

## **Introduction: Dr. Alai Reyes-Santos**

Good morning Chair Helm, and Vice-Chairs Owens and Reardon, and members of the House Committee on Water,

Thank you for having us here today.

I thank all the ancestors who bring us together.

Greetings to the media outlets interested in sharing Oregon Water Futures project stories.

I am Alai Reyes-Santos, professor at University of Oregon. Glad to share findings from the Oregon Water Futures Project today.

From Clatsop to the Willamette Valley to Malheur and Umatilla, Native, Indigenous Latin American, Latinx, Black, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, Arab, and Somali community members spoke with us in 2020 about the public health and safety challenges they face daily.

Talking with them in phone interviews and online community gatherings I was both amazed and heartbroken.

Amazed at their resiliency and creativity in the face of water scarcity, fears about water quality, the pandemic, and the fires. How people come together to help one another.

Amazed at their desire to learn more about water management in Oregon and participate in water planning.

And heartbroken. Moved to tears by stories of people who do not have access to clean water to drink at home and at work, in mobile home parks, in farmworker housing; of unsafe wells and septic systems. By stories of farmworkers not having enough water in bathrooms during the pandemic, of people who do not know that boiling drinking water is not good when there are algae blooms, of people terrified during the fires with little information or resources to evacuate if needed.

Low income people all over Oregon buy bottled water and do not trust faucet water; some at times have to ration their water supplies:

As Javier, a farmworker in the Willamette Valley shared:

“The problem we have here is that the water is not drinkable. . . . It smells really bad, and the people don’t even think about drinking it. Even when you want to brush your teeth, we don’t want to do it with that water.”— PCUN

And Ekram, a Somali immigrant in Malheur County:

“The water, it's not good. Because sometimes you don't have money, you run really short (to buy bottled water). So you just try to do your best not to spend over your budget. One time . . .

I just ended up drinking the [tap] water. I ended up getting sick. So . . . I just go buy water, and then I end up not drinking enough water because I'm worried I'm going to spend more money.”  
— Euvalcree

Isn't it time for Salem to invest in these communities to ensure the health and sense of safety of all Oregonians?

Can we commit to invest in people of color leadership in community engagement and planning relevant to water?

Can we invest in the tribal and community-based organizations that offer accessible information, relief, and lifesaving aid during emergencies?

Can we commit to investing in wells, and septic, emergency notifications, and small water systems?

I think so because here we are listening to voices usually unheard in water policy circles, to our stories, our knowledge, and the solutions we bring to the table.

Thank you again for your time.

### **1. Rachel Cushman, Chinook Indian Nation**

Members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me to speak today.

Laxayam, Rachel Cushman nayka yakal. Nayka tilixam nsayka Chinook Indian Nation. Nsyaka Clatsop, Cathlamet, Wahkiakum, Willapa pi lower chinook.

For the record my name is Rachel Cushman. I am a Councilwoman of the Chinook Indian Nation, the five western-most Chinookan speaking tribes at the mouth of the Columbia River. I listed them in my introduction. My people are the Clatsop and Cathlamet of Oregon and the Wahkiakum, Willapa and Lower Chinook of the State of Washington. We are one nation straddling the Columbia River. I am a direct descendant of Clatsop Chief Wasilta (also known by his pen name as Washington). My grandfather was one of two negotiators and signers for the Clatsop Tribe of Chinooks at the Anson Dart Treaties at Tansy Point, OR in 1851. I am proud of that fact.

Federal Indian Policy is complicated and often convoluted, tumultuous and unjust. I would like to acknowledge the 9 Federally Recognized Tribes of Oregon. It is important to acknowledge sovereign governments and the Indigenous peoples of whose lands and waters you reside. The 9 tribes are extremely important, but they are not the only Tribes of Oregon. Folks like to think that the United States' relationship with Indian Country is stagnate, but it is not. I would like to remind members of this committee that it wasn't long ago that there were no federally acknowledged tribes in Western Oregon – termination era policies attempted to erase and eradicate many Tribes of Oregon. Restoration bills reinstated many of Oregon's Tribes, but not all. The Chinook Indian Nation has been fighting the United States government for nearly 170 year to honor our treaties at Tansy Point and provide justice to the Chinook Indian Nation. We continue to push for federal acknowledgement.

