



BURNS  
PAIUTE  
TRIBE



# Cities, County and Tribe Unite on Groundwater Resolution

A historic agreement brings four southeast Oregon governments together to collaborate on groundwater management.

By Lauren Brown  
April 2026

In January, a noteworthy four government joint groundwater resolution regarding collaborative groundwater management was signed by the City of Hines, the City of Burns, Harney County and the Burns Paiute Tribe.

The resolution commits the four jurisdictions to work together, while respecting each government's distinct authority, and in collaboration with state and federal authorities to achieve sustainable, equitable groundwater management that benefits the entire community.

As the Harney Basin's groundwater issues rose to the forefront last year with the Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) Division 512 Rulemaking and public comment process, members of the Burns and Hines city councils, the Harney County Court and the Burns Paiute Tribe quickly realized that four unified voices were better than one.

Tracy Kennedy, Chairperson for the Burns Paiute Tribe's Tribal Council, said initially the four jurisdictions were all doing their own thing. "We were all kind of doing this work separately with the same end goal," she said.

Representative Mark Owens encouraged getting the joint groundwater resolution established. He helped with an initial petition that would have amended the new proposed groundwater rules. All four jurisdictions signed that petition and that started the ball rolling. Representative Owens suggested the joint groundwater resolution, and the idea caught fire. "Our intention is to let Salem know that we are working together," Kennedy said. "The two cities, the county and the tribe all have a commitment to work collaboratively to figure out our groundwater and how to manage our groundwater into the future."

"With the help of High Desert Partnership, we started meeting regularly. I think we met a couple times the first month, and then after that, we were meeting monthly to put some of that language together," said County Commissioner Rob Frank.

High Desert Partnership, which has provided a model for tackling complicated issues through collaboration in Harney County for nearly 20 years, has been a key partner in helping the four jurisdictions to work together.

Frank said that after the first couple of meetings it became apparent that this was a significant step. "Several members around the table had said never, to their knowledge, in being involved with local governments, have all four governments come together and tried to address issues that were facing us," he said. They began to look ahead to other issues that could potentially benefit from collaboration. "We hope that not only can we make a positive difference with this joint groundwater resolution, but maybe in the future, we start meeting regularly just so that the left hand knows what the right hand is doing," Frank said. From the City of Burns' perspective, the resolution means the local governments are promising to talk to each other and coordinate their efforts to ensure there is enough water for the community, the economy, and the environment in the long run, noted Burns City Manager Brenda Engebretson.

"Essentially, it moves the region away from separate, disconnected water projects and toward a single, unified plan for the entire Harney Basin," she said. As part of the resolution, each group keeps its own legal authority. "The tribe remains sovereign, and the cities/county keep their local jurisdiction. They are choosing to cooperate, not giving up control," Engebretson said.

While the state has no authority within the boundaries of the Burns Paiute Reservation, Kennedy said that the tribe wants to be a good neighbor. "Our trust property is only about 1,000 acres. Harney County is our aboriginal land, so it's not just this little reservation that we were put on. This whole area is very important to us," she said. "The water is very important to us. It was about the bigger picture of the vast area. It's about the water and taking care of the land because that is where we come from."

Hines City Councilor Kim Valentine sees the groundwater issue as one that affects every single person in the basin. "What impacts one, impacts all of us," she said. "This resolution brings us all to the table formally."

Hines City Manager Roxane Worley agreed. "We all might be separate government entities, but we are one community," she said. She sees the joint groundwater resolution as a springboard that will allow for collaboration on many fronts. "It's a document, and it's starting this relationship where we can continue to grow on different topics," she said. "We can collaborate with each other and benefit the community as a whole."

Worley noted that there have been some hard feelings regarding the groundwater rulemaking process as folks realize how these rules will impact their ranches and livelihoods. She believes the joint groundwater resolution will show the state that this community is willing to collaborate to find a process that works to ensure good results without harsh economic repercussions. "We don't want to see a situation where we're pitting neighbor against neighbor or neighbor against city.

"The importance of this joint groundwater resolution; when we have all four jurisdictions working together, that unity makes it possible for us to most effectively work with the state on groundwater management," said Frank. High Desert Partnership's collaborative model has set a clear example for how the four jurisdictions can come together. Kennedy noted that the partnership has been a

fundamental facilitator, which has made the process a little easier. Kennedy said that sometimes just scheduling a meeting to get everyone in the same room at the same time can be tricky. "People don't think little things like that are barriers, but they are," she said. Having a reliable collaborative model to follow helps.

The City of Burns, City of Hines, Harney County and the Burns Paiute Tribe through this joint groundwater resolution are establishing their commitment to work together on this complex issue. As Engebretson noted: "The importance of all four governments working together for a common cause sends a big message of unity," she said.

RESOLUTION RECORDS

Burns Paiute Tribe: 2025-16

Harney County: 2025-37

City of Burns: 25-816

City of Hines: 2387

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Commissioners' Journal  
Derrin E. Robinson, County Clerk

I, Derrin Robinson, County Clerk for Harney County, Oregon certify that the instrument identified herein was recorded in the Co. Clerk's records.

Derrin E. Robinson, Harney County Clerk



JOINT RESOLUTION

A JOINT RESOLUTION OF BURNS PAIUTE TRIBE, HARNEY COUNTY, CITY OF BURNS, AND THE CITY OF HINES, FOR COLLABORATIVE WATER MANAGEMENT AND CO-STEWARDSHIP IN THE HARNEY BASIN.

