



To: Joint Committee on Ways and Means
Re: Support for HB 3124 Bipartisan Drought Relief and Water Security

April 28, 2023

Dear Co-Chair Steiner and Co-Chair Sanchez, Co-Vice Chairs Girod, Gomberg, and Smith, and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the chance to support HB 3124 specifically the “Targeted Investment: Emergency Response to Groundwater Quality Concerns in Umatilla and Morrow County.”

My name is Zaira Sanchez, I’m Director of Community Organizing with Oregon Rural Action, a grassroots organization that has been working for more than a year with the community in the Lower Umatilla Basin *mientras que luchan por el derecho humano básico, al agua potable* - as they fight for the basic human right to safe water.

For decades, the groundwater we rely on in the Lower Umatilla Basin has been contaminated with nitrate, making it unsafe and undrinkable for many in our community. We have been waiting for a year for the State to respond to this emergency and for the resources we need to address our drinking water crisis.

In 2022, the EPA wrote in a letter to Oregon’s state agencies that an “adequate response” to the water crisis in the LUB requires the state to identify all impacted residences and “should identify each residence that obtains drinking water from a private well in the LUB GWMA.” However, only about 16 percent of the basin’s estimated 4,500 wells have been tested for nitrate, and many of our neighbors still do not know if their water is safe.

Testing is critical to understanding the problem and informing the public because nitrate is a tasteless, odorless, invisible pollutant. Nitrate is an acute contaminant, meaning that a single dose can be harmful to a person’s health, and many in the LUB community have been left to drink nitrate-laden water without their knowledge for decades.

My team and I speak with community members every week who have lived in the LUB for decades and were not told of the danger they face every day simply by drinking, cooking, or boiling the water in their tap. They share their stories of miscarriages, of cancer, of lost loved ones, and the growing anxiety of other health concerns they have. They worry that they will not live to see the end of this.

Based on testing trends to date, we estimate at least \$16.5 million in funding is needed for local-level implementation of a state-coordinated emergency response in the LUB. This minimum estimate includes funds for testing domestic wells, providing safe water for affected



homes, and communicating about this ongoing danger with the public. Given the severity of nitrate contamination in the area, it is likely that this investment in safe water will be required for many years, perhaps decades.

While long-term solutions for resolving the Lower Umatilla Basin's groundwater contamination crisis are needed, the more immediate need is to halt the ongoing harm to local groundwater users. To do this, resources must be available and sufficient to test wells, install and maintain filters, deliver clean water to those who need it, and communicate with the public. People need sufficient, reliable, and accessible sources of clean drinking water to live their lives, and the state must work to provide permanent solutions to this crisis.

As one community member said in a meeting, "filters are a bandaid for our problem." People know filters have limited capacity and mixed success at reducing nitrate.

We understand the issue is complex and it will take time, money, coordination, and enforcement of the law. This is why I am urging your support to fund this initial investment in the state's emergency response in the coming biennium included in the Drought Relief and Water Security package.

Help the LUB community acquire the necessary emergency resources to meet our community's basic needs:

- Ongoing access to free water testing;
- Immediate, ongoing, free delivery of sufficient safe water;
- Short-term filters and maintenance.

Oregonians in the Lower Umatilla Basin have been exposed to unsafe water for decades. They deserve access to safe water now, and they deserve investments in securing the basic human right to safe water in the future.

Sincerely,
Zaira Sanchez
Oregon Rural Action