

# OREGON WATER JUSTICE FRAMEWORK

Community-Driven Principles and  
Priorities to Advance Water Justice



A project led and  
compiled by the  
Oregon Water  
Futures Collaborative



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The Oregon Water Futures Coordination Team is a collaborative between Verde, Coalition of Communities of Color, Oregon Environmental Council, Willamette Partnership, and the University of Oregon’s Pacific Northwest Just Futures Institute and the Environmental and Natural Resources Law Center.

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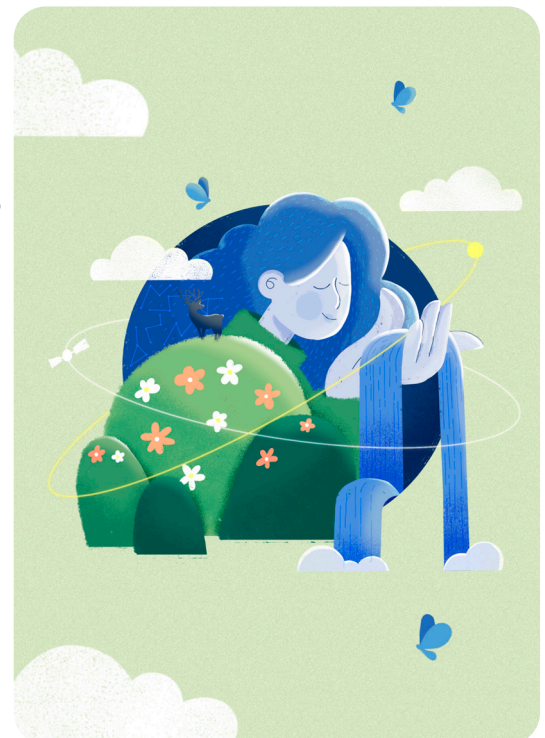
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# INTRODUCTION

Since Oregon's founding, water resource decisions have created wealth for some and disparities for others — starting with broken treaties between the US government and sovereign tribal nations to exclusionary practices that relegated Black communities to areas prone to flooding or without access to potable water. There are workspaces and housing without proper access to water and sanitation that disproportionately impact low-income, rural, and migrant households. The cost of much-needed infrastructure upgrades is passed down through water bills, hitting customers struggling to cover basic expenses. And despite interest and desire, community members can't easily access decision-making processes that dictate how we care for and sustain water for generations to come.

These power dynamics continue to influence who makes water decisions, reinforcing a policy and funding cycle consistently dominated by the same voices. Consequently, there's a gap between the conversations state and local decision-makers are having and the daily experiences of many Oregonians. Furthermore, current systems ignore the Traditional Ecological Knowledge held by Oregon Tribes and Indigenous communities on how to care for water, as well as the ecological values and practices that communities of color and low-income households contribute to the state.

Oregon Water Futures seeks to influence these systems by centering community voices often left out of the conversation.

## Water is Sacred; Water is Life

In 2021, we published an initial report on water justice issues in Oregon based on a series of interviews with Native, Indigenous, Latinx, Black, Asian, Middle Eastern, and other communities of color across the state, mostly in rural areas.<sup>1</sup> We mobilized our findings to support the landmark \$530 million water package passed by the Oregon Legislature for water infrastructure, planning, community support, and more.<sup>2</sup> In 2022, we synthesized available data to paint a picture of what water justice looks like here in Oregon, pointing to major gaps in water access and affordability for low-income households, rural communities and communities of color, renters, and mobile home park residents across Oregon.<sup>3</sup>

Now, Oregon Water Futures has shifted focus to water justice principles and action items that decision-makers can use to ensure that water funding is spent well and in the communities that need it most. This Water Justice Policy Action Framework builds on the experiences of approximately 200 community members and feedback from tribal governments, researchers, state agencies, utilities, and environmental organizations.

### Oregon Water Justice Framework

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Every single person has a water story to tell. Some stories are of joy and laughter, others are of ingenuity and resourcefulness, and others still are of sickness and trauma. “Water is sacred; water is life,” are phrases we repeatedly heard as we talked about water with Native, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other migrant communities from Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and the Pacific Islands in the state. They shared personal stories about their close relationships with water, intimate memories about water, and how they learned to care for water in traditional ways.



Yet, their voices, values, and ways of relating to water are not reflected in water policy, management, and decision-making at the state and local levels. As water actors and community assets — not merely consumers — community members, especially those most impacted by water issues, offer creative solutions to the challenges Oregon faces.

