

**Upper Grande Ronde River Watershed Partnership
Place-Based Integrated Water Resources Planning
Quarterly Implementation Meeting
June 7, 2023; 4:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m.
Conference Call/Misener Room**

ATTENDANCE

Alexandria Scott (OWRD), Jim Webster (USWCD), Janna Stevens (ODF&W), Joe Lemanski (ODF&W), Lili Prah (OWRD) Kim Ogren (OWRD), Donna Beverage, Dana Kurtz, Jed Hassinger, Tim Wallender, Curt Howell

I. WELCOME

Introductions took place and a request to record the meeting was accepted. Minutes will continue to be posted on the County website.

II. ORGANIZATIONAL UPDATES

Alexandria thanked Donna for testifying at HB3163 hearings; an update will be provided at the next Partnership meeting indicating the direction of Place Based Planning. They are updating the IWR strategy; a public survey is available through June 15 and the last of seven in-person regional conversations is June 8 in Ontario. Updates from that feedback will be provided to OWRD mid-summer, with outcomes to follow in the fall. OWRD Water Projects Grants and Loans Program public comment opportunity ends July 25.

Donna shared that the Eastern Oregon Women's Coalition is hosting its Economic Summit in Union County on August 3 & 4; it has been in Umatilla County the last few years, attended by a couple hundred people including county commissioners, state legislators and the Governor. Participants choose from four options; a water tour is offered this year with stops at Buffalo Peak Golf Course, Cove Hydro Plant, Bird Track Springs, and possibly a location where flooding often occurs. Dana will distribute registration information via email.

III. STRATEGY GROUP UPDATES/ACTION ITEMS

a. Project Management

- i. The original OWRD Place-Based Planning grant has been completed. OWRD sent the \$250,000 ARPA Grant to the Board of Commissioners for review and potential approval, which would be used as follows:

Task 1 – Continuation of IWR planning and plan implementation coordination

Task 2 – Hydrologic Study Support

Task 3 – Catherine Creek Aquifer Capacity Preliminary Analysis

Task 4 – Re-establishment of Flow Gauge on Lookingglass Creek

Discussion comments

- ARPA grant funding excluded bridges impacted by flooding
- Upgrading culverts on approaches is one idea to mitigate bottlenecks and bridge damage/flooding
- Above ground storage did not fit criteria for other ARPA funding at the County
- Water quality testing should include pharmaceutical levels and impacts to fish and wildlife
- There was no indication of high level of pharmaceuticals, therefore not included in testing
- Pharmaceutical testing is specialized, nonstandard, experimental, and not required for cities
- One thought is that pharmaceutical testing should be easy because of urinalysis drug testing availability; the other thought is that comparing water quality testing to urinalysis drug testing is not a fair comparison because of the water to pollution ratio compared to a water basin test
- Continued reservations about underground storage water quality and monitoring because livestock won't even drink it

ii. Other Grants

Dana is forwarding grants as she receives them. Alexandria reported upcoming fall solicitation for OWEB grants.

iii. Legislative Update

Donna said that Place-Based Planning for other groups is high priority and it looks like the funding will go through, most likely funded by the Joint Committee on Ways and Means. Kim shared that HB3124 and HB2010 are ones to watch that include the drought package.

b. Outreach

- i. June 27: Union County Crops and Conservation Tour
- ii. August 3: Eastern Oregon Women's Coalition Economic Summit
- iii. Potential tour of Cove Hydroplant

c. Municipal

Goal is to meet this quarter. Dana suggested asking the Mayors group if they have water-related needs that this group could support.

d. Administrative

Goal is to meet next quarter.

e. Infrastructure

- i. BOR hydraulic study update

Jim reported that Rob made a lot of gains in developing an existing conditions model for the valley. Their tour of road and culvert crossings included Catherine Creek, Wilkerson Lane to confluence at Alicel Lane and downstream to Rhinehart Gap, and the upper boundary on the Grande Ronde to the upper freeway exit at La Grande. This helped Rob see pinch point locations and how they might affect bridges; his modeling is specific to each bridge and looks at water height and velocity. Jim said they could provide an update with maps at the December meeting. Tim asked about potential dredging; Dana said that they are currently focusing on existing conditions, which will be followed by modeling various scenarios, and then considering potential solutions, which could include dredging.

f. Public Land

- i. Field Trip update

Dana reported that the group observed an early restoration site at McCoy Meadows, illustrating how restoration ideas have changed over the years. They observed ground water monitoring wells and positive effects of ground water at Birdtrack Springs; this site has survived a lot of high water events. They observed exposed wood and engineered log dams at Longley Meadows; it is a newer site and they are interested to see how it performs for higher water events, re-meandering that river and straightening out the water. Most of the field trip's focus was on these restoration sites' groundwater impacts, how they could be complemented by natural storage and potentially used to store ground water.

