

SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

‘We’re not going away.’ EPA pressures Oregon to clean up groundwater pollution



By **Monica Samayoa** (OPB)

March 22, 2023 4:56 p.m.

The EPA can step in and require the state to clean up pollution under the Safe Drinking Water Act



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The Environmental Protection Agency’s regional administrator is warning Oregon government agencies that federal authorities will take action if the state doesn’t quickly address nitrate contamination cleanup in Eastern Oregon.

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EPA Region 10 Administrator Casey Sixkiller on Monday met with local nonprofit Oregon Rural Action, representatives of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and more than 30 residents from Morrow and Umatilla counties to hear firsthand how nitrate contamination in the area continues to affect their lives.

The meeting marked the first time a regional administrator from the agency has visited the region over nitrate pollution concerns.

EPA Region 10 spokesperson Bill Dunbar said the meeting had a significant impact on Sixkiller.

“He’s indicated he’s going back, and we are going to continue our work,” Dunbar said. “That means we are going to continue to press the state agencies to do the work that needs to be done, to protect people, to clean up the groundwater and make sure that people have clean drinking water.”

It’s been 30 years since state agencies [first noted the high levels of nitrate contamination in the groundwater](#) in Morrow and Umatilla counties. Since then, the state and a sanctioned local committee have worked on [voluntary measures to reduce the contamination](#). Still, nitrate levels in the area’s main source of drinking water have

Oregon Department of Environmental Quality and Oregon Health Authority to come up with a plan that will address the nitrate contamination. EPA has asked the state to conduct more well testing so they have a better idea of where the contamination is, whose wells are affected and where the nitrates are coming from.

During Monday’s visit, Sixkiller heard stories from many residents who said their health has declined because of the nitrates.

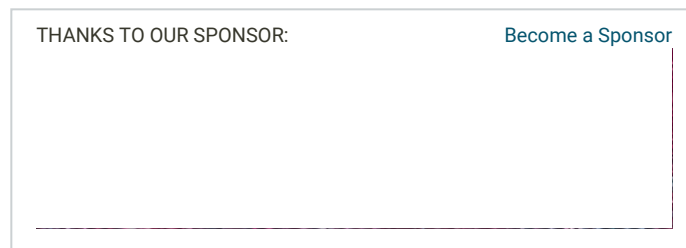
According to the EPA, nitrate levels exceeding 10 milligrams per liter can cause serious health risks if consumed. In some cases, home tests by area residents have shown nitrates at four to five times that level.

Dunbar said if Oregon does not quickly address the problem, the agency can step in under the [Safe Drinking Water Act](#) to protect people’s health.

“We’ll determine whether EPA needs to step in and take any further action,” he said.

Dunbar said it’s clear from the region administrator’s visit that “we’re not going away” and the agency will use every authority it has to ensure people have clean drinking water.

Last year, [the regional EPA sent a letter to all state agencies involved](#) saying that Oregon hasn’t done enough. The letter indicated the state could no longer rely on voluntary measures presented by the Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area committee.



The EPA’s increased interest in the Lower Umatilla Basin stems from a 2020 petition for emergency action filed by a [coalition of environmental groups](#).

Moving forward, Dunbar said the agency will visit the area more often to conduct community meetings.

Oregon Rural Action’s senior organizer, Nella Parks, said the community wants more action. Parks and her organization, along with each county’s health departments, have been going door-to-door testing wells for more than a year.

As of January, only 648 of the 4,500 wells in the Lower Umatilla Basin have been tested. Of those that have been tested, nitrate levels exceeded the federal standard in 208 households in Morrow County.

Parks said residents are fed up with bureaucracy from state agencies.

“People told some pretty intense stories, people were really frustrated,” she said of Sixkiller’s meeting with residents. “People continue to show up and participate in democracy and come to these meetings, but they are also skeptical because they’ve been blown off for 30 years.”



U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley and rural Boardman resident Ana Maria Rodriguez go over a letter from Boardman residents to Gov. Tina Kotite in Boardman, Ore., Jan. 20, 2020.

Parks said residents want more rapid and ongoing well testing, and to still receive free water delivery for everyone that's affected. She said residents also want the state to make it clear to residents that the water isn't safe to drink right now.

“We need EPA to hold the polluters accountable for funding safe water, as well as cleaning up their act and not continuing to pollute,” she said.

Despite residents' skepticism, she said, the EPA's visit gave a lot of people hope. She said her group sent a letter to Gov. Tina Kotek requesting her to also visit Boardman, but the group has not heard back.

OPB has reached out to the governor's office for comment.

Moving forward, Parks said her organization will continue to treat this as an emergency.

“We're going to keep making sure that it's not comfortable for elected officials and people who have more power than these rural folks,” she said. “It's not gonna be comfortable for them to continue ignoring these people's situations.”

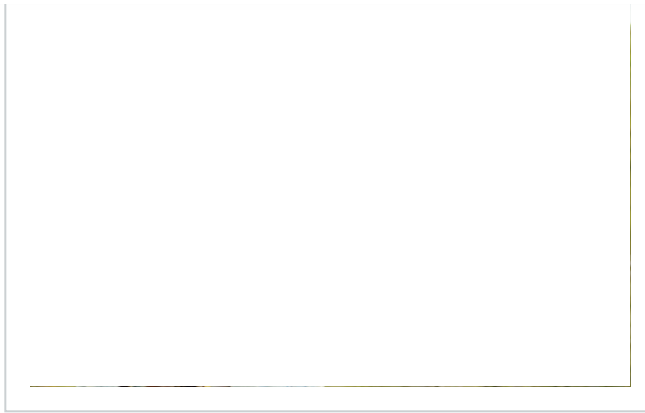
The Oregon Health Authority announced Wednesday it is accepting vouchers through May 15 for private well owners in Morrow and Umatilla counties [to test their wells](#).

To be eligible for a free voucher, the well water must be used for drinking, bathing, cooking or washing dishes.

So far, the health agency has distributed 38 vouchers in Morrow County and one in Umatilla County. It said it will continue to work closely with both counties to test more wells and use the results to identify which households need treatment or free drinking water.

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