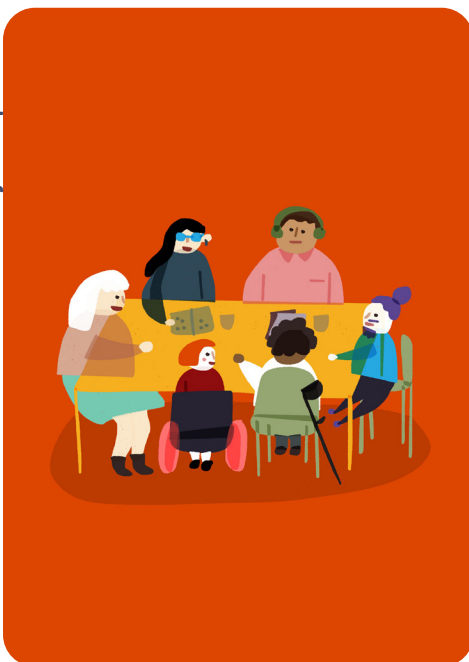
Water justice requires uplifting priorities, issues, and knowledge from communities that have traditionally been left out of water policy decisions. All Oregonians benefit from a just approach to water management that ensures everyone has access to clean, safe, and affordable water, protection from natural disasters, and restoration of natural landscapes now and for generations to come.

## WHO ARE FRONTLINE COMMUNITIES?

Our outreach efforts centered frontline communities and organizations that work with them because historical and current structures have largely excluded frontline communities from policymaking. Frontline communities are communities most impacted by water quality, quantity, and affordability issues despite contributing the least to environmental degradation or unjust infrastructure decisions of the past. In Oregon’s Senate Concurrent Resolution 17 (SCR-17), they are defined as Black, Native American, Indigenous, and People of Color communities, and immigrant and low-income communities that historically and presently experience the brunt of health, economic and ecological impacts.<sup>4</sup>

The resolution also provides a legal basis for water justice policy by articulating that clean water is a basic human right. It mandates that state agencies make reparative investments in frontline communities to ensure clean and affordable water, protection from climate disasters, and improve watershed protection and water infrastructure.

Hatiye Garip



In particular, Oregon’s Tribes have a unique position to lead water justice because of their relationships with state and federal governments as sovereign nations. They have been stewarding and protecting water since Time Immemorial, and their leadership and values must be centered in our collective vision for water.

## JOIN US

Wherever your realm of influence lies, whether at the state, local, or community level, we encourage you to use the water justice principles and priorities to guide you in your journey toward water justice for all Oregonians. We will not accomplish water justice in a single legislative session and it will not be completed by a single group. Rather, it requires an intentional investment in relationships, trust, recognition of history, and centering the leadership of communities experiencing inequities. Oregon’s water future is going to take all of us working together over time and through conflict. But it’ll be worth it – only together can we build a vision for water that doesn’t leave anyone behind and allows all of our communities to thrive for the next 100 years and beyond.

# WATER JUSTICE PRINCIPLES

We believe that all water policy should embody the following principles to advance water justice in our state. Inspired by environmental and social justice movements that lay a strong foundation for us, we

must recognize the intersectionality of people and our Earth, the right to self-determination, the rights of workers and renters, and that authentic and meaningful community engagement leads to stronger and more just policy.<sup>5 6 7 8</sup>

Valeria Araya for ArtistsForClimate.org



## 1. DRIVEN BY COMMUNITY PRIORITIES, EXPERTISE, & NEEDS OF THE MOST IMPACTED

As we plan for Oregon's water future, the priorities, wisdom, and needs of community members most impacted by water injustices need to be centered if we aim to repair the unjust water decisions of the past and co-create healthier landscapes of the future. This means building systems that allow frontline community members to have agency and influence on issues that impact their lives, with the power to shape water decisions.

## 2. PROTECTS THE ENVIRONMENT, IMPROVES HEALTH, AND CREATES ECONOMIC INCLUSION

We can no longer afford to address a single issue at a time. Our world is interconnected and systems are intertwined with one another. Water policy needs to take a holistic approach that protects the environment, improves people's and nature's health, and creates economic inclusion. We need more workforce development and job creation in natural and water infrastructure, and there should be ample opportunities for frontline communities to enter these careers.

Photo by Melissa Jeanty, Unsplash



## 3. PUTS MONEY AND POWER INTO THE HANDS OF FRONTLINE COMMUNITIES

Water infrastructure planning has been done without consulting the communities most impacted. The wisdom, experience, and assets of communities are often missed, resulting in water decisions that leave people behind or miss out on opportunities to strengthen community assets. By investing in local coalitions, communities can advance projects that they know are the most important for local health and wellbeing. Without more inclusive processes in decision-making and investments, we risk wasting valuable resources on the wrong solutions or imposing decisions on communities without their input or consent.

## 4. DOES NOT RECREATE BROKEN SYSTEMS

We cannot maintain systems that have harmed people in the past and continue to harm people now. Water justice policy must have the courage to change extractive systems that continue to perpetuate water injustice. Instead, we must advance regenerative systems that promote community health, economic inclusion, healthy natural environments, and social justice.

