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Working together is key to providing water for the future

by Lorna Stickel - 6.18.09

The Columbia River, from its headwaters in British Columbia to its mouth on Oregon's north coast, is the second largest river in the country. The Willamette River – whose valley is home to the majority of Oregon's population – is volumetrically the 10th largest river in the U.S. With that amount of water flowing through the state, it's hard to imagine that Oregon is going to run out of water any time soon, particularly west of the Cascades.



The importance of regional planning and collaboration

Oregon has a panoply of water sources, from reservoirs to rivers to groundwater wells. In the tri-county Portland-metropolitan area these supplies are managed by a collection of water districts, public utility districts and cities. In the early 1990s water planners saw the writing on the wall as the diversity of readily available water rights narrowed. Federal legislation, the Clean Water and Endangered Species Acts, pressure from environmental groups, land-use planning regulations, population growth, and the sheer number of water providers motivated a collective examination of assumptions held about secure water rights for the future. In response, water providers in the Portland-metro area created the Regional Water Supply Plan, a comprehensive, integrated framework of technical information, resource strategies and implementation actions to meet the region's water supply needs to the year 2050.

As a means to implement the plan, water providers formed the Regional Water Providers Consortium in 1997. Over the last 12 years, this group of 24 water providers plus the regional government has worked on critical water supply issues and collaborated on emergency preparedness planning. The Consortium also implements a robust conservation program that utilizes two-thirds of the group's \$740,000 annual budget.

Focusing on mutually beneficial activities while retaining each water provider's authority to operate and upgrade its individual system and infrastructure has allowed the Consortium to weather changing political tides and meet institutional priorities that affect all providers.

Addressing the impacts of climate change and population growth

In Oregon, longer summers will present challenges, even for rain-fed water supplies. This will be especially notable when the demand for drinking water is balanced with other needs, from agriculture to habitat to recreation. In Oregon, the time of year when we need the most water – summer – is the season of least precipitation.

Also, if climate change impacts pan out the way some scientists are predicting, it could mean displacement of human populations to the point where Oregon – especially west of the

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Marketing Cascades – is going to look really attractive to those living in increasingly hot, dry areas in the country. Researchers and land-use planners are just beginning to study this aspect of migration and its impact on existing population forecasts.

So, as population increases and precipitation and temperature patterns change over time, how will we provide the water needed by residents, businesses, farmers and wildlife? I believe there are three approaches that can help:

- Better interconnectivity. Even in the Portland-metro area there are providers that have excess capacity that can be utilized in areas that could purchase that excess supply, or to provide backup supplies for emergencies. We're currently working on a more detailed transmission study that identifies areas where improved interconnectivity of supplies would be beneficial.
- Conservation. Programs and resources tailored both for the residential customer and the commercial/industrial sector can help available water supplies last longer and meet the needs of a growing population. A regional planning and implementation body such as the Consortium can pool resources, provide information, and offer workshops and tools to help homeowners, property managers and businesses make more efficient use of water, and often, save on their water bills.
- Innovation. This is an area of enormous opportunity. For example, potable water is currently used in all types of situations where non-potable supplies could be substituted. Source-switching – that is, using a raw water supply such as wells or rainwater instead of treated, potable water – can be very lucrative for both businesses and residents and help keep millions of gallons of water in the system for other uses. Recycling of water is also being explored and piloted in the Portland area. When a company can reuse some of its water supply – such as using water from cooling coils in another part of a manufacturing process or to flush toilets – water use and waste discharge can be reduced dramatically.



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Successful regional collaboration based on trust

During my 35 years working in land-use and water supply planning I've come to understand that the process is every bit as important as the issues. You've got to account for the "institutional readiness" of each entity involved in the process, allow flexibility for each agency to meet its customers' needs, and then take incremental steps toward identifying key issues and creating a framework for addressing them. Without relationships built on earned trust, regional planning and coordinated implementation would not be possible. Once that platform of trust has been established, it is much easier to work on complex problems of growth, climate change and meeting the future needs for water supplies through conservation and other strategies.

Lorna Stickel is the Regional Water Providers Consortium Project Manager. Learn more about the Consortium at www.conserveh2o.org.

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