



Community Adaptations to Persistent Water Shortages

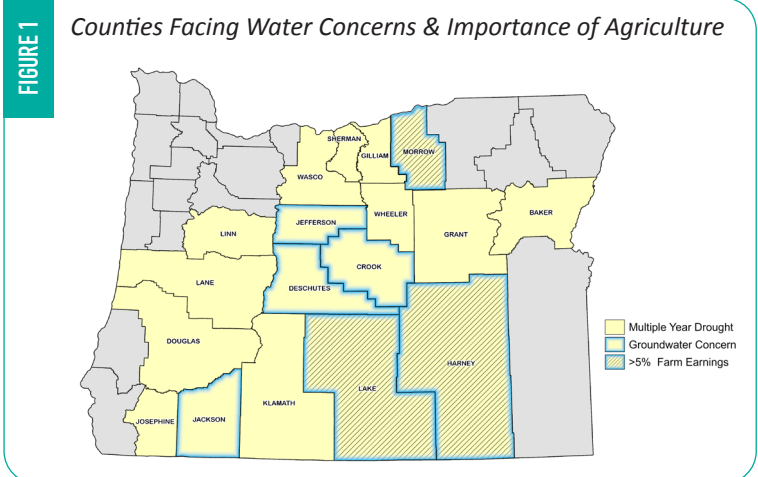
Summary for Decision-Makers

Across Oregon, 18 counties are experiencing persistent water shortages (defined as more than half the county being in severe drought more than half the time in the past six years). Seven of those counties also have groundwater areas of concern (e.g., where groundwater levels have declined excessively, have more permits to pump than water available, or where pumping has been restricted). For about half of the 18 counties, agriculture employs more than 10% of residents and accounts for more than 5% of total county earnings (see Figure 1). These Oregon communities have natural resource economies and ecosystems that rely on water and will likely need support in adapting to less water availability.

The Oregon Water Policy and Innovation Service conducted an analysis of how the State of Oregon could help communities adapt to persistent water shortages in ways that:

- Maintain enough labor and investment in natural resource sectors, so farmers, ranchers, and foresters can continue to steward the landscape;
- Encourage economic development with an “all hands” funding approach from foundations, state, and federal agencies (not just economic development agencies); and
- Center on a community’s vision for the prosperity of their place and their people.

The analysis was informed by state policies from 26 case studies and by interviews with 27 national and state experts in rural development, resilience planning, and water management.



The [Oregon Water Policy and Innovation Service](#) is a joint project of Portland State University, Rural Engagement and Vitality Center at Eastern Oregon University, and Southern Oregon University to provide objective, third-party analysis of Oregon’s toughest water policy challenges.

Key Considerations as Oregon Looks at Policy Options

The full report is intended as a menu of options and does not provide specific recommendations. Here are some considerations Oregon decision-makers might keep in mind as they weigh policy options:

- Good information on water availability, use, and trends, with a local plan, is important.
- There is experience from Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board's Focused Investment Partnerships, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's strategic investments, and Oregon Water Resources Department's place-based planning that could inform how to better coordinate state agency actions in service of locally-defined plans and objectives.
- Adaptation involves unpredictable change, and communities need access to flexible, consistent funding over time (e.g., six years). There are examples, like community development block grants or trust-based philanthropy, that could support flexible funding.
- Investment from federal, state, and foundation sources can help with adaptation, but it is not a substitute for local investments that sustain changes over time.

Policy Options to Support Community Adaptations to Water Shortages

The full report provides 11 policy options, housed under three guiding “pillars” to support communities during a significant change process (see Figure 2).



Research revealed that communities adapting to persistent water shortages wrestle with various aspects of rural economic development, water resource management, and the fundamental role of governments. As such, state-level support would need to package coordinated actions, and the full report provides three example packages. These range from executive actions and no additional budget, to legislative authorizations with pilot-level budget, to significant legislative action with significant state budget.

Access the full report at

<https://www.pdx.edu/policy-consensus-center/water-policy-and-innovation-service>