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## 5. BUILDS SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE, NOT JUST CONSTRUCTION

Investments in community capacity and engagement alongside infrastructure improvements are critical to building a more just and sustainable water future for all Oregonians. Historically, infrastructure investments have not created equal benefits for all communities. Investing in community capacity and engagement led by and co-designed with Tribes, community-based organizations, leaders from communities of color and migrant communities, and low-income and rural communities will open paths for more equitable laws and policies that serve communities as a whole. When we invest in social infrastructure, we build community power, cohesion, and civic muscle that allows for deep democracy.

## 6. INVESTS IN PROJECTS THAT MATCH A VISION OF THE FUTURE: MULTI-GENERATIONAL, MULTI-BENEFIT, AND JUST

Sustainable policies are forward-thinking, offer multiple benefits, and protect water for future generations. This includes planning for change we predict and leaving room for unexpected challenges. Investments should look to nature-based solutions, such as natural infrastructure, and build resilience in the face of climate change. Policies must be integrated, holistic, and promote long-term resilience and reliability for communities and ecosystems. The challenges ahead are significant, and policies must be bold to match a vision of the future where our water, land, and communities are healthy and thriving.



# MOVING TO WATER JUSTICE: AN ACTION AGENDA

Building on the experiences of over 200 community members and feedback from tribal governments, researchers, state agencies, utilities, and environmental organizations, we identified the following six water-justice priorities requiring our attention now.<sup>9</sup>

For organizational purposes, we separate the priorities into six categories, but recognize that they are integrated, overlapping with and informing one another. Water policy must be cross-sectoral, coordinated, and sustained to change whole policy ecosystems and advance solutions where all people and places thrive – no exceptions.<sup>10 11</sup>

## WATER JUSTICE ACTION AGENDA AT A GLANCE







# 1 INDIGENOUS WATER JUSTICE LEADERSHIP

## SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL

Since Time Immemorial, Tribes and Native communities have been protecting and stewarding water. Through processes of colonization, Native communities have often been stripped of their traditional ecological practices to care for water resources, fish, and conduct culturally specific activities in waterways. Broken treaties, privatization of water, management of water resources that ignores Indigenous science, and economic activities that heat up and pollute waters continue to perpetuate the colonial dispossession of water from Native communities.

## LOCAL AND STATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

- 1. Empower Tribe-Agency Water Task Force**  
In September 2021, Oregon's nine federally recognized Tribes requested the creation of a Tribe-Agency Water Task Force. The Task Force includes a representative of each Tribe and state agency working on water, with the goal of bringing a Native lens to water policy. The state should appropriately fund the Task Force so that an Indigenous Water Vision can be operationalized and ensure its longevity through administration changes.
- 2. Support food sovereignty by caring for the health of water and surrounding habitat**  
Tribes have the right to hunt, fish, and gather resources, including culturally significant plants and animals. Habitat conservation and restoration programs should include specific funds to increase restoration and access to First Foods. This work needs to be led or co-led by Tribes or Indigenous-led organizations. In some cases, conservation tools (such as conservation easements) might be inconsistent with tribal access. Ensure that state-led and -funded conservation efforts support and do not hinder tribal access. Furthermore, water infrastructure and water stewardship should prioritize community benefits that increase access to hunting and gathering for Tribes and Native communities.

### MAKING THE CASE FOR INDIGENOUS WATER JUSTICE LEADERSHIP

To start addressing these systemic injustices, the State of Oregon needs to center Tribal leadership in all decision-making that will impact the future of water bodies in the state and recognize both common and distinct interests of each sovereign nation.

**"We have met as the tribes of Oregon to share and discuss our beliefs, concerns and needs for an Oregon water vision. Each of us is a distinct and unique sovereign, but we have all reached agreement regarding these issues.**

**Water is sacred. Water is life. Water is the heartbeat of our culture. Our understanding of these truths is based upon a legacy of survival and reliance on our Oregon oceans, rivers and lakes. Whether we are planning for one year or 100 years, any water vision must, at its core, restore and protect cold, clean water."**<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Broaden access to funding for all Tribes

Across the board, funding to Tribes is essential to engage the specific realities and needs of Native communities and their knowledge base about best water management practices in specific watersheds. There needs to be prioritized funding to Tribes for water stewardship and climate resilience. Loans, grants, and other funding mechanisms must reduce specific barriers to make them more accessible to Tribes. For example, the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs recognizes water as a human right, not a commodity, and does not charge its members for water.<sup>13</sup> As a result, they are not eligible for water infrastructure funding that requires a ratepayer base. State and Federal lawmakers must ensure that Tribes have funding to sustain their water resources, secure ecosystem access, and address challenges to clean water at home. Tribes who are not federally recognized have even less access to funding and resources and are fighting for federal recognition.

### 4. Recognize rivers and bodies of water as a “person” with legal rights

The current western legal systems typically put humans above all other life. In this system, rivers, like other non-human living systems, are managed as resources, often exploited for profits and short-sighted developments that benefit few and cause harm to many. Indigenous communities worldwide are challenging this perspective, suggesting instead that rivers are living and have the same legal rights as humans.<sup>14</sup> Through legislation for personhood that is led by Tribes, Oregon’s rivers could hold the rights, powers, duties, and liabilities of a legal person through legislation for personhood and establish formal guardians to act on their behalf.

