

EAST OREGONIAN

Grover: Eastern Oregon is running out of water

By Dorys C. Grover

Published on September 9, 2016 2:03PM

Water, one day, may be the drink of choice.

We will be thirsty.

One day we may find our high groundwater extraction has caused our aquifers to run out of water. There may come a day when our government will designate the amount of water that will be available to us due to a critical water shortage.

If we look at who is responsible for our water usage, we need to look directly at lawmakers, the Legislature, which has resisted limiting groundwater pumping because of political and public rejection. Our aquifers are running out of water because Oregon has and is giving away its underground water supply to large city populations, farmers and livestock owners. There is a critical need to curb new construction of irrigation wells.

We were warned in the 1980s, by the Oregon Water Resources Department, that farming dry land using well water had lowered the Umatilla Basin's water table dozens of feet in some areas. In other recent studies scientists have found that rivers and lakes are interconnected with underground water and a well can threaten nearby streams.

As a farmer, I can verify this. I live on Tutuilla Creek and used its water to irrigate six acres for two months each summer. This worked until about 1985 when Tutuilla Creek went dry.

I believe the drilling of several wells in my immediate area caused the creek to go dry. When it did, I began irrigating by pumping well water. From the 1920s through the 1970s, Tutuilla Creek, which runs through my land, had enough water for cattle, and ponds to swim and fish in.

This proved to me that we had to replace the groundwater for the creek to flow again, so I began limiting well water usage in the hope of bringing back surface water. So far it has not worked, which means the water table has lowered. I know this because my well was once artesian, but is no longer.

It seems obvious to me we must stop new well construction because we know the aquifers are being lowered and we don't know how much underground water we have left.

Local farmers and ranchers in most of Oregon's eastern counties have profited from irrigation. Driving across the state one can view great irrigation equipment providing water to the land. Scientists say pumping in these areas has lowered the water table and weakened surface springs. One can no longer drill a well and expect to protect surface water.

East Oregonian: Cont'd

I read somewhere that ranchers fear bureaucratic regulation more than they do about their wells going dry.

As a farmer, curtailment of my water usage has affected my lifestyle, but I realize the importance of just having enough drinking water is reason enough for us to conserve underground water and stop issuing well permits. The depletion of Oregon's aquifers is due mainly to extensive irrigation, but most farmers lack any financial incentive to change because water has been and is free.

Irrigators have protested any change in water usage, particularly in drought-ridden agricultural regions but Oregon's leading resource issue is climate change. Most farmers rely on well water because they have few or no other options. Their water usage is based on an honor system that they will not pump more water than permitted.

There is no doubt that restricting well permits and underground water pumping will create economic upheaval because water regulators face enormous public and political pressure.

Many times the Oregon Water Resources Department's attempts to limit groundwater use have ended in physical threats, Legislature maneuvers to thwart regulations, and failed lawsuits.

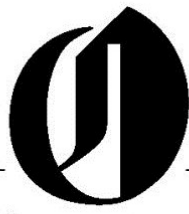
Most of us do not realize how overuse of Oregon's groundwater harms people, plants and animals, especially fish and wildlife.

Today, Oregon's legislators have the water usage issue under study hoping to generate funds to determine the extent of underground water available. We don't have five, let alone 50, years to determine this issue. Lawmakers need to have a solution by the 2017 legislative session.

It is obvious Oregon needs better water management. We are running out of water.

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The Oregonian OREGONLIVE
OREGONIAN MEDIA GROUP

Draining Oregon: State regulators must stop approving wells when water levels are unknown

By [The Oregonian Editorial Board](#)

September 10, 2016 at 10:00 AM

State regulators approve permits for wells in Oregon even as they suspect there isn't enough water in some areas to keep pace.

A permit application might state it "cannot be determined" whether enough ground water existed for the well. Yet time and again, Oregon Water Resources Department managers approved the application.

The lax regulatory culture is so engrained, some farmers and ranchers began pumping their wells before submitting an application.

The Oregonian/OregonLive reporters Kelly House and Mark Graves detailed the galling practice in a recent four-part series "Draining Oregon."

They showed how the department failed to measure and protect the resource it was tasked to manage and in turn, potentially put fish, animals and the communities that rely on the water at risk. As it stands – and whether or not it's sustainable – the state has approved farmers and ranchers to drain nearly 1 trillion gallons of Oregon's underground reserves annually.

