

Balancing Water Interests and Building Local Water Planning Capacity: Lessons Learned from Oregon’s Pilot Place-Based Planning Program

Place-Based Planning Overview

In 2015, the Oregon Legislature passed ORS 536.220 which granted authority to the Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) to make grants and provide technical assistance to communities engaging in place-based integrated water resources planning. In 2016, OWRD awarded grants to four pilot place-based planning groups:

- Lower John Day Place-Based Partnership
- Harney Community-Based Water Planning Collaborative
- Upper Grande Ronde River Watershed Partnership
- Mid-Coast Water Planning Partnership



Figure 1 – Pilot sites for place-based water planning. Map provided by OWRD.

OWRD drafted planning guidelines based on the principles in Oregon’s Integrated Water Resources Strategy (IWRS). Among others, these principles included engaging multiple water interests (in stream and out-of-stream) in planning and consensus-based decision-making. The guidelines outlined a five-step framework (Table 1) that the groups were meant to follow when developing their Action Plans. The program was initially set to sunset in 2019. However, because the plans took much longer than anticipated to develop, the program was extended through 2023.

Table 1 – The five-step framework

Step 1	Build a collaborative and inclusive process
Step 2	Gather information to understand current water resources and identify gaps in knowledge (instream and out-of-stream)
Step 3	Examine current and future water needs (instream and out-of-stream) for people, the economy, and the environment
Step 4	Develop and prioritize strategic and integrated solutions to meet water needs
Step 5	Create a local integrated water plan

In 2021, OWRD contracted with the National Policy Consensus Center and Oregon State University Extension Service to conduct a participatory evaluation of the pilot program. The evaluation team worked with the planning groups and state agencies involved in place-based planning to design the evaluation, including identifying key topics to cover and data collection approaches. The team gathered data through scoping interviews, workshops with the planning groups and state agency staff, an on-line survey of planning group participants, and interviews with the OWRD’s place-based planning coordinators and program manager.

In this factsheet, we summarize the socio-ecological characteristics of the four pilot planning areas and their place-based planning outcomes. We then describe steps the groups took to incorporate multiple water interests and reach consensus-based decisions, some of the challenges they encountered with doing so, and key gaps in local-level planning capacity that negatively impacted the groups’ ability to complete their plans within the original three-year timeframe. We end with key lessons learned that can inform future integrated water resources planning efforts.

Socio-Ecological Characteristics of the Planning Areas

The Lower John Day, Harney Basin, and Upper Grande Ronde planning areas are located east of the Cascade Range and have semi-arid or arid climates. The Mid-Coast planning area is adjacent to the Pacific Ocean and has a much wetter climate. However, all the planning areas experience ground and surface water shortages during the summer months. Table 3 provides additional details about the each of the planning areas.

¹ Produced for the Oregon Water Resources Department by: McLain, R. and S. Boyers. May 5, 2022. National Policy Consensus Center.

Table 3 – Socio-ecological characteristics of the place-based planning areas

Socio-ecological characteristics	Lower John Day Place-Based Partnership	Harney Community-Based Water Planning Collaborative	Upper Grande Ronde River Watershed Partnership	Mid-Coast Water Planning Partnership
Geographic location and area	Located in north-central Oregon; includes the Lower John Day sub-basin. Encompasses 3,140 square miles, primarily in Gilliam, Wheeler, and Sherman Counties.	Located in southeastern Oregon; the planning area includes the Harney Basin, which covers 5,240 square miles. Most of the Basin is in Harney County.	Located in Union County in northeastern Oregon; is part of the UGR sub-basin. The planning area is nearly congruent with the watershed boundaries and covers 2000 square miles.	Located in Lincoln County on the central Oregon coast, encompasses eight sub-basins. The planning area covers about 980 square miles.
Population	Roughly 5000 people live in the planning area; population density of 2.0 persons per square mile	About 7500 people live in Harney County; population density of 1.9 persons per square mile.	Union County is home to roughly 26,000 people; population density of 12.6 persons per square mile	Lincoln County is home to 50,000 people; population density of 47 persons per square mile.
Economic drivers	Agriculture, ranching, energy development, waste handling, tourism, and recreation	Ranching, farming, retail services, and tourism	Agriculture, ranching, and forest products	Fishing, tourism, logging, real estate, public services, and small businesses
Climate	Semi-arid climate. Most precipitation occurs from late fall to early spring.	Arid climate, precipitation falls primarily from November through June.	Semi-arid climate, with most precipitation occurring in the late fall through early spring.	Mild and wet climate. Most precipitation falls November and March.
Water uses and concerns	Water uses include irrigation, water for livestock, domestic and municipal uses, and instream uses. Surface and groundwater shortages are common in the summer months.	The Greater Harney Valley is a Groundwater Area of Concern. The groundwater deficit is primarily attributable to an overallocation of groundwater for irrigated agriculture.	Most out-of-stream water use is for agriculture, the rest is residential and industrial use. Fish, wildlife, and recreation account for most instream water use. In-stream and out-of-stream water shortages are common during the summer months.	The largest water uses are industrial users, hatcheries, and domestic users. Summers are dry and some streams have inadequate flows during the summer.