### 5. Integrate Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge and cultural fire science in current strategies to sustain water health

The recent fires taught us that Indigenous fire and water science could prevent large-scale emergencies produced by a changing climate, warming waters, and catastrophic megafires. Opening pathways for integrating Indigenous water and fire science into existing water management strategies can build resilience in the face of climate change.

## CASE STUDIES

#### Wapato Restoration

A wetland restoration project on the lower Columbia River is improving access for Tribes to harvest wapato. The project planted over 3,000 wapato bulbs and 30,000 seeds in the wetlands for future tribal harvest. Additionally, this restoration benefits a variety of native species and migratory birds.<sup>15</sup>

#### Personhood for Klamath River

The Yurok Tribe, based near the northern border of California, declared rights of personhood for the Klamath River. The Klamath has the same legal rights as a human, at least under tribal law. Declaring personhood allows for the creation of laws, advocacy pathways, and centers Yurok values.

#### Cultural Fire

The Traditional Ecological Inquiry Program incorporates cultural fire practices into restoration work with notable benefits to waterways.<sup>16</sup> Read more about considerations for protecting and integrating Traditional Knowledge in the Tribal Climate Adaptation Guidebook.<sup>17</sup>

#### Klamath Marsh, Oregon



Photo by Stacey Dalgaard

# 2

## RENTER'S RIGHTS



### THE CHALLENGE: RENTER'S RIGHTS

In Oregon, renters are vulnerable to water injustices, especially mobile home park tenants, farm workers, and undocumented immigrants. In our community convenings, renters raised concerns about water quality, affordability, and rainwater harvesting for growing food. Many water infrastructure funding opportunities, data, and resources are available for homeowners but are not passed on to renters. Renter's rights are deeply intertwined with water affordability and accessibility.

### LOCAL AND STATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

#### 1. Provide water and sewer bills, and water quality reports to renters

Renters and those in employer housing aren't guaranteed copies of the water bill or water quality reports, which are sent to landlords. Utility costs are often included in total rent or split across units. Despite attempts to conserve water, water bills may still be high due to other tenants' usage. Renters said their landlords would cite high water bills to increase overall rent increases, potentially displacing families.

#### MAKING THE CASE FOR RENTER'S RIGHTS

Renters, especially low-income renters and multi-generational households, need access to information related to their water bills and water quality reports. Requesting this information must be easy, with clear remediation steps if there is contamination in the water. They need access to bill-pay assistance and the ability to use water to grow food at home and in community gardens.

Renters have the right to water data information, including the breakdown of bills that include water, stormwater, sanitation, and other related costs, water quality information, and water usage. Many renters also had questions about the source of their water and if their water was safe to drink, suggesting that utilities could improve their outreach and education by making it more accessible and in multiple languages. Communities need clear communication during emergencies (such as boil notices or when there is a harmful algae bloom contamination in drinking water). Legislation should be passed that makes water data more accessible to renters, requiring landlords and utilities to provide data in multimedia formats, in the language that renters prefer, and with additional contact information should renters want to report a water concern. Water meters are another potential avenue to increase data transparency and individual agency on water consumption at the unit level of apartments.

#### 2. Allow renters to use water to grow food

Small, personal gardens improve health outcomes, increase access to nutritious foods, and foster community-driven healing and transformation.<sup>18</sup> Low-income communities and communities of color often live in food deserts where people have limited access to affordable and healthy foods. Despite data showing that gardens can improve health, landlords often prohibit renters from cultivating home gardens or using small planters, citing high water costs. Local and state programs can support or subsidize low-income renters' use of water to grow household plants for food and medicine. Programs can also support or subsidize water expenses for community gardens.



Photo by Kenny Eliason, Unsplash

3. Recognize specific vulnerabilities of farmworkers in employer-provided housing, undocumented immigrants, and mobile home park tenants  
There are unique barriers to ensuring clean, affordable, and accessible drinking water for people living in employer-provided housing and mobile park homes. There are also limited resources for undocumented immigrants. Oregon needs targeted programs that work closely with trusted community organizations to ensure that these communities have access to safe, clean, and affordable water and sanitation. State and local policies must prioritize funding for appropriate water testing and needed infrastructure upgrades and collaborate across authorities as needed.
  
4. Expand the ability for rainwater harvesting, especially for renters  
Many renters were interested in rainwater harvesting. State and local governments can provide financial, educational, and logistical support to low-income households to conserve, harvest, and reuse water. In Oregon, the size of a roof determines how much rainwater can be collected.<sup>19</sup> Roof footprints favor single-family homes because they have a higher roof-to-person ratio. Roof-to-person ratios can limit available rainwater in apartment complexes or multi-generational households. Furthermore, landlords may limit and discourage rainwater harvesting for renters. State agencies can implement programs and modify rules to encourage increased rainwater harvesting for apartments and multi-generational families and normalize rainwater harvesting across the state.



