

WATER JUSTICE FOR OREGON COMMUNITIES

A Community Engagement Initiative by the Oregon Water Futures Project

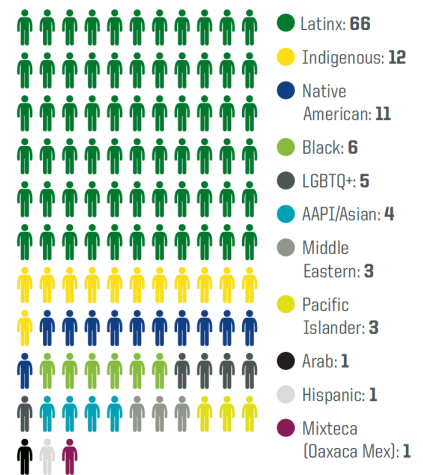
A changing climate, aging infrastructure across the state, and lack of ongoing investment in clean water have left Oregon's water systems stressed, putting our health, safety, economy and environment at risk. Communities of color, particularly those that are rural and low-income, are often on the frontlines of these impacts, facing a wide range of threats, including rising utility rates, disparities in drought and flooding vulnerability, and exposure to nitrates, pesticides, and heavy metals.

In recognition of these challenges and the increasing vulnerability of our water resources, the [Oregon Water Futures](#) Project was formed to elevate water priorities from communities currently underrepresented or historically discriminated against in water policy decision-making.

Elevating Community Voices

In 2020, the Oregon Water Futures Project co-conceptualized and facilitated a series of conversations with Native, Latinx, Black, and various migrant communities across the state – including Indigenous Latin American, Caribbean, Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern, Arab, Pacific Islander, and Somali communities. These conversations lifted up culturally-specific ways of interacting with drinking water and bodies of water; concerns around water quality and cost; resiliency in the face of challenges to access water resources essential for physical, emotional, and spiritual health; and a desire for water resource education and to be better equipped to advocate for water resources.

Participants' Social Identifiers



Water Values + Knowledge

Community members care deeply about our shared water resources and have extensive knowledge and experience to contribute to achieving Oregon's water resource goals. Yet, they face significant barriers to participating in policy and infrastructure discussions. Rural, low-income, Native, Latinx, Black, and immigrant communities must be engaged as water actors, not simply consumers. By bringing their values and culturally-specific knowledge, community members can improve our collective capacity to solve water challenges and address inequities.

Unseen Water Insecurities: Public Health and Safety

Some Oregonians continue to live with serious water quality and availability challenges. Pollution and invasive species are threatening vital food sources and impact sources of income for tribal communities. And with an increase in natural disasters, low-income and non-English speaking households face unique vulnerabilities in our current emergency response systems. There is a gap between the conversations state and local decisions-makers are having and the knowledge, priorities, and concerns of many Oregonians.

Infrastructure + Community Engagement

Investments in community capacity and engagement alongside infrastructure improvements are equally critical to building a more just and sustainable water future for all Oregonians. Historically, infrastructure investments have not created equal benefits for all communities. Investing in community capacity and engagement that is led by and co-designed with tribes, CBOs, BIPOC leaders, and low-income and rural communities will open paths for more equitable laws and policies that serve communities as a whole.

2020 Community Engagement: Statewide Key Themes and Findings

WATER VALUES AND EDUCATION

- Community members care deeply about water and have extensive knowledge and experience to contribute to achieving Oregon's water resource goals
- Community members are motivated to learn more about water and water management; and educate peers drawing from within their communities and other's expertise



Judy Bluehorse Skelton / Eddie Sherman

CAPACITY AND INFORMATION ACCESS

- Water resource challenges are tied to community capacity needs
- Lack of trust is driven by significant information and communication gaps
- Whether you rent or own your home impacts water resources and access to information

DRINKING WATER

- Too many community members experience serious water quality and availability challenges
- Water affordability and water quality are linked. Communities with high costs of water are also reporting concerns with water quality.
- There are well water concerns tied to past experience, poor regulation, and lack of protections for renters

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

- Some community members feel unprepared for disasters due to lack of money, resources and information
- Community and intergovernmental partnerships can help prepare for future emergencies in culturally-specific ways

INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDS

- Flooding impacts livelihoods and public health
- Investments in natural infrastructure are needed to restore cultural resources
- Financial support is needed to address domestic well and septic challenges
- Improving river water quality is an opportunity to connect more people to positive water experiences
- Small water systems and employer-provided housing have inconsistent water access

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT BEST PRACTICES

- Co-create outreach and engagement approaches that center community voices
- Be flexible and adaptable
- Create as much access as possible
- Tap into people's existing values and language
- Ensure adequate funding



The [Oregon Water Futures Project](#) is a collaboration between water and environmental justice interests, Indigenous peoples, communities of color, low-income communities, and academic institutions.

Through a water justice lens, we aim to impact how the future of water in Oregon is imagined through storytelling, capacity building, relationship building, policymaking, and community-centered advocacy at the state and local level.