

## **Balancing Water Interests and Building Local Water Planning Capacity: Lessons Learned from Oregon's Pilot Place-Based Planning Program**

In 2015, the Oregon Legislature passed ORS 536.220 which granted authority to the Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) to make grants and provide technical assistance to communities engaging in place-based integrated water resources planning. In 2016, OWRD awarded grants to four pilot place-based planning groups:

- Lower John Day Place-Based Partnership
- Harney Community-Based Water Planning Collaborative
- Upper Grande Ronde River Watershed Partnership
- Mid-Coast Water Planning Partnership

The planning guidelines called for the groups to engage multiple water interests (in stream and out-of-stream) in planning and to do so using consensus-based decision-making.

In 2021, OWRD contracted with the National Policy Consensus Center and Oregon State University Extension Service to conduct a participatory evaluation of the pilot program. The evaluation team worked with the planning groups and state agencies to design the evaluation. The team gathered data through scoping interviews, workshops with the planning groups and state agency staff, an on-line survey of planning group participants, and interviews with the OWRD's place-based planning coordinators and program manager. Some of the key lessons learned are summarized below.

***1. Engaging multiple water interests, including both instream and out-of-stream interests, is hard. It is important to pay careful attention to process design and provide multiple ways for stakeholders to engage in planning.***

- Planning processes are more likely to achieve the goal of engaging a broad range of interests if they are structured in ways that encourage participants to provide input, allow participants to engage in multiple ways, and incorporate strong and on-going community engagement efforts.
- Skilled facilitation and the presence of paid staff with community engagement skills are important for ensuring participation by a broad and balanced set of water interests.

***2. Consistent and adequate levels of state funding for both local planning groups and the core state agencies are critical for successful place-based planning.***

- Adequate funding enables the groups to hire dedicated planning coordinators or engage consultants to do the work of organizing meetings, facilitation, and other essential tasks for which it may be difficult to recruit volunteers.
- Funding is also essential for the state agencies, who have key roles to play in place-based planning. With sufficient resources, the state agencies can respond more quickly to technical assistance requests and be more engaged as planning group members.

***3. Place-based planning requires technical and other key skills. Participants need to include not just a balance of interests, but also individuals with the types of technical and collaboration skills needed to accomplish the work.***

- At a minimum, the skills and knowledge required include project management, community engagement, facilitation, water science, ecology or biology, water law, and technical plan writing.
- Where core technical skills are absent, groups will need to seek outside partners to fill the gaps.