harney County. The timber industry brought my family to this county over 60 years ago and agriculture has allowed us to stay here. My wife and I have raised our seven children on our family farm and are blessed to employ a few of those children as well as some of our 14 grandchildren, the ones that are old enough to reach the tractor pedals. This farm is our home. This farm has paid for 4 bachelor's degrees, 3 masters' degrees, and trade schools. It provides employment for 40 families in our community. It provides summer jobs to teenagers. It sponsors local sports teams, our county fair, meals at the senior center and fundraising benefits as families in our community have faced hardships. We have worked hard and invested everything we have into this place we call home. And for what?

The Water Resource Department is proposing to take it all away...to cut off our water and devalue our land. And they are doing this despite the fact that we have the same goal - groundwater stability. We know we have a groundwater problem in Harney County, as producers we NEED water to grow crops and raise cattle. Our goal is to make our farm a multigenerational operation that can be passed down to our grandchildren and their grandchildren. We need groundwater stability to make that happen.

However, the Water Resources Department's approach to fix these problems would put half the county into bankruptcy. Once we start to lose farms (which we will with the Department's approach), we lose the local equipment dealer and farm store, we then lose restaurants and teachers, and so on, until our community is just gone. We have seen this happen once already when the State changed their forest management policies and as a result, Harney County lost hundreds of jobs and cratered our local economy. Today, our economy depends on our water and agriculture which now hang in the balance with OWRD's rulemaking.

Based on the recent proposals, the State is proposing to cut water usage back so far that it will send farms into bankruptcy and knock out our economies remaining leg of the economic stool. There are other options – community driven options – that can reduce water use, stabilize our groundwater resource, and mitigate impacts to our local economy. To strike that balance, we believe the legislature needs to engage.

The groundwater depletion challenges in Harney County have developed over decades, made worse in recent years by severe droughts. Expecting this complex issue to be resolved over a short period, without considering equitable solutions, is impractical and counterproductive. Other Western states are implementing gradual, collaborative reductions to water usage, ensuring that communities can adapt without catastrophic economic consequences.

My wife and I started our venture into alfalfa and cattle production in 1986. We have reported water usage to the Department for the past 39 years. The Department has known

that there were wells triggering permit conditions for the past 15+ years. Yet, the department continued to issue water rights. They knew this was a problem and chose to do nothing about it. Instead, they overallocated water in the basin and now, after we as landowners have made these tremendous investments they want to change the rules. I don't want to assume everyone on the committee knows the ins and outs of irrigation infrastructure. But it is not a cheap endeavor. It would be like buying a lot that was zoned for commercial use. Going through the proper channels to get building and business permits. Investing everything you had into a commercial building. Setting up your business and planning to use the profits to pay off the debt and then the city telling you, we changed our minds, you can't actually use that for a commercial business, and we are going to change the zoning so you have no resale value either. Where exactly does the State's accountability lie? These farms are our investments. We don't have pension funds and retirement plans.

To make matters worse, the county is already reeling from 205,000+ acres lost to wildfires last summer. The losses due to wildfires will affect our grazing rights for a minimum of three years, dramatically affecting our cattle operation. Our irrigation operation is facing nearly a 50% loss of water, between reductions proposed during the rulemaking meetings and the enforcement of permit conditions just rolled out by the Department in January of this year. We sell hay all over the world, from local Dairy Farms in Oregon and Washington to overseas buyers in Korea and China. This overreach of the department will not only disrupt irrigation and crop production but will have cascading effects on many local and even international businesses, including power companies, equipment suppliers, and agricultural support services. Our company alone will have to lay off a minimum of 15 employees. Many of our neighbors, who have mortgaged their properties to build irrigation infrastructure they will likely have to stop using altogether, will lose everything. And the agricultural lenders, who relied on the Water Resources Department issuing permits to the farms they were lending to, will lose too – sending ripple effects across these specialized, and sometimes rather small, farm lenders. Rather than imposing abrupt and inequitable restrictions, we urge the Committee to explore alternative management strategies.

We feel strongly that Oregon has an opportunity to adopt a more balanced, logical, and long-term approach to water resource management—one that acknowledges past mistakes made by the Department, protects livelihoods, and ensures sustainability. We cannot dismantle prior appropriation, it is the bed rock of Oregon water law. We cannot pit neighbors against neighbors. We need to adopt a shared sacrifice approach where everyone wins. Where we can collectively survive, as a community. My family has lived in Harney County for five generations. We plead with the Committee to require that the Department take a different approach than its current proposed water management and enforcement policies so that we can salvage the sense of community we have left. Please listen to LOCAL stakeholders, not outside entities with endless funds and loud voices.

Thank you!

Andy Root