Photo by Kristiana Teige Witherill

## COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

The community gardens conversation came up in Eugene with NAACP Eugene-Springfield members, Huerto de la Familia; and in Salem with a Native elder. The desire to grow food was a migrant reality across the board, from the Willamette Valley to Eastern Oregon.

**"Not [having] a garden... is one of the first recommendations the manager makes. He sends a letter saying that we shouldn't abuse water usage. We're careful not to wash the cars, not to water the yard with water, or anything like that."**

- Don Javier, Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN), 2020

# 3

## WATER ACCESS & AFFORDABILITY



### THE CHALLENGE: WATER ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY

There are few water assistance programs for low-income families, and there are even fewer options in rural communities. In conversations with community members, water access and affordability issues were often intertwined with water quality concerns and questions about rent increases and renters' rights.

### LOCAL AND STATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

1. **Prioritize utility bill assistance to communities of color, low-income, and rural residents**  
Communities of color, low-income communities, and rural communities have difficulty accessing utility bill assistance because there aren't many available resources. We recommend state and federal support for the Low Income Household Water Assistance Program (LIHWA), administered through the Oregon Housing and Community Services.<sup>20</sup> Like the Low Income Heating and Energy Assistance Program (LiHEAP), this program provides water and sewer bill assistance for low-income households. Eligibility needs to expand to low-income renters to help cover their water expenses. Utilities can audit their water costs to see if residents and commercial entities are paying the same rates. They can also explore tiered utility bill assistance programs. State and federal funding can help support utilities in rural areas with a small customer base for needed infrastructure upgrades so that low-income communities don't have to shoulder the cost of water bills.

#### MAKING THE CASE FOR WATER ACCESS & AFFORDABILITY

Communities of color, low-income communities, and rural residents need access to clean and affordable water. Utility bill assistance programs should be based on the household's income and the region's cost of living and made available to residents in all parts of the state. In addition to making water affordable, utilities should eliminate domestic water shut-offs for low-income households. By taking holistic approaches to water affordability, we can ensure that all Oregonians have access to clean and affordable water.

2. **Streamline Processes for Assistance Programs and Reduce Administrative Burden**

It is likely that a low-income household needing utility bill assistance also qualifies for government assistance programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid, and LiHEAP. Community members should be able to apply for all needed support through a single office or navigator, serving as a "one-stop shop." Streamlining application processes will reduce administrative burdens, reduce administrative costs, and increase participation rates. For many families, streamlining application processes can reduce barriers to access. A successful low-income water assistance program invests in trusted community organizers, such as community health workers or community-based organizations, to share information about utility bill assistance with communities.



### 3. Eliminate Residential Shut-offs

During the Covid-19 pandemic, utilities and municipalities took measures to keep water running in homes. However, many of those measures have been lifted, utility bills have increased, and debts are being collected. Consequently, many low-income community members are at risk for or are experiencing water shut-offs in their homes. We need to eliminate water shut-offs for residential use to sustain the long-term economic health of community members. Utilities or state policies should consider income and relative water burden.

4. Join “Human Right to Water” efforts throughout the US  
Too many Oregonians do not have access to safe, clean, affordable, and accessible water. Marginalized groups are often overlooked and face discrimination as they try to access the water and sanitation services they need. We recommend that Oregon legislatively recognize water as a human right.



## CASE STUDIES

### Tiered Assistance Program

In 2017, Philadelphia launched the Tiered Assistance Program (TAP) that offers low-income customers payment plans based on a percentage of their income, with lower rates available for households at or below 50 percent of the federal poverty line. Additionally, if a person isn't eligible based on income, those facing hardships are eligible through the Special Hardships Program. The Water Department works with local community-based organizations to provide TAP application assistance and to connect community members with more resources and support. Once enrolled in a payment plan, customers are eligible for forgiveness of penalties after 24 months of on-time payments.<sup>21</sup> TAP has reduced residential water shut-offs and collections by exempting those enrolled or who just applied for the TAP program. Roughly 50,000 customers are protected from water shut-offs and delinquency charges up to \$1,500.<sup>22</sup>

### Human Right to Water

California became the first state in the country to declare water as a human right, stating that “every human being has the right to safe, clean, affordable, and accessible water adequate for human consumption, cooking, and sanitary purposes.”<sup>23</sup> The United Nations General Assembly explicitly recognizes the human right to water and sanitation.<sup>24</sup>

## COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

In our findings, various Eugene-based respondents spoke about relying on Eugene Water & Electric Board's low-income assistance programs, feeling good about the experience, and how it allowed them to make it through harsh economic times. It is the only place respondents mentioned such a program (having access to it, information about it, and having used it). In Clackamas and Polk Counties, two people talked about being unable to pay their water bill while on unemployment and disability. In Umatilla, Malheur, Washington, Polk, and Clackamas, respondents shared stories of reducing the amount of water they drink or not having or watering food gardens because they could not afford it. Renters, in particular, were often limited by landlords who did not allow growing food in gardens to save on the water bill.