WHEREAS, the Harney Basin is a unique and vital landscape whose water resources sustain its communities, economy, ecosystems, and cultural heritage; and

WHEREAS, the long-term health of the Harney Basin depends upon maintaining balanced, sustainable use of groundwater and surface water resources consistent with Oregon's water policy, including the duty to promote the public welfare, safety, and health; and

WHEREAS, Executive Order 25-26 recognizes that natural and working lands and waters provide a range of environmental, social, health, and economic benefits statewide, and that communities have the knowledge, ability, and desire to participate in climate solutions and increase local disaster resilience through collaborative planning and action in partnership with state agencies; and

WHEREAS, Executive Order 25-26 calls for agencies to pursue partnerships to increase the pace and scale of adoption of sustainable stewardship and climate resilient practices by landowners including federal, local and tribal governments, businesses, non-profit organizations and private citizens; and

WHEREAS, the Oregon Integrated Water Resources Strategy (IWRS), which was updated in September 2025, establishes a statewide framework for meeting instream and out-of-stream needs now and into the future through collaboration, data-driven decision-making, and integrated management of surface water, groundwater, and ecological systems; and

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WHEREAS, the Harney Basin Place-Based Integrated Water Resources Plan, developed over nearly a decade through inclusive local, state, tribal, and federal collaboration, was formally recognized by the Water Resources Commission in September 2025 and is a model for community-driven, science-based, and partnership-oriented water planning that reflects both local priorities and state policy objectives; and

WHEREAS, the Burns Paiute Tribe, as a federally recognized sovereign nation with inherent authority over its lands and resources, the Harney County Court, the City of Burns, and the City of Hines, as political subdivisions of the State of Oregon, share interests in stewarding the Basin's water resources for present and future generations; and

WHEREAS, collaboration and co-stewardship – defined as cooperative communication and coordination, not shared or joint jurisdiction – across governments, communities, and sectors are essential to achieving lasting solutions that reflect scientific understanding, local knowledge, cultural values, ecological needs, and economic realities; and

WHEREAS, the High Desert Partnership has demonstrated a nationally recognized model of inclusive, trust-based collaboration that brings together public agencies, tribal governments, and diverse partners and stakeholders to address complex natural resource challenges through joint problem solving, transparency, and adaptive management while respecting the separate legal authorities of all participants; and

WHEREAS, the success of previous collaborative initiatives in Harney County has shown that locally led, cooperative approaches produce durable outcomes that strengthen community, economic, and ecosystem resilience; and

WHEREAS, future water management actions in the Harney Basin should be grounded in collaborative management principles, respect for tribal sovereignty as a distinct federally recognized authority, respect for local governments, meaningful public participation, and adherence to best available science and law;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT:

1. The Burns Paiute Tribe, exercising its inherent sovereignty, and the Harney County Court, City of Burns, and City of Hines jointly affirm their commitment to cooperative communication and coordination in water management, without altering or sharing jurisdiction, to support the long-term stewardship of the Harney Basin's groundwater and surface water resources.
2. The parties will work together to:

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- Promote transparency, proactive communication, and mutual respect in all water-related processes;
  - Incorporate both scientific data and traditional ecological knowledge in planning and management, with respect for data sovereignty;
  - Foster public awareness and participation in water management activities;
  - Support locally driven conservation efforts, voluntary agreements, and monitoring programs, and other efforts that sustain water availability and community livelihoods; and
  - Coordinate with state and federal agencies to ensure that policies and actions affecting the Harney Basin reflect the collective priorities of its communities and the sovereign priorities of the Burns Paiute Tribe.
3. The parties will work with the High Desert Partnership to support the formation and ongoing convening of a collaborative approach to sustainable and adaptive groundwater management to support coordination of interrelated efforts, including support for this resolution, implementation of the state-recognized place-based integrated water resources plan, implementation of adopted Division 512 rules, implementation of approved voluntary agreements, and other related efforts. The collaborative will support efforts to integrate and coordinate different efforts, track and report on progress, share data, evaluate outcomes, and adapt strategies to ensure equitable, sustainable, and resilient water management. The parties will invite participation from state and federal agencies with authority and jurisdiction over water-related decisions. The parties will support efforts to secure resources to support such an effort.
  4. This resolution shall be entered into the record of each governing body and shared publicly as a statement of shared intent to collaborate while maintaining the independent authority of each government.
  5. Nothing in this Resolution shall be construed as creating joint management, shared jurisdiction or any limitation on existing authorities, including the sovereign authority of the Burns Paiute Tribe. Nothing in this Resolution shall limit or restrict the ability of any party, including the Burns Paiute Tribe, to enter into separate agreements or government-to-government arrangements that further the party's interests in protecting the Basin's water resources, including but not limited to Tribal-State co-stewardship agreements.

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**BURNS PAIUTE TRIBE**

ADOPTED by the Tribal Council of Burns Paiute Tribe this \_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_ 2025,  
by a vote of \_\_\_\_ “ayes” to \_\_\_\_ “nays.”

By: [Signature] Date: 12/23/25



**HARNEY COUNTY COURT**

ADOPTED by the County Court of Harney County this 7<sup>th</sup> day of January 2026  
by a vote of 3 “ayes” to 0 “nays.”

By: [Signature] Date: 1/7/2026



**CITY OF BURNS**

ADOPTED by the Common Council of the City of Burns this 14<sup>th</sup> day of January  
2026, by a vote of 6 “ayes” to 0 “nays.”

By: [Signature] Date: 14 Jan 2026



**CITY OF HINES**

ADOPTED by the Common Council of the City of Hines this 18<sup>th</sup> day of December  
2025, by a vote of 5 “ayes” to 0 “nays.”

By: [Signature] Date: \_\_\_\_\_