



2024

Water Equity Fund

The Water Equity Fund is a straightforward and innovative way to support communities who are willing to implement creative solutions to their current water challenges. It provides easily accessible and flexible funding to address their water needs. The Legislature has put Oregon on the map of creative water solutions across the nation and internationally. Water stakeholders elsewhere constantly state their desire to see similar programs in their communities whenever it is shared in presentations, meetings, summits, conferences, and convenings.

The fund is a simple way to provide a public service and have direct impact on the intergenerational stewardship of water we need to collectively see better water futures for us all. It also fosters a sense of civic empowerment among communities who tend to be underserved and underrepresented in water decision making process, opportunities for healthy community building across generations, best food security practices, and necessary workforce development in the water sector across the state.

Senate Bill 5506 (SB 5506), passed in the 2023 Regular Session by the Joint Subcommittee on Capital Construction, created the

Oregon Water Equity Fund, allocating \$500,000 “for distribution to the University of Oregon Just Futures Institute to conduct research to understand and address water needs of environmental justice communities and to award grants.”

SB 5506 also directed that “the Higher Education Coordinating Commission, in collaboration with the University of Oregon, shall submit a report on the use of funds related to equitable water access to the Joint Committees on Ways and Means and any committee of the Legislature working on water-related issues during the 2025 legislative session.”

Pursuant to SB 5506 and in keeping with a commitment to effective and transparent storytelling, the University of Oregon has produced report to share information regarding the Community Water Justice Award program made possible through SB 5506. This state budget allocation has been placed and managed within the Climate Solutions Center at University of Oregon. JFI officially merged with the Climate Solutions Center as of January 1st, 2025.

The funds allocated by SB 5506 in 2023 have been awarded to nine entities selected through an open call process. They have conducted work supporting communities’ stewardship of our water resources and enabling communities to feel safer about their drinking water and during emergencies across the state. Projects emphasize waterways restoration, fishing, crabbing, and food security, workforce development in the water sector, public education on water stewardship, water quality testing and education, emergency preparedness and response, public education about policies and regulations that protect water resources, among other needs shared by community members, utilities, state agencies, and environmental experts over five years of public engagement projects by university researchers and community-based organizations, as well as state-led efforts to

understand existing water challenges. These projects have had direct impact in the North Coast, Southern Oregon, Northeastern Oregon, and the Upper and Lower Willamette regions.

Below we share the Award Narrative—information about the purpose of the Community Water Award program and the related selection process. The award narrative and plan to use the funds were brainstormed and discussed with water stakeholders in a series of meetings including community leaders, government and state agency officials, and legislators before implementation. These are some of the reports and data cited to design the award process: <https://www.oregonwaterfutures.org/reports>.

In 2024 a new budget of allocation of 1,000,000 was approved for the Water Equity Fund. We will produce a report about the use of those funds during the 2026 legislative session. After a series of meetings with community leaders, government officials, and legislators, those funds were allocated to fund the following: tribal water projects selected through an open call by Portland State University's Institute for Tribal Governments, two more awards from the previous selection process in Klamath and Lane Counties, public education, multimedia, materials on topics such as well waters, renters and water rights, rainwater harvesting, tribal water, water affordability and pipe water, a pilot project supporting tribal workforce development, and a pilot project providing legal and policy technical assistance to community-based water stakeholders. These projects are being completed in collaboration with water experts at UO, OSU, and PSU enabling inter-institutional partnerships.

We have asked applicants to the Fund to provide feedback about the application, selection, and reporting process during our midterm convening of awardees to share projects with one another and foster collaborations among them. People stated that the application was clear and the easiest they had ever filled, and

that the reporting process is also clear and direct. People also felt supported by the UO faculty and staff leading the project during the application process and afterwards. When requested, we met with applicants and helped them strengthen their ideas for applications. We have also shared feedback and other funding sources with applicants who were not selected to receive an award.