# 4 NATURAL & BUILT INFRASTRUCTURE FOR CLEAN WATER



## THE CHALLENGE: NATURAL AND BUILT INFRASTRUCTURE FOR CLEAN WATER

Communities of color, low-income communities, and rural communities face many challenges related to clean water and sanitation. Race is the strongest predictor of who has access to clean water and sanitation. Nationwide, Black and Latinx households are two times more likely to have inadequate plumbing than their white counterparts, and Native American households are 19 times more likely.<sup>25</sup> Low-income rural communities experience the most drinking water violations and, in many areas, cannot finance needed water infrastructure upgrades because of a small customer base or limited access to loans or other outside funding.<sup>26</sup> Climate change exacerbates water issues by increased drought, mega wildfires, and more frequent and severe storms that threaten water quantity and quality. Inadequate access to clean water and sanitation are not isolated incidents — they impact the health of entire communities.

## LOCAL AND STATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

### 1. Expand federal and state funding for water infrastructure projects

Federal funding for water infrastructure has systematically decreased since the 1970s.<sup>28</sup> Federal funding can help support utilities in rural areas with a small customer base by increasing funds available in State Revolving Funds, Community Development Block Grants, and USDA-Rural Development Grants. Although recent federal infrastructure funding will allow essential infrastructure upgrades, this infusion is designed as a one-time investment. To meet the continuing need of communities, investments will need to be sustained. At the state level, agencies can reduce barriers by simplifying application processes to make it easier for small communities or Tribes to access funding, offering targeted matching funds that are often needed to access federal grants, and supporting technical assistance and capacity to groups accessing funding resources.

### MAKING THE CASE FOR NATURAL AND BUILT INFRASTRUCTURE FOR CLEAN WATER

Discriminatory practices embedded in past water infrastructure programs and the decline of federal funding for water infrastructure development drive water injustices today.<sup>27</sup> Oregon can address these inequities by declaring access to clean water and sanitation a public health emergency. Long-lasting solutions must include consistent and institutionalized investments in natural infrastructure and developing alternatives to centralized systems that are not affordable or practical remote areas. Water infrastructure investments must also clean and protect bodies of water for spiritual, cultural, and recreational practices.

### 2. Fund programs to test, repair, and replace household-level infrastructure, including wells and septic systems

Across Oregon, many low-income people, including many Indigenous and immigrant communities, do not trust their water because of poor odor, taste, appearance, or experiences with the water. There is a significant resource gap for Oregonians to test and repair their domestic wells and septic systems, leaving many communities vulnerable to public health risks. Oregon needs to invest in testing, remediation, and replacement of very small systems (15 connections or less), domestic wells, and septic systems, especially in the following areas: groundwater-limited areas that run dry

in the summer, farmworker housing, multifamily housing, mobile home parks, childcare centers, and schools. Regulation, education, and resources must ensure that renters receive regular water quality reports for utility and well water. Trusted community partners should help with water testing and education. These partners could be community health workers, community-based organizations, or trained community members in a workforce development program. All programs and information must be in multiple languages, accessible, and multimedia formats.



**3. Prioritize water and land planning equally, and collaborate across agencies**

Community members expressed worry about their wells running dry as agricultural or housing developments increase and droughts become more common. Across the state and especially in groundwater-limited areas, Oregon needs to integrate how land use changes, urban growth boundary expansions, and a changing climate impact water resources. Oregon must have an integrated water and land planning approach that accounts for future availability as part of development planning and before approval of water allocation.

**4. Put natural infrastructure on the same playing field as built infrastructure**  
Funding for sustaining and restoring natural infrastructure must be a priority for the long-term health of ecosystems. By incorporating nature into water management, we build sustainable, resilient, and often more cost-effective systems that support prosperous communities and healthy ecosystems. With direct and associated co-benefits, natural infrastructure approaches will be crucial to Oregon's water future.<sup>29</sup>

**5. Restore polluted sites, including Superfund sites**  
Tribes, communities of color, and other frontline communities have led environmental and racial justice advocacy around polluted areas in Oregon, including Superfund sites.

Groups historically or currently impacted by contaminated sites must guide clean-up efforts, and efforts should benefit frontline communities (through mechanisms such as Community Benefits Agreements). The involvement of frontline communities elevates the cultural, spiritual, recreational, and subsistence relationships to land and water.

