



PRESS RELEASE

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Legislative Investments Support Oregon Communities Impacted by Drought

Bipartisan action yields results

SALEM, Ore. - Responding to increasingly severe and persistent drought across the state, legislators have taken significant bipartisan action in recent sessions by investing more than \$100 million in drought relief and resiliency, including [investments](#) made this past December.

On Wednesday, local leaders testified to the House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources about how millions in state dollars provided effective drought relief, helping impacted communities with critical support for Oregon producers, domestic water assistance, soil health and irrigation, and aid for endangered species.

“Our investments are working and providing critical relief for Oregon farmers, ranchers, landscapes, and communities,” said [Representative Ken Helm](#) (D-Washington County), chair of the House committee. “But the work isn’t done. With persistent drought representing a new normal that strains our natural resources and communities, there will be a special emphasis in the coming session on how we prepare long-term.”

“Central Oregon has contended with drought and wildfires that threaten our ecosystem and economy. These investments have provided vital aid to communities in this region,” [Representative Jason Kropf](#) (D-Bend) said. “Moving forward, we must continue to look for innovative solutions so we can build a sustainable future for Oregonians.”

Some highlights from the testimony include:

Domestic Water Assistance: Supported by investments from the Legislature, areas like Klamath County have increased access to domestic water assistance, helping to stabilize access, alleviate financial burden, and provide a sense of normalcy for impacted

communities. In total, \$6 million was allocated to cities and counties to provide domestic and community well assistance.

“We have worked with the state on what I consider the most productive, most effective response that I’ve ever been a part of,” Klamath County Commissioner Kelley Minty told lawmakers. “The partnership with the state has been phenomenal, but we will continue to need your help.”

With an additional \$5.4 million from the Legislature, the Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) created a statewide Water Well Abandonment, Repair, and Replacement Fund to provide financial assistance to permanently abandon, repair or replace a water well used for household purposes. The program is still accepting applications. For information on how to apply, interested parties are encouraged to [visit the fund’s website](#). Priority will be given for low- to moderate-income households in areas impacted by drought or wildfire.

Support for Oregon Producers: Recent updates from the Oregon Disaster Assistance Program (ODAP) show that farmers and ranchers across the state who suffered losses due to natural disasters in 2021 have received \$19.5 million in emergency relief. This forgivable loan program has filled in federal funding gaps by providing direct assistance payments. Additional assistance for small-scale farmers was provided through the Oregon Community Food Systems Network, which received \$1.5 million in state funding.

“Farmers feed our families. Oregon farmers have been hard hit the last several years with drought and natural disasters. Many of our farmers are still viable because of the funding made available from the Oregon Disaster Assistance Payment Program,” said [Representative Mark Owens](#) (R-House District 60). “I look forward to building a bipartisan drought package that will bring our irrigation systems into the 21st century and help our farmers continue to grow food and fiber with less water.”

Soil Health: Recognizing the vital importance of healthy soils to Oregon’s agricultural sector, the Legislature dedicated \$3 million to alleviate risks such as erosion, soil degradation, and invasive weeds in Jefferson County, benefiting over 24,500 acres of farmland. So far, \$2.8 million has been sent out to producers for expense reimbursements to maintain soil conservation practices. Reimbursements were calculated on a per acre basis.

“I’ve received dozens of phone calls from participants thanking us for the assistance,” said Staci Merkt, District Manager of the Jefferson County Soil and Water Conservation District. “These are the types of programs we hope to see more of in the future.”

Fish Passage: Drought investments helped alleviate persistent threats to endangered fish and other aquatic species with \$8 million in state funding allocated in 2022. This funding has addressed 96 barriers and restored fish passage to over 500 stream miles and 200 acres of valuable tidal habitat. State investments have also helped pull down millions of dollars in associated federal funding and supported rural infrastructure improvements like culvert replacements, new diversion projects, and new tide gates.

“When we solve historical problems that affect our streams and our fish runs, especially the listed species, it creates space to collaborate with agriculture and irrigation in a way that

reciprocates itself into future projects. It's good to see those multiple benefits hit the ground," Rep. Helm said.

To find out about the state's Fish Screening and Passage Grant Program, visit the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's (ODFW) [informational page](#).

Irrigation District Assistance: As part of its action on drought, the Legislature allocated more than \$6 million to provide stability for a number of irrigation districts whose patrons have been hit hard by water scarcity. In addition, the Legislature appropriated funds to upgrade irrigation infrastructure around the state, with the potential to leverage millions of dollars more in federal funding.

The Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) is currently administering a \$1.6 million statewide grant opportunity for irrigation modernization, in addition to \$2 million allocated to the North Unit Irrigation District. These investments will improve stream flows and increase irrigation efficiency, resulting in significant benefits for both the environment and local economies. For more details on OWEB's statewide grant program, visit the [grant overview and guidance document](#).

A [recording](#) of Wednesday's hearing is available on the Oregon Legislature's website.

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