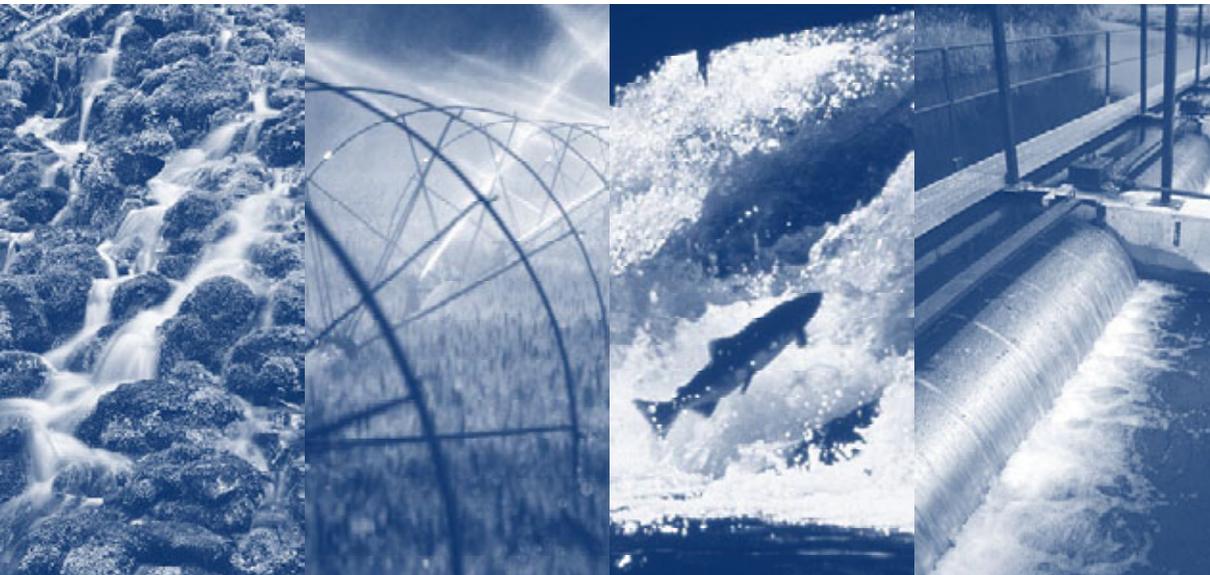


*Oregon  
Water Resources  
Department*



OVERVIEW  
*of*  
MISSION  
AND  
PROGRAMS

January 1999

*“Serving the public by practicing and promoting  
wise long-term water management.”*

# Oregon's water serves many beneficial uses



**T**he soggy winter and spring climate of northwest Oregon has given the state a reputation of water abundance. However, this perception obscures an important fact: each year the state's water supply falls far short of the demands placed on it. In dry years the shortages can be dramatic, leading to extensive crop losses, forest fires, damage to fish runs, and disruption of the economy.

In 1909, the citizens of Oregon authorized the state government to manage the allocation of surface water. In 1995, the Oregon Legislature added ground water management. Under these laws—the "Oregon Water Code"—all surface and ground water belongs to the public. It is the job of the Water Resources Department to manage this water for the protection of existing water uses, the environment, and future needs. The Department works to ensure a sufficient supply to meet the needs of Oregon's growing economy and quality of life.

*Water Resources Department staff use observation wells and stream gages to gather data about the state's water resources.*



*Combining streamflow and ground water data with public involvement helps decision makers to establish policies for meeting Oregon's water needs.*



*Using information and laws, agency staff manage Oregon's water resources. Department programs address supply needs, instream flow enhancements, and the protection of water rights.*



# What we do

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## Study the resources

The Water Resources Department employs hydrogeologists, engineers, hydrologists, geographers and other highly trained technicians that work to improve our knowledge of the water resources of Oregon's rivers, streams, lakes, aquifers, springs, and reservoirs.

These staff gather data from surface water sources and wells throughout Oregon using state-of-the-art technology and methods. This information is prepared using computer models for use by staff and citizens in making decisions about future uses of the resource.

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## Implement laws and policy

The Department uses water resources data and adds to it the comments gathered from the public to advise the Water Resources Commission in setting statewide water policy. These *administrative rules* guide the Department in issuing permits for the use of water. Another policy tool, the *Basin Plan*, describes the kinds of uses allowed in certain areas and a series of *water resource policies* guides staff in reviewing requests for water. Using these policies, and laws set by the Legislature, the Department administers water rights for both out-of-stream and instream benefits.