The point of this hearing isn't about federal acknowledgement. It about water justice issues. There can be no water justice if important players are left out of the conversations. The Chinook Indian Nation has worked with several of Oregon's Departments over the year in official government-to-government capacities, however consultations are not always prioritized by the State.

Engagement with Chinook and other BIPOC Communities needs to be prioritized. As indicated in the letter sent to your office on April 26, 2021, there are several actions that can be taken that will benefit both the Chinook Indian Nation and communities residing within our aboriginal territory, as well as throughout the state. I urge you to review the Oregon Water Futures report and invest in those opportunities.

Hayu masi. Thank you.

## **2. Haley Case-Scott, NAACP**

Good morning Chair Helm, and Vice-Chair Reardon, and members of the House Committee on Water,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on behalf of the Oregon Water futures project and its community findings. My name is Haley Case-Scott, and I am the climate justice grassroots organizer at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Eugene/Springfield Unit #1119, and co employed by Beyond Toxics. I live here in Springfield, OR with my family, and we are all enrolled members of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians.

The NAACP Eugene/Springfield was happy to support the Oregon Water Futures Project. We helped recruit community members to tell their water stories. (This included 20 participants from Portland and Eugene who were interviewed by phone in English and Spanish between October 26-31, 2020).

Throughout the interviews conducted by the project lead, common topics of concern that were identified included access to safe and affordable drinking water, education about water rights and conservation, and fears about emergency preparedness during natural disasters such as the wildfires that took place last summer.

A few participants in the study specifically noted that emergency preparedness was a key concern for them when talking about water. Education and community building were two solutions that were highlighted by participants as well. The OWF findings also make a mention of community and home gardens as a key solution in creating resilient and healthy communities.

The NAACP Eugene/Springfield manages two community gardens that are open to the public. Our gardens provide food for community members and resources to support food gardens at home. At our newly opened garden in North Eugene, our water bill ranges upwards to \$100 a

month, which is hard to manage for a community-run operation. We want to continue to find new spots to create gardens in the Springfield area but have to keep in mind that wherever we put the garden, it is necessary that the property have a 60 ft deep well (or deeper) to make sure we can afford to pay the bill.

This is only one example of the barriers communities face in our area in accessing clean, affordable, and sustainable drinking water.

### **Actions**

To increase access to water - I would like to thank the committee for supporting the creation of a water and sewer bill assistance fund for low-income households through HB 3089 - A.

I would like to ask the committee to consider the following actions to improve community resilience and access to clean, affordable, and safe drinking water.

1. Provide funding to Native American Tribes and Community Based Organizations to share information about utility bill assistance with BIPOC communities.
2. Update emergency notification systems to reach non-English speaking, low-income, tribal, and rural residents and businesses using funds from the Special Public Works fund.
3. Provide funding for BIPOC-led CBO capacity to engage community members who have not applied or had initial applications for relief rejected. (E.g., appropriate \$6.75M in fire recovery asks for drinking water systems and dedicate a portion to very small water systems and BIPOC residents).

Finally, I want to thank you and the members of the house committee on water for allowing me to speak on behalf of the NAACP Eugene/Springfield and in partnership with the Oregon Water Futures Project.

### **3. Jairaj Singh, Unite Oregon**

My name is Jairaj Singh, I am the Clackamas County Chapter Director at Unite Oregon. Unite Oregon is a social justice non-profit organization that is led by people of color, immigrants and refugees, rural communities, tenants, and people experiencing poverty - we work across Oregon to build a unified intercultural movement for justice. What Unite Oregon has been hearing from our communities over the past year in Clackamas County, during this pandemic, through our various virtual focus groups, listening sessions, one-on-one interviews, and online surveys, is a lack of confidence in our dominant culture systems - these include the systems that provide us and manage our water. There is confusion around water quality and water sources, and how to interpret water bills. Along with other basic resources, affordability is a concern and water rates are too expensive for the quality of water our communities feel they are receiving. The outreach and engagement Unite Oregon conducts does not only have the ability to build trust with our Immigrant and Refugee communities, but can also build knowledge and leadership by helping folks learn and navigate for ways to reduce costs - especially to reduce

their water costs. The solutions to the issue of mistrust and affordability can be addressed by continuing to center our frontline communities - who are being impacted first and worst - into these discussions and decision making spaces. This is why I'm speaking today, to emphasize the importance of investing in capacity for community-based organizations in order to continue to engage with historically and present day marginalized communities.