



# Legislative Bills Send \$2.5 million to Harney Basin for Wet Meadow Restoration

Funding will go toward projects, research and cooperation.

August 2023

by Lauren Brown

In a win for the Harney County community, the recent Oregon state legislative session resulted in the passage of bills that will send in a total of \$2.5 million to support critical wet meadow work and collaboration in the Harney Basin.



Led by Representative Mark Owens, HB3222 was introduced to design and implement projects for restoring or maintaining wet meadows, wetlands and lake conditions for birds, farmers, and ranchers on the Silvies River Floodplain, on the Donner und Blitzen River Floodplain, at Malheur Lake and in the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. It also included funding for research and public engagement and to support collaborative partnerships.

*Pictured: Great Sandhill Cranes in a wild flood irrigated wet meadow in the Harney Basin. Photo by Brandon McMullen.*

As the bill moved through the legislative process, it was incorporated into the Bi-Partisan Drought Relief and Water Security Package (HB 2010). This legislative session also produced a reconciliation bill (HB 5506) which included an additional \$1.5 million in funding for irrigation and infrastructure improvement.

The funding will allow the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative, a collaborative of the High Desert Partnership, to continue its work and will allow High Desert Partnership to continue to support the collaborative process benefiting farmers, ranchers, birds, and other wildlife while putting money back into the local economy.

"It was obviously a huge lean in from partners and the community to get this up and moving off the ground and through legislation," said Melissa Petschauer, coordinator for the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative. She noted that Owens was instrumental in pushing the legislation through. "He was the one, day in and day out, giving us a voice," she said.

Bob Sallinger worked on the legislation helping to develop and lobby for the bill for the High Desert Partnership; Bob agreed that Owens and Harmony Burreight, a water policy advisor for Rep. Owens, were vital to getting the bills passed. "It was a real privilege to work on this bill this session," said Bob. "The Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative partners did an amazing job stepping up and supporting the bill; in fact, many stakeholders contributed by writing letters of support. Several of them got up early on a snowy winter morning to drive across the state in a van to testify in person in favor of HB3222. "They drove through snow all the way to the Cascades before the legislature called the session off," Sallinger said. They ended up testifying virtually the next week and were able to voice their support for the bill.

"The bill got an incredibly positive bipartisan response from legislators. We were not only successful in being awarded \$2.5 million but also successful in engaging the Oregon Legislature with the collaborative work that is happening in Harney County," Sallinger said.

Rep. Owens said he has spent the last nine years talking about water, sustainable water management and how to better manage water. “The wetlands collaborative has that same goal to try to figure out how to get multiple resources out of the limited use. They are a very mature collaborative, and they need funding to sustain their actions. They need funding for their projects and all that goes to helping family farms, ranches, wildlife and fish in the Harney Basin,” he said.



The Harney Basin was once one of the most conflicted landscapes in Oregon. However, since the collaborative started more than a decade ago, ranchers, conservation groups, the Burns Paiute Tribe, state, and federal agencies and others have worked together to restore wetlands for multiple purposes. These wetlands represent some of the most important breeding and migratory habitat for wild birds in the Western United States. They also support local economies through ranching and promote recreational

activities such as hunting and wildlife watching.

*Pictured: A calf and birds sharing a wild flood irrigated wet meadow in the Harney Basin. Photo by Brandon McMullen.*

In the past, conflicts arose between ranchers and conservationists in the Harney Basin. “A lot of times in communities, change is scary, especially when your livelihood depends on it,” Rep. Owens said. When change threatens one’s culture or customs, it can seem hostile, he noted. Conservationists might not understand the community, and the changes they propose can look like a threat. “So, the way we’ve done it in the past is we get attorneys involved, and we try to stop any type of change,” he said. “But change is going to occur, and change is a good thing.”

He said bringing people together to try to find a solution is the answer. “The only way I would really know how to do that is through collaboration and coming together with the idea of listening to each other because once we honestly do that, we find that the vast majority of our priorities align and that it doesn’t have to be a compromise. It can be a win-win,” he said.

Instead of litigating a problem, collaboration can be far more fruitful, he said. “It probably takes about the same amount of time, as litigation can go on for decades,” he said. “It probably takes about the same amount of resources, but in the end, you actually get an outcome.”

Harney County Commissioner Kristen Shelman said she appreciated the hard work that went into the bill passage. “These bills allow for ongoing efforts here in Harney County to continue and will have a positive impact on our wetlands and different water issues,” she said. “Many thanks to the bill sponsors and those who testified in support of these bills.”

Petschauer noted that the legislative funding means bringing funds into the Harney County community that will be focused on this community. “The \$2.5 million will fund so many different projects,” she said. Such projects could include the installation of new dams and in-field infrastructure to help landowners move water across the landscape as well as monitoring reed canary grass and perennial pepperweed. In the coming weeks and months, the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative will decide how these funds are allocated.

Sallinger said he is proud of the wetlands work that has been done in the Harney Basin. He has worked on many different bills over the years, and he was impressed with the amount of support from stakeholders that went into getting this funding

for the Harney Basin. “They were phenomenal. Thanks to Rep. Owens’ leadership, it went incredibly smoothly,” he said. “It was a very positive experience in a very challenging session.”

*This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives including the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative.*