Planning Outcomes

As of March 2022, the Upper Grande Ronde group had completed and received state recognition of its plan in and the Lower John Day and Mid-Coast groups were on track to submit their plans for state recognition by June 2022. The Harney Basin group had finished a draft groundwater plan, which they planned to submit for state review in June 2022. They anticipated completing the surface water component in 2023.

Aside from the progress on their plans, all the groups described important incremental wins:

- Place-based planning provided a constructive venue for dialogue where diverse water interests that had not worked together previously could learn about each other’s water needs and concerns, and work toward mutually beneficial solutions.
- Through place-based planning, local-level knowledge about water resources and local and state-wide social networks around water planning were strengthened.
- The core state agencies (the Oregon Water Resources Department, Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, Oregon Department of Agriculture, and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife) reported that place-based planning had improved agency understandings of local needs; the local groups reported that they now had a better understanding of agency constraints.
- As the groups worked on their plans, they identified critical water resources data gaps, some of which the state agencies have already taken steps to fill.

Approaches for Balancing Interests

The planning groups reported used a variety of approaches to engage a broad range of water interests in plan development. Effective approaches to recruiting members and generating interest in the plans included:

- Posting information about upcoming meetings through local media and community groups
- Presenting updates to Soil and Water Conservation Districts and Watershed Councils
- Varying meeting times and locations to enable more members to participate
- Meeting with key stakeholders one-on-one to recruit them as planning group members
- Holding special events, such as landowner breakfasts and field trips, to generate interest in the place-based planning process.
- Forming working groups to accommodate different interests and levels and areas of expertise
- Conducting surveys with the broader public to increase awareness about the planning process and generate input on water issues and concerns



Place-based planning field tour.
Photo provided by OWRD

Adapting to the Pandemic

During the pandemic, the groups relied for a time on virtual meetings with variable results.

- In the Mid-Coast, participation increased when meetings were held virtually. The meeting videos were posted to the planning group's website for those who were unable to attend, broadening outreach.
- In the other planning areas, participation declined when the groups shifted to virtual meetings but increased when the groups offered a combination of in-person and virtual meetings.

Challenges of Balancing Multiple Interests

All the groups reported that incorporating a balance of water interests was challenging. Reasons given included:

- 1) The state's place-based planning model was very technical. All the groups found that recruiting and retaining members with limited technical knowledge and skills was difficult.
- 2) Engaging in place-based planning required a major time commitment. Across the collaboratives, individuals who were paid to participate in the planning process tended to outnumber members participating as volunteers.
- 3) The Harney Basin and Mid-Coast groups struggled to engage their planning area's largest water users and senior water rights holders. In Harney Basin, large-scale irrigators opted not to participate; in the Mid-Coast, large-scale industrial water users and many municipalities chose not to engage in place-based planning.
- 4) State agency field staff were inconsistently engaged as planning group members. For some, this was because of inadequate funding to support full engagement. For many, place-based planning was just one of their work responsibilities and not all agencies considered it a priority.

Making Consensus-Based Decisions

The planning guidelines required that groups use consensus decision-making when developing their plans. The groups adopted different approaches to consensus, ranging from full consensus (Harney Basin and Mid-Coast) to consensus minus 2 (Upper Grande Ronde) to consensus minus 10 percent (Lower John Day). During the evaluation, some participants expressed frustration with the need for consensus, which they perceived as slowing down the planning process. Others felt that consensus decisions broadened local buy-in and would facilitate implementation.

Some techniques the groups used to facilitate reaching consensus included:

- The Lower John Day planning group found that coming to agreement on a standard set of givens and facts helped members move away from pre-decided positions and reduced tensions within the group.
- The Harney Basin participants reported that consensus had worked well when they met in person, but it became more difficult to apply when meetings were held virtually. When meeting in person, it was easier for the group to have periodic check-ins during the session. These check-ins allowed everyone to be brought along until all were comfortable with the direction or concept being proposed.
- The Mid-Coast participants emphasized the importance of having skilled facilitators to reduce the risk of stronger voices dominating consensus-based decisions.
- The Upper Grande Ronde participants found that hashing out disagreements in subgroups rather than in the larger planning group worked well for resolving contested issues without slowing down the timeline.

Planning Group Capacity

Financial capacity

“Funding is a key piece of the puzzle: We’ll never have perfect information for planning. However, you still need significant funding to figure out the foundational pieces that everyone needs to be able to agree upon.” (Harney Basin workshop participant).

All the groups received an initial grant from OWRD, but the amounts were insufficient to carry any of the groups through a six-year planning process. The Mid-Coast and Harney Basin, both of which received only part of the amount they requested in their applications, suffered the most from underfunding. Their members reported that their planning efforts were slowed down considerably by the need to raise more funds mid-stream. Over the course of the pilot program, all the planning groups leveraged significant amounts of additional funding from other state sources, philanthropical foundations, and private firms and individuals.