Curt reported observing water cutting the channel and taking out habitat at Birdtrack Springs, which the BOR representative acknowledged was not good. Water control upstream is needed for fish habitat restoration, but it seems to be out of the picture. There was a clear indication that there are still a lot of problems with spring runoff. Joe acknowledged that it might look like destruction of habitat, but it is actually very beneficial. He explained that a lot of habitat restoration work is to reinitiate a dynamic system where over time the habitat turns itself over because creating a static system deteriorates fish habitat. This was more from an engineering perspective in the sense of trying to improve floodplain connectivity - slowing water down and letting it percolate into groundwater systems to attenuate that flood pulse.

g. Habitat

i. OWEB SAP development

This group's work on the OWEB Strategic Action Plan has started and will not compete with GRMW's work as this group will focus on flood mitigation/habitat improvement while GRMW pursues OWEB funding for improvements in the higher priority areas of our basin. The intention is to use this SAP to gain funding from other sources to look at improvements to the more degraded habitats. The focus was determined by the only strategic area that qualified this group for funding, which is native fish, and will include:

- Some of the more degraded habitat
- Levee areas and setbacks for creation of fish habitat
- Flooding and water retention issues to create a more natural system
- Prioritizing floodplain connectivity, using the hydraulic study for suitable restoration sites

h. Data

i. Instream Demand Calculation

A meeting was held to update demand calculations. The focus will be on Subwatersheds 7, 8, 4, 5 to determine which reaches do not have flow targets developed from the BOR; for other reaches, gauge data or modeled data will be used to develop a flow target and update tables in the plan.

ii. IFIM study update – Catherine Creek and Grande Ronde

Data collection is complete and the report is in process; the first field visit at Grande Ronde has been done and they're in the data analysis phase for Catherine Creek.

i. Agricultural Land

i. Locally led voluntary floodplain easement concept

Dana shared that it is suspected that many people in our area are not participating in federal and state setback programs because of additional approval conditions. Nick Vora and Mike Burton are interested in a locally led voluntary setback program using some BOR modeling data, which could allow for less stringent conditions and would better support farming. This group could potentially help with funding. Although this is not quite ready to move forward, it remains important to connect the strategies to the OWEB plan. Topic tabled until information is available from Nick and Mike.

ii. Frequently flooded areas – potential tour?

Donna supported the idea of touring potential flooding sites. Curt explained that there needs to be a balance of conversations about restorative projects upstream with what's needed to mitigate issues downstream. Standing water in ag lands impacts landowners' ability to make money and they still have to pay taxes and maintain the property. Spending money to fix the resulting problems is the wrong kind of economic development. The county has skin in the game because flooding on county roads that results in repairs and work like clearing debris. Tim added that impacts to infrastructure and agriculture was documented in drone footage and, without good road infrastructure, you're not going to have tourists. Jed suggested adding to the tour a presentation of BOR modeling and the potential of the flood easement project. Curt wondered if the road department would provide costs it has incurred to fix washed out roads, hauling rock, and labor spent to drive trucks and graders. Donna said that Union County has joined other counties in sending a letter to FEMA opposing their flood damage repair policies because they are trying to restrict filling anything, even raising roads one inch; telling counties they cannot bring in fill to repair washed out roads is overreach.

j. Built Storage

i. OWRD White Paper about Storage Requirements

Kim and Lili presented information about the development of OWRD's white paper. State agencies, including Oregon Water Resources Department, Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife, Department of Environmental Quality, Department of State Lands, Oregon Health Authority and Oregon Department of Agriculture, have been developing a white paper laying out the pathway and necessary considerations for groups like this one to plan water storage. The document includes written documents from Oregon Statutes specific to water storage policies, the Oregon's Integrated Water Resource Strategy, the Place-Based Integrated Water Resource Planning Guidelines, and work completed by this UGRR Partnership, as well as presentations from National Marine Fisheries Services, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, Oregon Water Resources Department, and Department of Agriculture. A Kaizen meeting with state and federal agencies was organized by DEQ, and feedback was sought from agencies and Dana.