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## Manage the resource

Using knowledge gained by studying the state's water resources, and the direction provided by law and policy, agency staff manage programs that allocate the state's water, protect existing water rights, and plan for future uses. The Department works with water right holders and the public to meet water supply needs without causing damage to the resource or injury to other water rights.

# Understanding Oregon's water resources

## Streamflow data

The Department gathers, analyzes, and publishes data about the surface water of the state. Using automated stream gaging stations, the Department collects streamflow information at more than 200 sites around the state. Watermasters also routinely measure the streamflows in their districts to maintain accurate accounts of flow quantities. This information also helps the Department to enforce existing water rights during low-flow periods.

## Ground water data

The Department maintains 336 data collection sites in a statewide network of observation wells. The agency's ground water hydrogeologists also gather information from more than 3,000 test wells. These staff work with the United States Geological Survey in cooperative studies mapping and assessing ground water resources in the Willamette and Deschutes Basins and other areas.

## Water availability analysis

Data on streams, rivers, and existing water rights are used in a computerized streamflow model to help determine if water is available for new uses. When someone applies for a new water use, this information allows Department staff to assess if enough water is available to support the new use above and beyond existing uses.



*Water Resources Department staff gather data such as streamflow measurements (above) and well levels from sites around the state. They add this information to computer data bases (left) for determining water availability and planning future uses. Water rights and water uses are digitized (above left) for use in advanced mapping systems.*

# Administering Oregon's water laws

## Water rights

Almost all uses of surface and ground water require a "water right" from the Water Resources Department which establishes the amount and use of water at a given location. Water rights are permanent and attached to the land where the use was approved unless they are formally transferred to other land, abandoned or forfeited through non-use. Since 1909, the state has issued about 80,000 water rights.

## "First in time, first in right"

The priority date of a water right is the date it was established and determines who will get water first in times of low flow. It is much like having a "place in line." The older the priority date—the closer you are to the front of the line—the more likely the water will be available during times of less supply.

## Public interest

The Department reviews applications for water use and determines if water is available for new uses and decides if the proposed uses would be adverse to the public interest. In some areas, rivers, streams, and aquifers are so depleted by water diversions that no further water rights can reasonably be granted.

## Instream rights

In 1987, the Department began to issue water rights for the protection of fish and wildlife, water quality, and recreation. Like their out-of-stream counterparts, these "instream" water rights have priority dates and are regulated to meet the needs of senior rights. The only major difference is that the water is left instream for beneficial use.



*Under Oregon law, in order to take and use surface and ground water, a person must first obtain a water right from the Water Resources Department. This allows the state to manage a vital resource and protect it for current and future needs. State laws and policies help prevent injury to existing economies (above) and meet growing water demands while protecting instream needs (above left) and serving a growing population (left).*

## Combining information and policy to manage Oregon's water resources

### Watermasters: distributing water, enforcing water laws

The Department's watermasters, well inspectors, and field staff distribute water in a stream system based on water right priority dates. They also actively enforce water laws to prevent the diversion or appropriation of water without the required state permits. In the summer, when streamflows are low, watermasters monitor supplies and water use. Watermasters address complaints from water users when not enough water is available to meet their entitlements. They may visit diversion sites to limit—or shut off—water users junior to those who are not receiving water. Watermasters also monitor streamflow levels to protect instream water rights.

### Dam safety

To protect downstream communities or property from dam failures, the Department reviews the plans and specifications for any dam 10 or more feet in height and storing more than 9.2 acre feet of water. (That is about 3 million gallons.) Watermasters perform dam safety inspections and advise owners of routine maintenance requirements, review design proposals, and monitor dam construction.

### Well and ground water management

The Department licenses well drillers, enforces well construction standards, and maintains records of well logs. Regional well inspectors monitor well construction to check compliance with state standards. These standards are in place to protect the ground water resource from contamination, waste, and loss of artesian pressure.



*Watermasters (above left, above) use water measurements to enforce water permit conditions and protect “senior” water rights in times of low flow or from injury caused by illegal use. Department well inspectors (left) work with well drillers to ensure that well construction standards are met.*

## Divisions and districts—a statewide network

### Field and Technical Services

This is the largest of the agency's divisions and includes five regional offices and 19 watermaster districts. Information services, water availability analysis, dam safety, enforcement, well construction, water right transfers, and ground water hydrology are some of the areas covered by staff in this division.

### Water Rights and Adjudications

This division assesses incoming applications for new water use, issues water right permits, certificates and limited licenses, coordinates hydroelectric relicensing, and serves as a record-keeping body for the existing water rights in Oregon. The division also organizes and processes adjudications of pre-1909 water right claims.

