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Deschutes Groundwater Mitigation Program: Questions and Concerns

The League of Women Voters of Deschutes County (LWVDC) would like to take this opportunity while the department is reviewing the Deschutes Groundwater Mitigation Program (DGMP) to share a few of our concerns about the program.

LWVDC considers protecting groundwater recharge and discharge to be a primary goal of the mitigation program that should be clearly stated. The Deschutes Basin aquifer, once considered so vast it could not be depleted, has been adversely affected by the multi-decadal drought.

Division of the sub-basins into zones of interference helps identify surface and groundwater interaction except in the “general zone”. This zone includes two of the largest cities, tens of thousands of wells, and a complicated volcanic geology that redirects surface and groundwater flow in ways that can vary within townships. For the purposes of rural and municipal water and land use planning defining the general zone in more detail would identify areas of concern for the timing and location of surface and groundwater recharge and discharge to allow the best uses of existing resources to benefit the community.

In order to ensure effective management and community resilience a safety factor of 2 AF of mitigation water should be provided for each AF of groundwater credit. *The League of Women Voters of the United States believe that natural resources should be managed as interrelated parts of life-supporting ecosystems. Resources should be conserved and protected to assure their future availability.*

Recognizing that “*effective planning for water protection and use is most effective with a complete inventory of the water resource including all domestic wells*” (LWV Oregon), we suggest that a committee of exempt well owners be convened to measure and study the groundwater resource and their uses and to make recommendations to OWRD.

Historic over-allocation of irrigation water by the Duffy decrees to provide water to farms in some senior districts resulted in irrigation diversions rates of ~9 to 15 AF/A of water to deliver ~5 AF/A of duty on farm. Modernization of the system could save between 40—60% of current agriculture supply especially if used for a beneficial use without waste.

It appears to us that basin programs and plans to conserve water and meet stakeholder needs rely disproportionately on funding, particularly by non-agricultural tax payers. Federal taxes support NRCS grants that make District piping and conservation possible. State taxes fund agencies that study, monitor, regulate resources, and fund water projects. City and county tax revenue provides permits and

funding for projects and infrastructure. Deschutes homeowners approved a dedicated property tax of more than 1% for the Deschutes Soil and Water District to help farmers invest in conservation equipment. The community has supported agricultural modernization in hopes of restoration of the river for the ecosystem, food, and recreational benefits it provides for residents and tourists.

“Basin/watershed management should be efficient and economical, responsive to public need, flexible to allow for changes over time, and lead to conservation and allocation of the resource in the public interest.” League of Women Voters of Oregon.

We suggest, rather than assigning the 25-75% of water as allowed under the Conserved Water Act to inter- and intra-district needs or personal profit from sale of water rights to create mitigation credits, that 50-75% of the conserved water, no longer essential for agriculture production due to irrigation modernization, be managed in the public interest by a public agency for beneficial use without waste.

The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs believe that water is the first gift from the Great Spirit and fish the second. Water is therefore free to all people and resources are managed to provide for seven future generations. We do not produce our precipitation nor did we create the river and its inhabitants and the valuable ecologic benefits they provide.

The water belongs to the people and is essential to life. Its use should benefit all living beings without regard to ability to pay. Commodification of water reifies and exacerbates the sense of “ownership” fostered by our water laws. Treating water as a commodity subject to the law of supply and demand, especially with our current uncertainties and shortages, will lead to undesirable outcomes such as hoarding, speculation, and continued damage to the river.

Mitigation projects such as injection of waste water or untreated river water into the ground for storage must require a high standard of purity to avoid contaminating the aquifer with commercial, medical and potentially harmful chemicals.

Solutions to improve water management should consider the needs and priorities of the community now and in the future, the limitations of the water and funding resources, and the health of the environment. We recognize that state agencies protect the community and appreciate the research, oversight and expertise of OWRD.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment.
The League of Women Voters of Deschutes County

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