

HB 4049

Once again, we are here trying to save our community.

No one at the Oregon Water Resources Department lives in Harney County. No one works here day to day. Yet the Department continues to act with an elite attitude of “we know better,” while refusing to truly listen to the people most affected by these decisions.

The people of Harney County want to conserve **and** responsibly use our water. Historically, water management in Oregon focused on utilization alongside conservation. Now the Department’s approach has shifted to “saving water” without meaningful input from the communities who depend on it for survival. That shift may look good on paper, but it ignores local realities.

The primary purpose of HB 4049 is to provide the flexibility needed to achieve and maintain reasonably stable groundwater levels. The reason for this bill is to return to the original intent of Voluntary Agreements as already outlined in statute, and to prevent OWRD from controlling those agreements through internal memos rather than law. Simply put, we are here and having this debate largely because of OWRD’s memo—not because voluntary agreements have failed.

Let me be clear: OWRD is funded by the citizens of Oregon—including me and the people of Harney County. It is time for the Department to represent the people who pay for its existence, not dictate to them.

Voluntary agreements are the path forward. They allow our community to continue, to conserve water, and to meet shared goals without destroying rural livelihoods. These agreements put decision-making in the hands of the people who actually know the land, the water, and how to achieve real, lasting conservation.

This approach is consistent with Oregon law. I specifically reference **ORS 537.745**, which supports locally driven, voluntary solutions rather than top-down mandates.

HB 4049 represents communities and recognizes that effective water conservation does not happen without the people who live and work on the land. We are not the problem—we are part of the solution, if you are willing to listen.

Craig Neher, Rural Harney County