Photo by Dan Meyers, Unsplash



**Tillamook, Oregon**



## CASE STUDIES

### Hydropanels for Water

The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs require substantial upgrades to their water infrastructure, including replacing pipes and water treatment systems. Over the last few years, they have explored new hydropanel technology that can supplement existing systems. Solar panels pull condensation from the air and become a local, self-sustaining water source.<sup>30</sup>

### State Water Infrastructure Funds

California established the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund which will provide \$1.4 billion over 11 years for water infrastructure projects, strengthening the state's commitment to the human right to water. It prioritizes disadvantaged communities, and funds can be used for operations and maintenance.<sup>31</sup>

### Frontline Advocacy at Superfund Site

Portland Harbor Community Coalition is a collective of organizations and individuals representing frontline communities who elevate the voices of communities most impacted by pollution in the Portland Harbor Superfund site. They ensure that impacted communities benefit from and lead the harbor's cleanup, restoration, and redevelopment. Their advocacy has led to a complete cleanup of Willamette Cove, among other wins.<sup>32</sup>



## COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Odor and coloring issues were common in interviews in Independence, OR. Although local utilities are aware, the problem persists in farmworker housing. In various areas in and around Ontario and Umatilla, there's a confirmed lead in rentals occupied by Latinx community members. There hasn't been lead education in mobile home parks where water seems questionable and homes predate the 1970s. Many migrant households in Polk, Clackamas, Washington, Umatilla, and Malheur Counties reported buying bottled water because they do not know their tap water's origin, quality, or treatment process.

**"They say the water is good, but I'm not so sure because when I use it to cook, it looks dirty."**

- Christina, Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN), 2020

Clatsop County residents had concerns about how the development of residential communities would impact water supply.



Andra Secelean

# 5

## EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS



### THE CHALLENGE: EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Oregon is expected to experience more natural disasters due to changing climate patterns. In some parts of Oregon, communities face increased flooding during winter. In the summer, other parts of the state encounter wildfires, severe drought, and harmful algae blooms that contaminate drinking water. Frontline communities experience the impacts of climate change first and worst.

### LOCAL AND STATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

1. Update state and county emergency notification systems for culturally specific needs to reach non-English speaking, low-income, Tribal, and rural residents and businesses

Emergency notifications for fire, floods, wildfire smoke, boil water notices, and other emergencies miss groups that don't speak English (e.g., Spanish, Mixtec, Zapotec, Somali, Nepali, Arab, Burmese), don't have access to cell service, or otherwise fall through the cracks. State and federal funding is needed to update emergency notification systems to fill these gaps, especially at local levels (such as city and district). Investments in notification systems upgrades should include consultation with Tribes and community-based organizations about how to best reach the communities they serve. There should also be specific funding for Tribes and community-based organizations to pursue emergency-related education and outreach efforts (including non-federally recognized Tribes).

Emergency managers can work with partners to establish social networks, use radio stations, engage community health workers, and send information through schools.

2. Ensure communities don't fall through the cracks in disaster relief

During the Labor Day fire in 2020, 37 of 56 fire-affected communities had fewer than 15 water connections. These very small systems are ineligible for most federal and state disaster relief. Similarly, low-income and non-English speakers are more likely to have their disaster relief applications rejected or don't apply at all.<sup>33</sup> Non-federally recognized Tribes like Chinook Indian Nation receive fewer resources and relief aid than federally recognized Tribes. After disasters, Oregon needs resource navigators who can work in various languages. Additionally, Oregon needs to audit the barriers to accessing disaster relief and reduce them (e.g., do not require documentation of immigration status for disaster relief fund applications). Oregon can invest in the community health workers developed during the Covid response to continue building relationships with the community and help them navigate administrative processes to access the resources they need before and after an emergency or disaster.

#### MAKING THE CASE FOR EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

In our community conversations about water, many community members raised concerns about emergency notifications and resources during emergency events. Emergency communication and resources are intertwined with water justice issues and are real experiences for community members living on the frontlines of disaster impacts. Knowing that Oregon will continue to face climate challenges in the following years, we must invest in emergency communications and resources to support those most impacted.



## CASE STUDIES

### Community Warning System

In Northern California, Contra Costa County has an effective emergency notification system called the Community Warning System. This system uses voice, text, and email alert messaging, sirens, and radio to deliver major local, regional, and national emergency alerts. Registration is not required to receive messages on a smartphone.<sup>34</sup>

### Community Radio

KWSO 91.9 FM is a non-commercial community radio station owned and operated by the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs. Their mission is to provide Warm Springs community members with local news, information, and cultural knowledge and to increase awareness of health and safety issues. The station runs 24/7 and reaches over 50,000 listeners across Jefferson County and Deschutes Counties.<sup>35</sup>

## COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

"[During the 2020 wildfires] For my little family that I have, me and my son, we don't have money to go away from the area . . . And some people didn't have phones, so reaching certain family was really difficult."

