

# Oregon's Groundwater

## Updated Rules to Protect Groundwater Availability



Groundwater levels are declining in parts of Oregon where the amount of water taken out of the system is more than what is replaced through natural water recharge cycles. Oregon's groundwater resources are being used at an unsustainable rate.

Climate change exacerbates these water conditions. Some Oregonians are experiencing water scarcity, water shortages, and wells that have gone dry. Groundwater use and depletion reduces surface water flows in streams, rivers, and lakes affecting fish, aquatic habitats and recreation. This issue impacts all Oregon families, farmers, cities and industries.

Oregon joins many other western states in recognizing the devastating impacts of groundwater depletion.

- In Oregon, over 1,300 water wells have gone dry across the state since June 2021.
- Streamflows have been reduced, impacting water availability and water quality.
- Many municipalities are now experiencing required reductions in water use.

### A forward-looking approach

The current practices for water right determinations do not consider the long-term impacts to underground aquifers and surface waters when granting water rights.

Mitigating the long-term negative impact of groundwater use and depletion requires changing the rules for how new water right applications are reviewed.

With a forward-looking approach that considers the needs of current and future generations, we are working to safeguard existing surface water and groundwater users and the livelihoods they support while managing groundwater resources more sustainably.





## Modernizing the approach to evaluating “is water available?”

The updated rules focus on determining if groundwater is available to support new uses when issuing new groundwater rights. The rules:

- Define key terminology and criteria for issuing new water rights.
- Determine water is available if groundwater is reasonably stable, does not interfere with surface water flows and the aquifer can produce the water at the requested amount.
- Detail how applications would be denied if existing data did not show water is available.

The new rules will likely result in fewer permits being issued for new groundwater uses. This will protect existing wells from going dry and will better protect existing water users.

*NOTE: The proposed rules will not change exempt groundwater use, existing water rights, groundwater applications that are already in the agency queue, and water right transfer processes.*

## Water for the future

Cities in the western U.S. have found ways to grow populations and economies using less water. Growth can occur, but Oregon must continue to adapt, invest and innovate to meet the changing water realities.

Currently, there are number of pathways that exist to access water for uses such as health and safety, population growth, economic development, and housing.

Some examples include:

- Efficiency and conservation measures to offset water needs.
- Transfer of water rights.
- Water sharing agreements.
- Market-based solutions.
- Designing for water reuse and reclamation.

On a larger scale, planning initiatives can help communities explore multifaceted solutions to their long-term water needs.

