



House Interim Committee on Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources and Water Hearing 12-11-2024 2:30 pm - Informational Meeting

Update on Wet Meadow and Wetland Restoration in the Harney Basin, Brenda Smith, Director, Melissa Petschauer, Ecological Programs Coordinator, Chad Karges, Board Member, High Desert Partnership, Harney County Oregon

Introduction and Background

In 2022 we came to this committee with a request to invest in Harney County, specifically the lands in the basin that are considered one of the most significant sites on the Pacific Flyway in North America. These lands are where millions of migratory birds come to rest and refuel, using both land and water in all parts of the Harney Basin, with large concentrations converging on the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge which includes Malheur Lake within its boundaries. Outside of the refuge private ranch lands provide critical support for this important bird migration.

Traditional wet meadow flood irrigation practices that spread shallow water across the Harney Basin's hay meadows every spring create ideal conditions for migrating birds. These private working lands are one of the cornerstones of Harney County ranchlands supporting families and feeding the local economy. Harney Basin's wet meadow crumbling infrastructure and other forms of irrigation are making it increasingly difficult to sustain the traditional method of forage production through wild flood irrigation. Adding to the stress is increasing frequency of drought reducing available spring flows for flood irrigation. Changing snow accumulation patterns affect runoff timing and the duration and availability of water for irrigating meadows.



Bob Sallinger, most recently the founder of the Bird Conservation of Oregon, came before you in 2022 and we had made plans the week before he passed that he would be here today. Bob started working with High Desert Partnership even before we were an organization and was so articulate about what is at stake in Harney County. The quote below is from Bob and gives a sense of why Bob has worked in Harney County and with the High Desert Partnership for over 20 years.

"What I find oftentimes with these collaborative efforts is they open up a world of creativity. You know, when you're in your respective corners, you're defending your space, that leaves very little room for creativity. You know, basically, you're simply trying to win and when you can get to a place where there is real trust. And again, trust doesn't mean there's no disagreement. But when you're in a place of real trust, there's a transparency and you can really have discussions about things and be open, one you find that sometimes some of the issues that you thought were issues disappear, that there actually is common ground and pathways forward. And the other is that it opens up the opportunity to really sit down and be creative with one another and think about things that, you know, you might have never put on the table and that those often really do bear fruit. So, I mean, I think that's really part and parcel of this. You know, I think these things often are about relationships and building that trust. And I think that's a lot of what happened was we got to a place where we could really have very honest conversations and really tease out where the agreements and disagreements were, but also, that it has been oftentimes a difficult process, . . . But also I just feel very fortunate to have been involved. It's a really special place. It's a beautiful place. It's been a lot of fun being involved. Bob Sallinger

The work of the diverse partners of the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative have resulted in developing numerous projects to mitigate the effects of climate change



resulting in greater variability of water delivery to the basin bottom floodplains and lakes. It has also been recognized that the management of water resources is central to the maintenance and restoration opportunities for both floodplain wet meadows and Malheur Lake.

Progress Legislative Funded [Project Details](#) | [Funding Allocation](#)

House Bill 3222 provided \$2 million over the 2023-2025 biennium to support nationally recognized collaborative efforts to protect and restore wetlands on public and private lands in Harney County. The Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative has been recognized as among the most important bird conservation initiatives and one of the most innovative conservation collaboratives in the western United States.

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In the past year since the legislative allocation was received, High Desert Partnership and the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative have developed, implemented and have neared completion a total of 21 projects in the basin.

Collaborative Center Concept - High Desert Partnership is an Oasis of Collaboration in a Desert

Over the past twenty years Harney County has gained a national reputation as an epicenter of collaboration, such as what we have described above about the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative. Led by the High Desert Partnership, which was for formed in 2005 to bring people together to find common ground on some of the



regions most complex, difficult and divisive challenges, diverse groups of stakeholders, many of whom had never worked together before, have advanced initiatives related to wetlands, groundwater, fire management, economic development and opportunities in one of the state's most hard hit regions. Collaborative initiatives are too often viewed as short-term strategies to simply get people to agree on a path forward. However, for the type of challenging issues faced in Harney County, they must in fact, be viewed as long-term programs that need to be nurtured, adaptively managed, and socialized across generations. There must be resources to ensure that they can adapt to new information and changing circumstances, that there is opportunity to learn by trial and error, and most importantly, that the time and energy invested to bring together people with widely varying perspectives, is sustained over time.

Collaboration should never be taken for granted. Left untended, it will fall apart and stakeholders will return to their respective corners.

In 2025 we are proposing an expansion of our work called the Eastern Oregon Collaborative Center and this builds upon the cutting edge collaborative work that has been advanced in Harney County over the last twenty years. It will provide a permanent physical space to take this work to the next level and sustain it over time. It will create capacity to take on new issues. It will, in and of itself, help build the economic, social and environmental fabric of Harney County by creating a facility that will draw practitioners, subject matter experts, university classes, researchers and a vast array of stakeholders to Harney County.



The Center would include a facility with meeting space, office space and work space as well as staffing to manage the operation of the facility. Thee a physical location would provide:

Space and resources to support new and existing collaborative initiatives;

- A place for people and programs to come and learn about and/ or share collaborative strategies;
- Presentations by subject matter experts on topics related to regional issues of interest;
- A location for facilitators such as the Oregon Consensus, Oregon Solutions, Oregon Office of Community Dispute Resolution, etc., to work out of when facilitating local processes.
- It will establish a physical location in Eastern Oregon to house collaborative programs/ staff rather than the current need to import these resources from Western Oregon

If you want to learn more about the work in the Harney Basin and how the 2023 legislative funding has been put on the ground in the last year, check these additional Resources about the Harney Basin Wetlands and the work of the High Desert Partnership

[Legislative Bills Send \\$2.5 million to Harney Basin for Wet Meadow Restoration](#)

[Legislative Funded Projects Set to Improve Habitat and Surface Water Management in the Harney Basin](#)



[Helping the Water Flow](#)

[New Tool Helps Refuge Analyze Blitzen River](#)

[Harney Co. - Land Sky Water Soul](#) - a short film about Harney County

[High Desert Partnership 2024 in review](#) -