



Greater Harney Valley – Groundwater Study Community Meeting Summary

Wednesday, October 12, 2022, 5:30pm – 8:30pm

Harney County community Center – 484 N Broadway Ave, Burns

Opening Remarks & Introductions

Jamie Damon (Facilitator) with Kearns & West opened the meeting by welcoming everyone and letting them know where to find the informational handouts, food, and restrooms. She also walked through the agenda and set the ground rules for public discourse. Ivan Gall, Interim Deputy Director, and Field Services Division Administrator was introduced and gave some opening remarks. He conveyed the Department's commitment to partnership with the community and expressed gratitude to community leaders for helping get resources for the community and the Department to help in this effort. He then shared what we hoped to accomplish at this meeting: an understanding about the Study, the water situation, and input to the path forward. The groundwater study team, other OWRD staff and members of the [Groundwater Study Advisory Committee \(GWSAC\)](#) were introduced to the audience.

Relevant handouts for this agenda item: [Meeting Agenda](#)

Why Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) & the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) conducted a groundwater study?

Ivan Gall spoke to the genesis or origin of the study being driven by complaints of groundwater decline in some irrigation wells. This led to the Department increasing monitoring and finding data that reflected groundwater decline. Further investigation needed to be done around the groundwater situation in the basin, so the community requested a study. According to the [Division 512 rules](#) of 2016, within one year of the study being published the Department will convene a Rules Advisory Committee (RAC) to assess whether these rules need to be updated. There are several outcomes that can come from an update which were discussed during the dual approach portion of the meeting. Ivan Gall explained the role of the GWSAC during the study, briefly walked through the study timeline, and explained that the study was led by USGS, and reports were produced in partnership with the expertise of OWRD technical staff.

USGS Presentations on the groundwater study methods and results

Amanda Garcia and Stephen Gingerich, members of the groundwater study team, presented the key takeaways from the published Study. Amanda Garcia gave a summary of the groundwater budget. One key point from the presentation is that the lowland groundwater budget accounts for most groundwater development and is out of balance by about –110,000 acre-feet per year. The current imbalance represents groundwater removed from aquifer storage. Another key point that was highlighted is that more than 70% of upland recharge discharges in the uplands. One final key point made about the

groundwater budget is that the largest budget deficit is in the northern region where pumpage exceeds recharge.

Stephen Gingerich gave a summary of the groundwater resources in the Harney Basin from the groundwater study. One key takeaway from this presentation is that most of the groundwater pumped from lowland wells is ancient and not being replenished at meaningful human timescales. Another key takeaway is that the effects of pumping vary across the basin depending on the local geology, the amount of recharge, and the amount of withdrawal. He also highlighted that pumping large volumes of groundwater from low-permeability rocks causes deep drawdown over relatively small areas and high-permeability rocks causes shallow drawdown over large areas. Lastly, it was emphasized that decline varies across areas in the basin and declines are steeper in some areas than others.

To view the Summary of the Groundwater Budget slides & Groundwater Resources of the Harney Basin slides, [click here](#).

Relevant handouts for this agenda item: [Groundwater Terms & Definitions, USGS 6-page Groundwater Resources of the Harney Basin, Southeastern Oregon Handout, OWRD 2-page Harney Basin Groundwater Study Key Finding Factsheet & Data Releases Page](#)

Questions/comments following USGS overview of the study and key findings

An opportunity for the public to ask questions about the groundwater study methods and findings was provided after the SSGS presentations. Below are the questions asked.

- How many areas are falling below critical decline?
- Is it all one water?
- Can we get out of this if we have a really wet cycle?
- What was a surprising thing about the study?
- How can you differentiate the age of the water?

OWRD Describes a Dual Approach to Stabilizing Groundwater Decline in the Basin

Ivan Gall spoke about the Department's vision for a dual approach to groundwater level stabilization and referred folks to the supplementary materials on the table out front for further information. Ivan Gall covered some basic facts about voluntary actions that can be taken such as: the Department's Cost Share Measurement Program, Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), Domestic Well Funds (Statewide and Harney), Support of the Harney Collaborative Place-Based Plan, Continued Groundwater Monitoring, Voluntary Agreements in Lieu of Regulation. He then discussed the regulatory approaches that the Department can take to stabilize groundwater levels. Some actions that have already been taken in the Harney Basin include stopping the issuing of new groundwater permits in 2016 and stopping the extension of undeveloped permits in 2019. Some actions that can be taken or will be taken include identifying, addressing, and reporting on all illegal uses, evaluating enforcement of permit decline conditions, Division 512 Rulemaking in 2023/24 and a Critical Groundwater Area (CGWA) Designation.

Relevant handouts for this agenda item: [Stabilizing Groundwater Levels in the Harney Basin Handout](#), [CREP Handout](#), [WARRF Factsheet](#)

Division 512 rulemaking

Ivan Gall walked through the relationship between the Division 10 and Division 512 rulemakings. OWRD is updating Division 10 rules, which govern the Department's process for designating a CGWA. Division 512 will be the first rule to undergo review under the updated Division 10 rules. Division 512 governs the use of groundwater in the Malheur Lake Basin, including use within the Greater Harney Valley Groundwater Area of Concern. Once the Division 10 rules are in place, OWRD will engage another Rules Advisory Committee (RAC) to update the Division 512 Harney Basin-specific rules with new CGWA corrective actions. This will occur within 1 year of the Harney Basin groundwater study being published; by April 2023. The process by which rules are written, the role of a RAC and chances for public input before they go to the Commission for approval were also shared with the audience.

Division 512 possible outcomes

At a high-level Ivan Gall discussed what the Division 512 rulemaking could accomplish. He explained what a CGWA and Serious Water Management Problem Area (SWMPA) allow OWRD to do that can lead to stabilized groundwater. Ultimately regulation will occur under these designations and reduction of use will be necessary, especially in certain areas and according to priority dates. The purpose of this is to achieve reasonably stable groundwater levels. Community input is critical to understanding the priorities of when, where, and how much to reduce to achieve this goal.

Relevant handouts for this agenda item: [Rulemaking Factsheet](#)

Critical Groundwater Areas

Oregon Revised Statutes (ORS 537.730-537.742) outline the process for designating CGWA's. A CGWA is an area that has experienced excessive groundwater declines and corrective action is needed to prevent further damage to the aquifer. Oregon has several CGWA's across the state. The Harney Basin won't be the first nor the last. Long-term groundwater management will require monitoring of groundwater use and groundwater levels. A SWMPA designation will be likely in the next Division 512 rule updates to make sure good groundwater use data are available for long-term management purposes.

Questions/comments following OWRD's dual approach of voluntary and regulatory actions to stabilize groundwater levels in the basin

An opportunity for the public to ask questions about the approach to achieve groundwater level stabilization was provided after Ivan Gall presented to the crowd. Below are the questions asked.

- How is the Harney Well Fund different than the Statewide Well Fund? Is the home ownership deadline the same?
- What are future actions?
- Does the Department think you will designate the entire GHVGAC as a CGWA?

Closing Remarks

Ivan Gall thanked for folks for attending, reminded them of the literature out front, and invited them to the open house to come speak with staff. The Department will be back in late February or early March to discuss next steps more in depth and to prepare for the Division 512 rulemaking. To receive future updates about Oregon Water Resources Department actions in the Harney Basin, please [subscribe to the mailing list](#).

Notes prepared by: Alexandria Scott (OWRD Engagement Coordinator) 11/18/2022