

## Place-Based Planning: A consensus based approach to water resources management in Union County

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In 2012, the Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD), with the assistance of multiple state agencies, developed the Integrated Water Resources Strategy (IWRs) for the state. The IWRs is a living document that provides a framework to both understand and seek solutions to meet instream and out-of-stream needs relating to water quantity and quality.

This framework contains multiple recommended actions, and one action calls for funding and support for locally led place-based planning to help communities develop plans to meet instream needs for fish and other aquatic life as well as out-of-stream needs, including agricultural requirements, municipal water supplies, and industrial processes. The goal is for communities to work through current water issues and plan to mitigate future ones. The reason for emphasis on this recommended action is that each community in Oregon has unique water challenges that are anticipated to increase in the future.

In 2015, based on the recommendations from the IWRs, the Oregon legislature appropriated resources to OWRD to implement the place-based planning recommended action. OWRD solicited letters of interest across the state and received 16 applications to participate in a multi-year pilot planning effort. Four groups received grants: the John Day Partnership in the Lower John Day Subbasin, Union County in the Upper Grande Ronde River Watershed, the Harney County Watershed Council in the Malheur Lake Basin, and the City of Newport in the Mid-Coast Basin.



Figure 1. Place-Based Planning Pilot Areas (source: OWRD)

Union County was one of two groups that received full funding for the pilot phase. Union County's boundary generally aligns with watershed boundary of the Upper Grande Ronde River Watershed

(including waterbodies such as the Grande Ronde River and Catherine Creek). The Upper Grande Ronde River Watershed is a vital ecosystem that supports ranchers, farmers, residents, tribal interests, and an array of fish and wildlife species. Water supply shortages for instream and out-of-stream uses currently exist in this watershed and may be intensified by climate change and increases in future demand.



*Figure 2. Upper Grande Ronde River Watershed Planning Area (source: Upper Grande Ronde River Watershed Partnership)*

The Upper Grande Ronde River Watershed Partnership has been formed and is working to complete the tasks associated with the planning guidelines.

The place-based planning process is composed of five steps that each pilot planning group is to complete over two years (however, all groups have requested an extension). These steps include important efforts such as forming a partnership, assessing water supply, determining water demand, seeking solutions, and finalizing an action plan. Potential solutions may include water storage, aquifer recharge, and stream flow augmentation to improve water temperature, among others. Place-based integrated water resources plans can provide a roadmap to gather the support and resources needed to implement local solutions.

After working together for approximately a year and a half, under the leadership of Union County Commissioner Donna Beverage and Union County Planning Director Scott Hartell, the Partnership has completed several project milestones including developing an outreach plan, work plans, and a water supply assessment, and is now in the process of completing a water supply and demand analysis. Once this water balance is completed, the group will work to develop solutions and create an action plan to implement the ideas that are approved by the group. One of the most important documents developed by the Partnership is the governance agreement – this document outlines the rules of engagement for members of the group, including how to deal with disagreements, requirements for being a voting member of the group, and guidance for participation.



*Figure 3. Upper Grande Ronde River Watershed Partnership Logo (Source: Upper Grande Ronde River Watershed Partnership)*

A unique component of the planning process is that all decisions are made through consensus. The Partnership received training in December from Oregon Consensus related to this concept, learning about the importance of listening to all points of view and working to ensure everyone was truly in agreement with the decisions being made.

The planning process has gone relatively smoothly; however, concerns about specific water issues have arisen in meetings and are indicators that these difficult resource issues will require broadly supported solutions.

The Partnership is composed of city representatives, members of the agricultural and ranching communities, fish and wildlife agency representatives, other government agency representatives, non-governmental organizations, and tribal organizations.

With between 20 and 40 people attending each Partnership meeting, and over 20 organizations operating as signatories to the governance agreement's memorandum of understanding, the need for inclusive participation is great. Commissioner Beverage stated, "I am excited that this project is being done by and for the local community." To encourage diverse participation, Commissioner Beverage convenes meetings to accomplish different tasks. Currently, in addition to stakeholder meetings (which include all Partnership members), there is also a technical committee that reviews scientific components of the planning process, a steering committee that reviews overall planning direction and strategy, and four demand working groups (agriculture, municipal, ecological, and natural hazards) that are currently completing the demand analysis. Mike Burton of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (and a member of the agriculture work group) stated, "NRCS has been happy to provide technical resources and information on the existing irrigation systems and efficiency for this community-based effort. It has been great to work as a team in this effort with other state, federal, and tribal representatives under the direction of local community members and representatives. We are hopeful that efforts such as this

community planning process will lead to even more landowners improving the efficient use of our water and energy resources for all beneficial uses in the Grande Ronde Valley.”

These demand groups meet regularly to analyze information and have opportunities to educate all participants on different facets of demand projections. The public is invited to attend all meetings, and members of the Partnership volunteer their time to complete project tasks. Participation is tracked and accounts for a portion of the required funding match of 25 percent of the grant value. Meetings typically include presentations, time for feedback and guidance on the next steps in the process, and small group work sessions. In addition to meetings, outreach events, including radio interviews, newspaper articles, and a field trip to learn about agricultural, ecological, and municipal demand, are used to encourage participation from different people and groups.



*Figures 4 and 5. Upper Grande Ronde River Watershed Partnership Field Trip (Source: Upper Grande Ronde River Watershed Partnership)*

So far, one of the outcomes of the technical side of the planning process has been increased awareness of how much we do not know about the resources and systems in our watershed. These “data gaps” have been identified in many critical information sources used for planning, including lack of information about the volume of groundwater in the basin, the sustainability of groundwater pumping, water quality parameters, surface water flows/calculated consumption of surface water, and actual water use of various water users.

When asked what their ideal outcomes were, stakeholders were unsurprisingly diverse. But, surprisingly, there was a widespread atmosphere of compromise – even among conflicting interests. According to Jeff Oveson of the Grande Ronde Model Watershed, “I initially was of the impression that the process was designed with a pre-determined outcome in mind, the outcome being that we need to build a reservoir in Union County.” Over time, Oveson reports that he saw cooperation among conflicting interests and values, and “the understanding that we cannot successfully address any of those interests or values without addressing all of them.”

Margaret Matter, a water resource specialist and water resources program lead from the Oregon Department of Agriculture stated, “My first impression was uncertainty although I chose to be

optimistic. Today, I am very optimistic, confident that the community will be successful, and although there is still some uncertainty, it is not as significant. It is good to periodically take account of the process. One thing it does is that I realized how far we've come in the process." She also is impressed that, "the community is interested, actively involved, and is a major driving force in the process."

Moving forward, the Partnership intends to continue its dedication to understanding water needs in our community. When this planning project is completed and the local integrated water resources plan is developed, the Partnership is hopeful that additional funding from OWRD and other sources will allow for these improvement projects to be implemented.

Interested in learning more? Join us! Place-Based Planning meetings are generally held monthly and are a great way to help shape the Upper Grande Ronde Watershed's water future. For more information on the Upper Grande Ronde River Watershed planning effort, please contact Scott Hartell, Union County Planning Director, (541) 963-1014, [shartell@union-county.org](mailto:shartell@union-county.org) or visit <http://union-county.org/planning/place-based-integrated-water-resources-planning/> to read project documents, meeting minutes, and reports.