The practice of approving wells in untested basins must stop. And state lawmakers must act quickly to focus on the crisis they've failed to address for years.

House, who has since left The Oregonian/OregonLive, reported how department managers for years ignored warnings by their own hydrogeologists. She found that Water Resource leaders had caved to pressure from lawmakers and interest groups.

The pressure is understandable and so great that in 2013, then-Gov. John Kitzhaber backed away from a solid plan to create a stable funding source for the department with fees on those holding water rights.

Department leaders defend their actions by saying they didn't have the money or staff to do the research necessary to determine whether they should deny permits and defend their decisions. And yet they once offered up the small amount of research money they had for a potential budget cut.

The practice of approving wells in untested basins must stop.

More than a dozen Oregon basins remain a mystery, and research must be done as soon as possible to determine their water levels. Oregonians need to know how much water is available to make responsible decisions about how to tap the aquifers deep underground.

Many environmental emergencies are amorphous and need global attention. The need for water is among them. Yet this small piece of the problem is not so complicated.

The Water Resources Department estimates that between \$45 million and \$75 million is needed to complete the necessary research.



The practice of approving wells in untested basins must stop.

House reported that a \$100 annual fee on all water-rights holders along with federal matching money and some new employees could pay for the job that could be completed within five years.

At the department's current pace, the research wouldn't be done until 2096.

Lawmakers, who have scheduled a September hearing on the issue, must require the scientific reviews and lock in a funding mechanism to make it happen. They'll likely face pushback on ideas involving fees for water-rights holders. But as long as fees remain minimal, it's a small price to pay to protect their own interest in those potentially stressed basins.

Lawmakers also should look north and consider setting higher standards for well approvals. Washington doesn't allow a new well if it would cause any harm to a stream that's already hurting for water, House wrote. Oregon's standard is when harm to streams would be "substantial."

What's most frustrating about this situation is how many of those likely to be affected are farming and ranching communities that have faced declining economies for years – often, they feel, because of government regulation.

Some of that regulation was necessary to protect some lands and various species.

But the Water Resources Department's reluctance to regulate may have set up a situation in which some of the unmapped basins may already be dangerously low and water rights might have to be rescinded.

Lawmakers must launch serious work on the issue in September with the goal to accelerate the pace of basin research that can provide more clarity to all. If not, the anger and distrust that already divides our state is likely to deepen among those Oregonians who have built their lives on the land.

The Register-Guard

Water, water everywhere

But Oregon's aquifers are being drained

[EDITORIAL](#)

SEPT. 14, 2016

A recent report by The (Portland) Oregonian about the massive amount of water being pumped from Oregon's underground reservoirs, much of it for agricultural uses in Eastern Oregon, with little oversight or control, should set off enough alarm bells to wake the dead.

Once upon a time, the idea of taking deserts and dry landscapes and turning them into productive agricultural land was seen as a triumph of man over nature.

Through ingenuity, hard work and technological advances these useless areas could become useful, creating jobs and wealth, providing food and other crops, the thinking went. And the main resource needed to do this — water — was there for the taking, stored in underground aquifers.

Over time, in large part thanks to a strong environmental movement, there has been an increased awareness of how the different types of landscapes fit into a larger ecosystem, each fulfilling a role. And there has been increased awareness that resources are not infinite.

But this hasn't yet translated into a comprehensive plan for managing the different ecosystems within Oregon for the long-term protection and use of one of the state's most precious resources, water.

Farmers are still allowed to pump vast quantities of water from Oregon's aquifers — up to almost 1 trillion gallons per year — with no apparent recognition that as more and more water was being pumped out of the ground to supply households and irrigate farmland — by far the largest use — it was not being replaced by an equal amount of rain and snow melt.

Not only that, there is no enforcement mechanism for what limits there are on water usage, as determined by approved water rights.

The Register-Guard: Cont'd

Instead, the state has generally stepped in only when there has been a significant and obvious drop in an aquifer, sometimes slashing water users' allowances. This system, if indeed it can be called a system, is a recipe for disaster.