### Resource Management

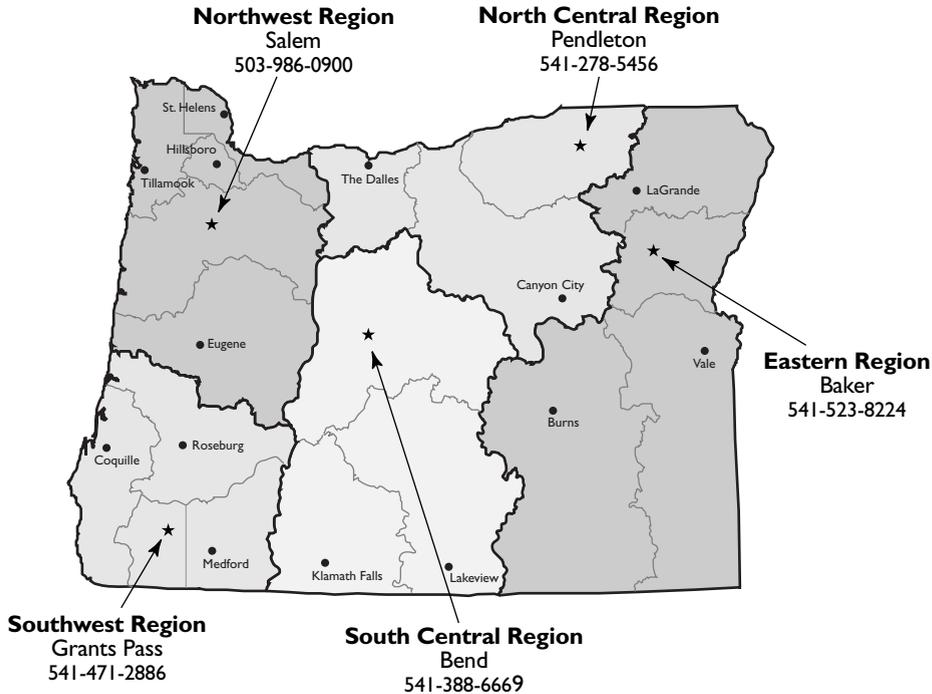
This division provides technical assistance and reviews water management and conservation plans, assists in water supply and basin planning, and coordinates instream leases, reservations of water, and water planning activities with other agencies and public.

### Administrative Services

The agency's day to day operations are supported through fiscal management, personnel, training, clerical support, copy center, and mailroom functions.

### Director's Office

This office serves to coordinate policy, legislation, public information and contested case hearings.



## Statewide network

*Department headquarters and the Northwest Regional Office are located in Salem. The Department also has four other regional offices and 14 district offices throughout the state. Many of the services of the Department are offered through these field locations in order to provide the most effective customer service at a local level.*

- ★ 5 regional offices
- 14 district offices

## Providing publications, reports, and data

### *Water Rights in Oregon*

This booklet provides an introduction to the water rights system and Oregon's water laws. It includes information about water uses which require a water right and a description of the application and transfer process.

### Data and online services: *www.wrd.state.or.us*

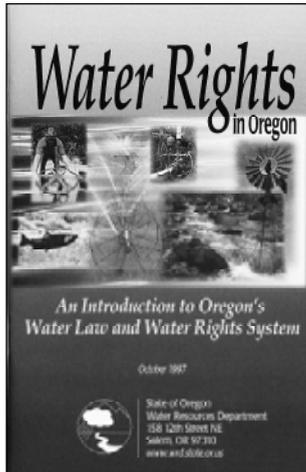
The Department's web site offers access to data bases and other information about the Department. Internet clients can access a water rights inventory, check on water availability, and view a data base of more than 200,000 well logs. Customers can use a search feature to research the administrative rules and statutes that pertain to water use or download a map of water rights on nearly any stream in Oregon.

### Reports and studies

Reports that are prepared for the Oregon Legislature or the Water Resources Commission are also available to the public. These range from task force recommendations and topical issue papers to basin maps and reports. A list of agency reports can be obtained by contacting the Department.

### *The Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds*

The Department has been a key contributor to the Oregon Plan. This is a combination of salmon recovery efforts and stream improvements that aim to restore and protect Oregon's watersheds. The full plan can be viewed at the Department or on the web: [www.oregon-plan.org](http://www.oregon-plan.org).



*“Water Rights in Oregon” (above left) is a simple guide to the water rights system used by the Department. Information and data provided by the Department is also available through the agency web site (above). Internet clients can access maps of water rights, copies of administrative rules, and information about water levels, along with more than 200,000 well logs. This Ground Water Resource Information Distribution system (GRID) is also contained on CD-ROM (left).*



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