

# Water:

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Umatilla counties, visiting farm and industrial sites. Morrow and Umatilla County's regional leaders and state Sen. Jeff Merkley attended the summit.

The Oregon Health Authority has sent out fliers in English and Spanish to raise awareness about nitrates, testing opportunities and where residents can collect safe water.

Oregon's Emergency Management Office also has helped, contributing two truckloads of bottled water, plastic jugs, temporary bottled water delivery and two temporary staffers to help with distribution. One was bilingual and worked on outreach to the Spanish-speaking community.

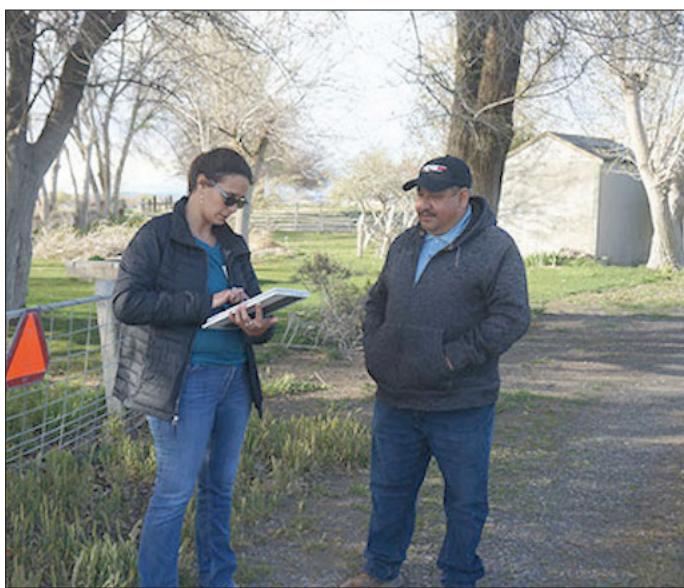
## Denial remains an issue

In January, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality fined the Port of Morrow in Boardman nearly \$1.3 million for years of violating its wastewater permit and allowing hundreds of tons of excess nitrogen onto area farmlands above the already contaminated basin. The county board on June 9 declared an emergency over the contamination.

Food processing and agriculture businesses affiliated with the Port of Morrow are reimbursing the county for up to 350 water filters that cost \$220 each. The county is paying for the installation of those filters for residents who need assistance, as well as the weekly water deliveries currently going to at least 80 households while they wait for filters, Doherty said.

There are 15 filters at the county Health Department, 50 coming by Friday, July 22, and 50 more ordered, according to the county's emergency manager, Paul Gray.

A longer term solution depends on financial assistance from the state, Gray said. "Shallow wells seem to be



Ana Pineyro, communicable disease specialist at the Morrow County Health Department, left, talks with a resident in West Glen neighborhood of Boardman about nitrate contamination and asks to sample his tap water.



Alex Baumhardt/Oregon Capital Chronicle

most contaminated," he said. "Deeper wells don't seem to have the nitrates. If we can fund new wells to be dug for underprivileged residents that would be helpful."

More than 40% of people in Morrow County live below the federal poverty line,

has spent nearly \$500,000 since April on the problem if the cost of public health and emergency management staff, as well as fuel for doing home visits, is included.

Residents are angry the state hasn't helped fund fixes. Some are "screaming

available to provide immediate relief and assistance to water users throughout the area."

Crowell said Brown is coordinating with state agencies to set up a long-term outreach and water testing program and "working on

23, and Doherty is preparing a request.

Smith did not respond to multiple emails, calls or a text message from the Capital Chronicle requesting comment.

Gray said the Oregon Health Authority is trying to get funding to expand the testing of private wells throughout the state, provided the Oregon Legislature agrees during its session next year.

"There's just no guarantee that money will happen," Gray said.

Both the Morrow and Umatilla county board of commissioners asked Wyden and Merkley for \$2.7 million from Congress for testing and filters. Their aides have met with Morrow County leaders at least once. Molly Prescott, a press secretary for Merkley, said both senators want to prioritize funding for the region's drinking water in next year's congressional spending.

"I expect to have news to report on this coming out of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Subcommittee, of which Sen. Merkley is Chair, before August," she wrote in an email. The counties could receive up to \$1.6 million, and solely for testing because federal agencies are not allowed to use congressional money on filtration for private wells, Prescott said.

**"SHALLOW WELLS SEEM TO BE MOST CONTAMINATED. DEEPER WELLS DON'T SEEM TO HAVE THE NITRATES. IF WE CAN FUND NEW WELLS TO BE DUG FOR UNDERPRIVILEGED RESIDENTS THAT WOULD BE HELPFUL."**

— Paul Gray, Morrow County emergency manager

according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

With just 20% of the private wells tested, Gray said he needs to increase awareness of the nitrate issue.

Several people recently told him the nitrate issue was nonsense while he was distributing water at a school in Boardman.

"Telling me, 'We don't need our wells tested, we've been drinking this for 50 years,' and they leave," Gray said. "It's not going to cost them anything to get their well tested, and even if we put a filter in it'll be free. Let us test, we'll get it fixed."

Doherty said the county

bloody murder that their dollars shouldn't go to this effort," Doherty said.

Many want the state to step in, and local industries to continue to pay, he said.

They blame regulators for allowing the nitrate problem to worsen over the decades and say industrial farms, food processors and the Port of Morrow are responsible for portions of the nitrate pollution, he said.

Doherty has talked with Gov. Kate Brown and her water policy advisor, Courtney Crowell. A spokesperson for Brown said in an email that the governor "is committed to making state resources

developing a program and resources to address the drinking water situation in both Morrow and Umatilla counties," Crowell said.

## Regional leaders largely quiet on issue

In the weeks following the emergency declaration, Doherty sought help from state Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner. Doherty said Smith, who is on the Emergency Board, recommended that Morrow County request funding from the board through the Environmental Quality Department or the Oregon Health Authority. The board meets Sept. 21 through

In Wyden's virtual town hall, Boardman residents asked what he could do to help with the nitrate issue. He said he was working to pass the WASH Act, which would provide federal grants for private well testing in areas with contaminated drinking water. This bill, if passed, could take years to go into effect.

After the emergency was declared, Doherty met with an aide for U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, but no action came from it. Knox McCutchen, communications director for Bentz office, wrote in an email: "We are eager to help in any way we can, and we are currently in the process of identifying what federal assistance is available."

State Rep. Bobby Levy, R-Echo, has met with Morrow County Commissioners, but her legislative aide, Whitley Schiller said they have no plans for action.

Morrow County officials also spoke with state Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena. Hansell, also on the Emergency Board, said no one from Morrow County had asked him to pursue state money.

Doherty said he didn't ask Hansell for money, but had hoped the senator would do more to find and direct state resources to the county in the aftermath of the emergency declaration.

Hansell has not met with anyone with contaminated well water in Morrow or Umatilla counties. Nor has he attended any community meetings on the issues.

"I haven't been invited to anything at this point," he said.

Hansell is in touch with Crowell, Brown's water advisor. "I've told them if there's anything I can do to help or to move the dial I will," he said.

Hansell wrote to Brown requesting money for a post-doctoral student from Oregon State University to collect more data on where nitrate contamination is worst and at what levels.

"I know that's long range and long term," Hansell said. "I stand ready to go to bat through the emergency board."

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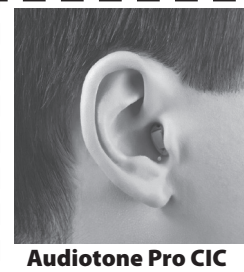
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