



Oregon

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Water Resources Commission

FROM: Ivan Gall, Field Services Division Administrator

SUBJECT: Agenda Item E, August 27, 2020
Water Resources Commission Meeting

Field Services Division Activity – 2019 Report

I. Introduction

During this informational agenda item, staff will provide an overview of activities undertaken by the Field Services Division during 2019.

II. Background

A. Division Structure and Focus

Maintaining a skilled and strong field presence is critical to water resources management. The Field Services Division (FSD) is the largest division within the Water Resources Department, encompassing 58 multi-disciplined employees (e.g. watermasters, assistant watermasters, well inspectors, hydrologic technicians, transfer specialists, hydrologists, and administrative support). Daily workloads are guided by statutory and rule requirements, management direction, water conditions, calls for water, and complaints.

Staff are located across five regional offices (including Salem) and 15 satellite offices around the state. As part of carrying out some of the recommendations of the 2016 Secretary of State audit, the Coquille watermaster office (District 19, covering Coos and Curry Counties) was closed in January 2020. The watermaster position was moved to Salem to provide additional capacity in the Willamette Valley and a new District 22 was formed. Curry County is now part of District 14 in Grants Pass and Coos County is now part of District 15 in Roseburg.

Engaging with the public is a critical component of the Department's work and field staff serve as the face of the agency in communities across Oregon. On any given day, staff may interface with water right holders, well owners, special districts, the public, local government officials and staff, tribes, special interest groups, federal and state agencies, and elected officials.

Outreach and education are particularly important in working with water users, who are better able to comply with Oregon's water laws when they are knowledgeable about their rights and responsibilities and know what to expect from staff.

Trust in field staffs' knowledge, approaches, and overall integrity is essential in responding to complaints about water uses and distributing water. Staff problem-solve, conduct research, mediate between parties, and share information in order to devise workable solutions, which sometimes may include voluntary reductions, rotations, and compliance monitoring.

B. Field Activity

A key responsibility of watermaster staff is distributing water under the Prior Appropriation Doctrine, meaning the last person to obtain a water right on a stream is the first to be regulated during times of low streamflow. When a senior user places a call to receive water, a watermaster validates the call and will regulate junior uses to distribute water to the senior user. In addition to responding to calls for water from senior water right holders, field staff also monitor streams to determine if senior instream water rights are being met and to regulate junior rights accordingly. After regulating water rights, staff conduct field checks at points of diversion/appropriation, or at places of use, to check for compliance. If voluntary compliance is not achieved, formal phases of enforcement begin.

In addition to water distribution and regulation, field staff have many other responsibilities. Field staff work with other agency sections protecting public safety and water resources by inspecting the construction of wells and the condition of dams. Watermasters provide input on water right transactions, incorporating field insights, data, and experience into the Department's processes. Staff help water right holders understand the terms and conditions of their water rights, and invest time in building relationships, technically advising, and assisting water right holders and entities seeking to restore streamflows. Field staff operate and maintain surface water gaging stations, establish measurement sites at strategic un-gaged locations, measure stream discharge and groundwater levels, participate in basin studies and place-based planning, and anticipate future water supply and management challenges to ensure readiness for changing conditions.

III. Discussion

The Field Activity Database (FAD) enables the Department to track and report on key actions over time. The FAD was brought online in 2018 to replace the 20-year old Surface Water Summary database. The FAD is continuing to undergo improvement, enabling staff to refine data collection on water management and distribution activities. Staff enter the following types of data: surface water use and groundwater use investigations, monitoring and regulation for instream water rights, monitoring and regulation based on senior calls for water, and field checks to ensure that users are in compliance with both the terms and conditions of their right, or are complying with staffs' regulatory actions. An overview of the data tracked is provided below.

A. Regulatory Actions

Field staff are the sole providers of water regulation and distribution in Oregon. Regulatory actions are actions by staff that cause a change in water use behavior. In 2019, staff reported a total of 4,891 regulatory actions.

Of the regulatory actions, 21 Notices of Violation (NOV) were issued. The number of NOVs in 2019 was double that of 2018, when 10 NOVs were issued. The increase was largely due to hemp and cannabis. In addition, 2,404 of the regulatory actions were to fulfill a senior water right or to address an illegal use. In addition, 2,487 of the total regulatory actions were conducted to regulate for, or monitor, 180 instream water rights, which provide ecological benefits to fish, wildlife, and recreational.

Staff also reported 13,679 compliance checks to determine if water right holders were in compliance with the law or a regulatory action.

B. Well Inspections

Field staff inspect water and monitoring wells. Properly constructed wells are important to maintain the integrity and quality of groundwater resources. In 2019, the Department received well log reports for 1,006 monitoring wells, 3,638 water supply wells, and 6,247 geotechnical holes. The Department also received 3,085 start cards for new wells: 450 monitoring wells, and 2,635 water supply wells.

The Department's goal has been to inspect no less than 25 percent of all newly constructed wells. In 2019, staff conducted a total of 988 inspections: 29 percent of new water wells were inspected, and 14 percent of new monitoring wells were inspected. Ten percent of the newly constructed wells were found to have a construction deficiency.

C. Dam Inspections

Dam Safety Program staff and FSD staff are responsible for inspecting the 952 statutory dams in the state. Statutory dams are non-federal structures that are 10 feet in height and store more than 9.2-acre feet of water. Generally speaking, Dam Safety Program staff inspect high hazard dams and FSD staff inspect significant and low hazard dams.

In 2019, 57 dams with a high hazard rating were inspected. Field and Dam Safety staff conducted 106 inspections of significant and low hazard dams in 2019.

IV. Conclusion

FSD staff responsibilities are evolving to meet changing environments, advancing technology, and address emerging industry issues. FSD uses the Field Activity Database, staff mentoring and training, and evaluation of new technology and data tools to review annual outcomes and adapt to carry out the Department's mission.

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