Not only does Oregon have no plan for how it will meet future water demand, it has no good data on current supplies, let alone projections of supply and demand. This type of information is desperately needed before the state's Water Resources Department can even begin to map out the scope of this issue and start planning for the future. Fees can and should be assessed on current holders of water rights if there are insufficient funds in the state budget to pay for this.

This issue is far too important to Oregon's future to allow it to be ignored, or to become a political football.

Water is one of the state's most critical resources, necessary to life itself. It is shameful that the state's leaders have not dealt with these concerns before, planning for the future. Let's not wait until we are in a crisis.

EAST OREGONIAN

Letter: Eastern Oregon must protect water resources

By **Walter Powell**

Published on September 21, 2016

As I read through the “Draining Oregon” articles in the Oregonian my thoughts returned to a quote in the New York Times from Thayliah Henry-Suppah, as well as a past comment from Alma Campbell, a Gilliam County rancher.

“Treat the earth well. It was not given to you by your parents. It was loaned to you by your children.”

“I will pass this land on in better shape than when I received it; and my parents left it in good condition.”

As a producer, and past Gilliam SWCD chairman, I read the Oregonian articles with interest, and in entirety. What is my take, and what would be my ask?

The job of restoring and retaining watershed function (soil health/groundwater, etc.) in Eastern Oregon is not yet complete. Having worked in this arena for the last two decades, this is not a surprise. This effort is an ongoing, forever adjustment to how we look at the land and water resource.

- A 1938 SCS study from Gilliam County showed 25 percent of the croplands had already lost 75 percent of the topsoil through erosion (wind/rain). Producers have shifted toward conservation tillage/direct seeding; and much work remains.
- As critical water issues developed in the Hermiston/Boardman area, producers moved toward reporting use, managing statics, working to get off of the wells; and much work remains.
- The challenge faced in restoring riparian vegetation to Eastern Oregon streams was significant; and yet the CREP program has returned vegetation to many streams, as discussed with Fifteen Mile Creek; and much work remains.

This was never a long weekend project, and nothing will be gained by focusing blame on any one party, agency, senator, irrigator, etc.

- It is time to bring funding for groundwater research in line with that available for addressing upland and riparian issues.
- It is time to accept that funding for this research will be borne, to an extent, by those benefiting from the resource.
- It is time to prepare for meters on all wells, as well as usage reports.

Balancing of the resource will require these steps; and likely others as well. The alternatives to taking these steps, as shown in the Harney County example; can be far worse.

My ask: The resources being discussed are held in common by all of us, and should be managed in common, balancing the economic needs of our rural communities with those of the resource.

Walter Powell of Condon, OR

Baker City Herald

Short on aquifer information

EDITORIAL

Published Sep 21, 2016

When you irrigate fields and pastures from a reservoir or a stream, it's easy to tell when you're running short on water.

You just have to look.

But the situation is nothing like as simple when it comes to some of Oregon's larger sources of water for irrigation and for drinking.

Because these reservoirs are underground.

Thousands of farmers statewide, including many in Baker County, depend on water from aquifers to nourish their crops.

Trouble is, as The Oregonian showed in a well-researched series of stories recently, we know little about how much water is in these hidden reservoirs.

The sketchy data that do exist suggest that in some places — again, including Baker County — irrigators are pumping more water from aquifers than is being replenished by rain and snow.

This unacceptable state of affairs requires action by the Oregon Legislature.

The Oregonian reported that based on the current rate of groundwater studies, the state won't finish its work until 2096. The excuse, as is typical with the government, is that there's not enough money to accelerate the work. The implication is that someone — farmers, cities, someone — isn't paying enough in taxes or fees.

We disagree.

We blame lawmakers for failing to write budgets that recognize how vital water is to agriculture, and moreover how integral agriculture is to Oregon's economy. Farm and ranch products grown here brought in \$5.4 billion last year.

We're not opposed to the state imposing a modest fee on farmers and ranchers who tap aquifers, to help raise money for studies that will show how rapidly we're depleting our aquifers.

But although agriculture is the thirstiest Oregon industry, accounting for about 80 percent of aquifer use, it's also an industry that supports hundreds of thousands of jobs. It would be unfair to put the entire financial burden of these studies on the water users themselves.

Ultimately the state of Oregon's aquifers should be a high priority for the Legislature.

As it stands, it's hardly a priority at all.