- Tabitha (Latinx, Eugene), NAACP Eugene-Springfield, 2020

"The most important thing is the language. It needs to be translated because there have been times when they give you information regarding water, but it's only in one language so until you don't go to a place like, like a community place I could say"

- Mariana, Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN), 2020



## THE CHALLENGE: COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

Historically, water infrastructure investments have not created equal benefits for all communities. Infrastructure underinvestment, environmental degradation, toxic pollution, and displacement have disproportionately impacted Tribes, communities of color, low-income communities, and rural communities. Without the voices, knowledge, and experience of most affected community members, water policies will continue to perpetuate injustices and miss opportunities to incorporate community strength and creativity.

## LOCAL AND STATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

1. Fund water positions in Tribes, tribal organizations, and community-based organizations that serve communities of color to provide water education, water law and policy, and emergency response preparation to members

The community members that we talked to trust their community-based organizations. Oregon needs to invest in community-based organizations to create water-specific positions, including those that can help water agencies and utilities engage communities (e.g., drinking water testing, setting water infrastructure priorities, engaging in policy). Investments must be long-term and large enough for CBOs to bring additional staff. County and State governments are not always equipped or have the relationships to do engagement with communities who have not been included in water conversations but want to participate (e.g., immigrants, Tribal youth, farmworkers, or renters). For any infrastructure investments, it is important to commit funds to engage Black, Indigenous, and residents of color and businesses, so they can participate in the benefits of those investments.

### MAKING THE CASE FOR COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

Investing in community capacity is just as critical as infrastructure investments because it opens pathways for more equitable laws and policies that serve communities. Water policies and infrastructure investments need to include funds for community capacity, local water stewardship, and water policy education that is led by and co-designed with Tribes, community-based organizations, Black, Indigenous, and other leaders of color, and low-income and rural communities.

2. Fund water positions in Tribes, tribal organizations, and community-based organizations that serve communities of color to lead water stewardship activities

Tribes have been stewarding water since time immemorial. State, local government, and utilities must invest in existing Tribal water stewardship and expand funding for new programs and partnerships. Additionally, we found that other communities in Oregon want to know how to steward their drinking water and rivers in Oregon. First-generation immigrants are often well-informed about water sources and stewardship in countries of origin and wish to be as informed in Oregon. We heard about cultural ways of caring for water from Indigenous Latinx and Afro-Indigenous people that can enrich water policy.

Larger cities often have stormwater outreach and water conservation programs, but those don't always reach immigrants. Smaller towns and counties don't always have the same capacity to deliver such programs. Many parents said that the best way to reach them was through their children. There is a desire for more shared water stewardship learning opportunities. State and local authorities

can invest in education, stewardship, and workforce development opportunities that celebrate communities' rich histories, knowledge, and perspectives.

3. **Invest in water policy education that is designed or co-designed with Tribes or community-based organizations that serve communities of color**  
People want to know more about water and be involved in water policy. To be engaged, they need their languages, experiences with, and cultural values and knowledge about water reflected in water management and policy education. Several cities have civic education programs for community leaders on how policy decisions get made, issues in the community, and leadership skills.<sup>36</sup> Let's guarantee that similar initiatives around water include the community's expertise and engage their culturally specific experiences.
4. **Invest in culturally sensitive communication and outreach specialists who can work with underserved populations and provide technical, policy, and legal assistance to the efforts above**  
The state needs to hire staff who are trained in culturally sensitive communication and outreach and can provide technical, policy, and legal assistance to the community leaders listed above. These positions would help oversee statewide initiatives and assist community-based movements.
5. **Invest in Tribes, tribal organizations, and community-based organizations that serve communities of color to provide workforce development in water and environmental careers**  
There must be career pathways in water and environmental sector jobs at all levels, from entry-level to executive director. Green workforce development includes job pathways in climate resilience, water infrastructure, natural infrastructure, clean energy, and environmental restoration.



Joana Campinas for ArtistsForClimate.org

## CASE STUDIES

### Anahuac Farm

The Anahuac Farm is a community-centered program in Woodburn, Oregon, that works to reclaim their ancestral culture, traditions, knowledge, and values. This program offers Capaces community members traditional education in agriculture, culinary and cultural arts, wellness, and native languages.<sup>37</sup>

### Chinook Reclaim Tansy Point

In 2019, the Chinook Indian Nation reclaimed Tansy Point. These 10 acres of land sit at the mouth of the Columbia River and is the “birthplace of one of the most laborious hopes and traumatic abandonments” in Chinook history. Now, tribal members are identifying and tending natural resources and are establishing Tansy Point as a canoe journey destination.<sup>38</sup>

### Tribal Convenings on Water

Founded upon the idea that water is a critical and invaluable resource for many tribal communities, Changing Currents: Tribal Water Summits convenes staff and leadership from Tribes across the Northwest to discuss water resource protection, develop priorities, and explore opportunities at the state level. Following the first summit in 2017, Changing Currents became a project of the Affiliated Tribes of the Pacific Northwest and continues to build interest around water stewardship.<sup>39</sup>

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