

At the very least, health, safety and even the economy are placed in jeopardy without a reliable and voluminous water supply.

EWEB General Manager Frank Lawson says Eugene, with the 180,000 people the utility serves, is the largest city in the Pacific Northwest that has a single source for its drinking water.

While the idea of a massive disaster hitting Lane County may seem farfetched, the state government’s “Oregon Resilience Plan” says there is a 15 to 20 percent chance the Willamette Valley will experience a very large earthquake within the next 50 years.

In January 2014, 300,000 residents in Charleston, West Virginia, couldn’t drink or bathe in their tap water for almost a week after about 10,000 gallons of a chemical called “crude-MCHM” spilled into the water supply from an old storage tank.

Also in 2014, the city of Toledo, Ohio, had no backup when a fertilizer-fueled algae bloom in Lake Erie fouled its water supply. This left 500,000 people without clean water to drink and is an ongoing summertime problem.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency’s “Planning for an Emergency Water Supply,” the “current approach to post-disaster water supply in the United States is bottled water.” But the EPA says that “at a certain disaster scale, duration or remediation-recovery period, this strategy becomes unsustainable.”

In other words, when the big earthquake hits, waiting for a truck to arrive with bottles of water just isn’t the wisest strategy.

EWEB has set out to establish a backup water supply for Eugene — also known as a redundant supply — by 2022. And the utility plans to take that water from the Willamette River. Water experts and river advocates agree that it’s a good idea.

But there are some barriers EWEB must cross before it can get that second source of water. Gaining the right to use the water is well underway, but land, cost and even public perception that the Willamette’s waters are lower quality than what Eugene gets from the McKenzie are all factors.

The Right to the Water

At a Nov. 10 stakeholders’ water forum at EWEB discussing the second source plan, Jeff Althouse of Oakshire Brewing raised an eyebrow at the mention of introducing water from the Willamette River into Eugene’s water supply. Oakshire makes a Watershed IPA that celebrates the McKenzie River’s pristine water.

Water is the number one ingredient in beer, and the water from Eugene’s McKenzie watershed is so pure that little to nothing has to be done to it before it’s used in the brewing process — breweries in many other areas have to purify their water. The less treated the water, the better it tastes. “Beers reflect the region where they are made,” Althouse says.

The water forum discussed the plan with Oakshire and about two dozen large commercial water customers and public agencies. Representatives from Veneta — which buys water from EWEB — the city of Eugene and PeaceHealth, among others, were there.

But beyond discussing whether Willamette River water tastes as good as what comes out of the McKenzie, EWEB first needs to have a right to the water.

Users can’t just randomly pull water from rivers; under state law, Oregon’s water is publically owned and users must be given a right to it. Watermaster Michael Mattick says that EWEB holds a number of water rights.

The utility has three rights on the McKenzie, two of which are “perfected.” The water rights system in the West assumes that water needs to be used, and to “perfect” or certificate a right, it must be put to beneficial use.

Mattick, part of whose job it is to cut off users if the rivers run below a certain level, calls the second source plan a good idea — better not to have all one’s eggs in one basket, he points out.

Those first two rights allow the withdrawal of nearly 194 million gallons per day. A third right for an additional 118.2 million gallons per day is in progress, and it is the reason why EWEB sells water to Veneta.

In its 2012 “Water Management and Conservation Plan,” EWEB also discussed selling water wholesale to Creswell, Coburg and Junction City.

Travis Williams of Willamette Riverkeeper says of EWEB’s water right and second source plan: “It seems like a prudent idea to have that backup. The only question I would have over time is to what degree it could migrate to a primary water source as the region’s communities grow?”

Jeannine Parisi with EWEB’s public affairs office stresses that the effort to get a second source is not about amassing yet even more water. “We have ample water

right does not increase the total amount of water EWEB can use.

Mattick says that the state issued a Willamette water permit to EWEB on Feb. 28, 2011, for 30.9 cubic feet per second with a “priority date” of Jan. 3, 2011. Four points of diversion are listed in the permit — four places EWEB can pull water from. The original water claim dates back to the 1880s, Mattick says, but if the Willamette River were to be adjudicated — meaning all the claims to water on the river are established — EWEB could have lost that pre-1909 right.



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rights on the McKenzie far into the future while at the same time, water usage is flat or declining even with population growth.”

Parisi says the second source project “is all about having a diversity of supply to mitigate against natural disasters and/or major equipment failures and allow more flexibility to take critical facilities off-line for maintenance.”

And Parisi says EWEB agreed that its cumulative water rights would remain the same — the Willametter water

While other rivers in Oregon have been adjudicated, pre-1909 water right claims on the Willamette River are unadjudicated, and Mattick says they may not be adjudicated for decades, leaving pre-1909 claims, permits and certificates uncertain. EWEB’s 2011 permit might be a junior permit, but it’s a safe bet for the future given the uncertainty.

Parisi says EWEB plans to use the point of diversion on the permit furthest upstream to take water — before the