Technical and planning expertise

“Did we have the time? Skills? Access to data and mapping technology? Not really. The process is set up in a way that results in people writing reports who lack the time, expertise, and access to information that is needed.” (Harney Basin workshop participant)

The groups varied considerably in the types and levels of technical and planning expertise they could draw on internally. Areas of expertise in short supply within the groups included facilitation, community engagement, social science and economics, technical report writing, water law, climate science and modeling, and water sciences. The planning groups had anticipated that the state agencies would fill in technical knowledge gaps, but the state agencies lacked sufficient staffing resources to fill many of the gaps.

Learning Partnership: Enhancing Planning Capacity through Cross-Collaborative Learning

Participants in the four planning groups identified the Learning Partnership project, which was supported with funding from The Ford Family Foundation, The Oregon Community Foundation, and OWRD, as an extremely valuable addition to the pilot place-based planning program. The Learning Partnership brought together planning group representatives and state agency staff at events designed to provide opportunities for building relationships, sharing experiences about place-based planning, and learning new skills. In the words of one planning group participant, these events were “one of the better things that came out of the place-based planning process.” State agency staff noted that the events were attended by higher-level administrators as well as program and technical staff. Evaluation participants listed the following as benefits of the learning partnership events:

- They led to greater information sharing between the planning groups, enabling those that were slower at completing some of the steps to benefit from the experiences of faster groups.
- They helped build trust between the state agencies and the participating planning group members, as well as between members of different planning groups.
- They provided opportunities for skills training for planning group members and state agency staff.



Learning Partnership event: Upper Grande Ronde Planning Area. Photo provided by OWRD

Lessons Learned from Oregon’s Pilot Place-Based Planning Program

1. Engaging multiple water interests, including both instream and out-of-stream interests, is hard. It is important to pay careful attention to process design and provide multiple ways for stakeholders to engage in planning.

Incorporating multiple water interests in a way that balances instream and out of stream needs, and water quality as well as water quantity proved to be one of the most challenging aspects of the state’s pilot place-based planning program.

- Planning processes structured in ways that encourage participants to provide input, offer multiple ways for participants to engage, and incorporate strong and on-going community engagement are more likely to achieve the goal of incorporating the water needs of a broad range of interests.
- This program evaluation highlights the importance of skilled facilitation and the presence of paid staff with community engagement skills in bringing in a broad and balanced set of water interests.

Lessons Learned from Oregon's Pilot Place-Based Planning Program (continued)

2. Collaboration based on consensus decision-making is hard. Skilled facilitation and a willingness to compromise are essential.

The following quote from the Lower John Day planning group nicely sums up the lessons learned about collaboration based on consensus decision-making:

“Collaboration by such a diverse member group takes time, good communication, and nurturing. It is important to facilitate conversation of difficult topics, sometimes multiple times to maintain energy and forward momentum inside a large group of members that come with their own expectations and needs. We have to foster a certain level of sensitivity and broker a social contract that allows us to work cohesively. Collaboration isn't something we can attain and walk away from. It is a living thing that needs to be nurtured.” (Lower John Day Progress Report February 15, 2018).

3. Consistent and adequate levels of state funding for both local planning groups and the core state agencies are critical for place-based planning.

If planning groups lack consistent and adequate funding, they are forced to divert their attention away from planning to raise additional funds. Adequate funding enables the groups to hire dedicated planning coordinators or engage consultants to do the work of organizing meetings, facilitation, and other essential tasks for which it may be difficult to recruit volunteers. Funding is also essential for the state agencies, who have key roles to play in place-based planning. With sufficient resources, the state agencies can respond more quickly to technical assistance requests and be more engaged as planning group members.

4. Place-based planning requires technical and other key skills. When a planning group is established, participants need to be selected or recruited to include not just a balance of interests, but also individuals with the types of skills and capacities needed to accomplish the work.

Oregon's pilot place-based integrated water planning requires a wide range of collaboration and partnership skills on the part of local planning groups, as well as considerable technical knowledge and skills. If place-based planning is to be efficient and effective, the skills and capacities of local planning groups need to align better with place-based integrated water planning needs.

- At a minimum, the skills and knowledge required include project management, community engagement, facilitation, water science, ecology or biology, water law, and technical plan writing.
- Given the likely significant impacts of climate change on Oregon's water resources systems, someone with skills in running and/or interpreting climate change scenarios would also be an asset.
- Where core technical skills are absent, groups will need to seek outside partners to fill the gaps.

“Place-based planning is a great start. This is the first step to making a collaborative, cooperative community approach to a pretty serious issue. Everyone has different opinions and viewpoints. Not everyone will agree. The first part is getting to the table. It's a great first step in the right direction.”

Note: This factsheet is the third in a series of factsheets describing findings from the participatory evaluation of Oregon's pilot place-based integrated water planning program. Factsheet 1, “Place-Based Integrated Water Resources Planning: Pilot Program and Recommendations” provides an overview of the program and a list of four key recommendations. Factsheet 2, “Integrated Place-Based Water Resources Planning: Revising the Five-Step Planning Framework” focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of the five-step planning framework and includes suggestions for improving the framework. Please contact Dr. Rebecca McLain at mclainrj@pdx.edu for additional information.