The intended result is a thorough and consolidated document with information and expertise from all agencies providing a clear and transparent review of agency processes and durations involved in planning water storage; it will not focus on any particular area of the state; provides background review of storage policy and available water storage type descriptions; and outlines administrative and permitting framework to consider before exploring challenges and opportunities. It joins new information with previously existing information that was scattered over various agency websites. It is not a new water permit guide, because those are already existing, but more like a place pointing groups to those existing guidebooks and different permitting processes. Knowing that it would be helpful for groups to have federal regulations incorporated into the document, they are wrestling with how to do that because the roadmap and legal landscape is always evolving and it's already a pretty big task just trying to get a handle on the state side. Work is still needed on the section that talks about where groups can look for opportunities to be successful, not specific locations but more like places that are better for underground storage at a high level.

Lili stated that since the final document is not expected until late 2023/early 2024, an interim document with a high level review of storage permitting and water storage policy background could be provided to this group sooner but it would delay the final document. She asked the group if the interim document would be helpful, or if it would prefer to wait for the completed document.

Dana thought that the white paper was a great idea and was glad the agencies were asking for feedback. She thought that the interim document would be more helpful for planning future studies and work and, that since the feasibility study has been extended to the end of 2024, this group could wait for the complete document. There was consensus that the interim paper would not be of much use to this group at this stage because agency policies and procedures could change before the final document is released. Dana liked that the document would provide all the information in one place that groups need before starting the planning process, with hopes of a complementary federal addendum later on.

Tim pointed out that this Place-Based pilot program started seven years ago and was presented as a locally led process but now there are a lot of new faces and agencies involved. Local people know the best use of the natural resources. Dana said that since we don't always know how to get to the goals we want, it's helpful to have help from agencies because they have expertise that some local staff do not have. Tim understood and appreciated access to resources, but said he does not necessarily appreciate the control measures, barriers, and obstacles that come up when they want to implement things for improvements to see if there is a better outcome for all of the people in wildlife. He has been paying attention to things around here for 40 years - things that have been tried over that time have not necessarily resulted in improved specific wildlife needs. Certain things are being overrun with other things we don't have enough of; whether that is an agency management problem or a local problem, that's another conversation. We need to look at what has not worked and what could work that has not been tried.

Joe reminded the group that agencies are seeking its feedback and improvement suggestions, which could potentially help implementation of future projects by this group and other groups. He acknowledged frustration from landowners who are seeing the impacts, adding that everybody is trying to work to find a workable solution when there is no one-size-fits-all solution. There is a need for everyone to be creative, collaborative, and willing to sacrifice as well as the 'look out for our own' mentality. This is the opportunity for everybody to provide their perspective on how this could be better perfected, not just for the individuals in the room, but also for those in the future. Kim reiterated that everyone wants to figure out how to navigate this phase; there is value in noting storage opportunities, as well as considering barriers when processing applications. She noted the importance of including positive feedback about opportunities and marrying them with some of the challenges that storage projects face.

Curt suggested that the agency provide regular updates about the progress of the white paper. Dana said that it would be helpful to streamline inefficient processes, such as a joint application for multiple agencies. The DSL and Army Corp of Engineers have a great example where they collect different information on one single form, making it easier for the applicant. That could address some frustration that comes with a lot of permitting, funding, and resource challenges. Donna stated that she appreciates working with the agencies and that they care about local perspective and having locals on board. She appreciates that agencies are listening and everybody will work together to be successful in some of the opportunities locals want to do.

Kim appreciated the group's understanding of a delayed timeline in developing the white paper.

- ii. Update on flow calculations for top four sites
- iii. Kaizen Meeting Summary March 15

Dana thought the Kaizen meeting was really helpful. Compared to others she has attended in the past for specific projects, this was at a much higher level and more informational with ideas to consider like mitigation options, the 401 process, and addressing the group's unfinished/unevaluated questions, such as quantifying the benefit to fish during the low flow periods, and talking about temperature studies. In the future, a meeting with more agencies and a more detailed proposal could be really helpful guiding future projects as they are narrowed down.

IV. CONCLUSION

- a. Next Quarterly meetings tentatively scheduled for September 6 & December 6, 2023, Misener Room, 4:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m.

The meeting adjourned at 5:56 p.m.