

Defending Oregon's Water Rights: Why SB 1153 Threatens Agricultural and Rural Sustainability

I. Introduction

Water is not only a resource it's a right, a necessity, and a pillar of Oregon's agricultural and rural identity. Senate Bill 1153 (SB 1153), while marketed as an environmental and tribal partnership bill, contains language and provisions that raise serious red flags for farmers, ranchers, and rural communities. It signals a shift in water management that could mimic the damaging consequences already seen in neighboring states. Oregon must avoid the same fate.

II. What SB 1153 Proposes

SB 1153 would give the Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) authority to assess whether water right transfers could harm aquatic habitats or worsen already impaired water bodies. It also requires giving tribes the opportunity to review certain water right transfer applications. Additionally, OWRD could impose conditions on transfers, including mandatory water usage measurement, reporting, fish screens, and bypass installations.

III. What Happened in Washington and Idaho: Cautionary Tales

Washington's regulatory framework has increasingly prioritized environmental and urban interests over agricultural access. Overregulation has led to reduced allocations for farming operations. Idaho recently imposed groundwater curtailments, leaving farmland without irrigation. Both states have seen legal and economic fallout. Oregon must not ignore these outcomes.

IV. The Real Issue: Industrial Use and Metering of Groundwater

SB 1153 doesn't just affect farmers it enables a more aggressive state role in managing who gets water. Once groundwater becomes regulated like a public utility, users can face fees, restrictions, and industrial competition. Mining and large industrial operations could gain access to water currently supporting

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agriculture.

V. Oregon's Water Table Is Strong For Now

Oregon sits atop a massive aquifer system. But access to these aquifers is politically fragile. SB 1153's regulatory language places rural water autonomy at risk. Once discretionary authority is granted, it's hard to claw it back.

VI. Rural Equity and the Growing Urban-Rural Divide

SB 1153 deepens the divide between urban policy and rural necessity. The bill adds regulatory layers without support, prioritizing environmental and industrial interests while ignoring the economic and social role of farmers and ranchers.

VII. What Oregon Should Do Instead

Instead of following Washington and Idaho, Oregon should protect private well access, streamline water right transfers, prevent industrial exploitation, use aquifer science to guide policy, and offer incentives for voluntary conservation.

VIII. Conclusion

SB 1153 is a directional change toward greater state control and rural disenfranchisement. Oregon should not repeat the mistakes of its neighbors. Water must remain with the people who live on and work the land. SB 1153 must be opposed.