Now, we ask for another budget allocation and more funding. We realized that awardees did remarkable work with very small awards of \$25,000-\$50,000. But, in the end, these were all pilot/seed, short term, projects. We have identified the need for bigger awards that enable awardees the capacity to tackle more complex water challenges, as well as to develop longer term programs; and to offer public education resources relevant for water stakeholders. Our goal for another award cycle will be to offer multiple tiers of funding to address the needs of smaller and larger projects. We also plan to offer an orientation to prospective applicants about brainstorming projects and the selection process and continue strengthening our outreach efforts to engage more communities, especially in rural and coastal areas. We have done great work engaging people across the state and we want to do even better.

Background—Award Narrative

2024 Community Water Justice Awards: Narrative & Criteria

Why this award?

- Water infrastructure investments have not benefited communities equally.

- Under-investment, environmental degradation, environmental racism, toxic pollution, and displacement disproportionately impact environmental justice communities, such as Tribes, communities of color, low-income communities, and rural communities¹.
- Research, policy making, capacity building, and educational, outreach, water stewardship, and community initiatives must engage the voices, knowledge, and experience of those most impacted to address continuing harm.

What is the opportunity?

- Community capacity and social infrastructure is just as critical as built infrastructure.
- Investments in the water sector need to include funds for: research, capacity building, outreach, stewardship, and local education led by environmental justice communities.
- This funding opportunity is made possible by community-led advocacy.
- Senate Bill 5506 (SB 5506), passed in the 2023 Regular Session by the Joint Subcommittee on Capital Construction, created the fund for these awards “for distribution to the University of Oregon Just Futures Institute² to conduct research to understand and address water needs of environmental justice communities and to award grants. The Higher Education Coordinating Commission, in collaboration with the University of Oregon, shall submit a report on the

¹ See House Bill 4077, passed in the 2022 Regular Session, for the Oregon Legislature’s definition of “environmental justice communities.” (<https://olis.oregonlegislature.gov/liz/2022R1/Downloads/MeasureDocument/HB4077>)

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use of funds related to equitable water access to the Joint Committee on Ways and Means and any committee of the Legislature working on water-related issues during the 2025 legislative session."

What do the awards fund and what are the funding priorities?

- Funding water positions in environmental justice communities, such as Tribes, Tribal organizations, and community-based organizations that serve environmental justice communities to provide water education, learn about water law and policy, and develop better, equitable, and accessible emergency response systems.
- Funding water positions in environmental justice communities, such as Tribes, Tribal organizations, and community-based organizations that serve environmental justice communities to lead water stewardship activities.
- Investing in water stewardship and policy education that is designed by or co-designed with environmental justice communities, such as Tribes, Tribal organizations, or community-based organizations that serve environmental justice communities.
- Investing in culturally sensitive communication and outreach specialists who can work with environmental justice communities, and provide technical, policy, and legal assistance to the efforts above.
- Investing in environmental justice communities, such as Tribes, Tribal organizations, and community-based organizations that serve environmental justice communities

to provide capacity building, including workforce development in water and environmental careers.

Evaluation criteria of applications³:

1. Proposal goals and plans are clear.
2. Proposal addresses at least one of the funding priorities described in the award narrative.
3. Proposal clearly states impacts for environmental justice communities and their water justice goals.
4. Environmental justice communities or those historically underrepresented and/or underserved in water advocacy, funding for water stewardship, and/or water governance lead or co-lead the project.

³ All applications were evaluated by an impartial three-person committee, including two representatives of community-based organizations that did not apply for funding and one University of Oregon researcher. Each committee member assessed each application. They evaluated applications against each evaluation criterion, assigning a numeric score (on a scale from one to ten, with ten being the lowest possible score) for each criterion. The 11 applications that received the lowest overall scores after all committee members' scores were aggregated were selected for funding. All committee members established whether applications fulfilled basic requirements or did not qualify at all before discussing and aggregating scores.