EPA urges Oregon to take action against nitrate polluters

BY ANTONIO SIERRA

Oregon Public Broadcasting

BOARDMAN — The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is urging state officials to take more action on nitrate pollution in Eastern Oregon's Lower Umatilla Basin.

A July 29 letter from the EPA to the Oregon Health Authority, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality and the Oregon Department of Agriculture praised the state for some of the measures it's taken to provide clean water to residents in Morrow County, but said that's not enough.

"EPA expects the state to hold nitrate sources accountable by requiring them to assume some of the responsibilities set forth above and, more importantly, to change their practices to reduce the amount of nitrate they discharge to groundwater," wrote Edward Kowalski, director of EPA Region 10's enforcement and compliance division.

Nitrates are a chemical commonly found in fertilizer. In excess amounts, they can affect the health of people's lungs, thyroid and blad-

High nitrate levels in Morrow County and western Umatilla County's groundwater supply has been on the state's radar for more than 30 years, but a recent round of water testing of private wells in the Boardman area found many residents had unsafe levels of nitrates in their drinking water.

Kowalski highlighted a Lower Umatilla Basin work plan completed by the three agencies, the plan including initiatives for nitrate contamination education, free drinking water tests and alternative water sources where necessary. He also gave plaudits to the agencies' plans to seek funding for these initiatives at the Oregon Legislature Emergency Board's September meeting and the long session in 2023.

But Kowlaski wrote the state could no longer rely on voluntary practices and had to address the source of nitrates. According to a 1997 study by the state Department of Environmental Quality, agricultural and industrial operations were among the top sources of the chemical.

Kowalski encouraged the state to regulate industrial discharge and animal feeding operations through a permitting system established by the EPA's National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System.

Before ending the letter, Kowalski left the door open to the EPA taking emergency action in Eastern Oregon.

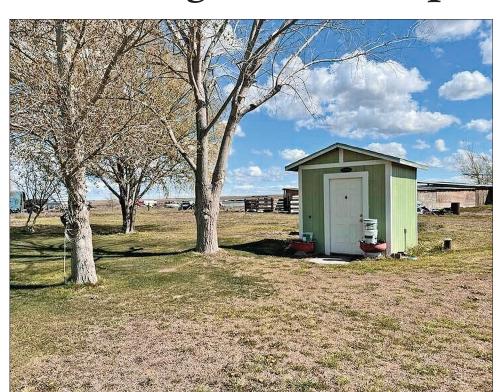
"The Agency will continue to closely monitor the situation and continues to assess options for additional Agency intervention if necessary," he wrote.

Responding to requests for com-

ment, representatives from the Ore-

State agencies outline their efforts

gon departments of environmental quality and agriculture explained the enforcement work they already were doing while also emphasizing the



liver clean drinking water to Morrow **County residents** affected by nitrate pollution but wanted more action to address the issue at its source. Monica Samayoa/Oregon

This April 15, 2022,

photo shows Sil-

via Hernandez's

private well in the

outskirts of Board-

man. The Environ-

mental Protection

Agency lauded the

state's efforts to de-

Public Broadcasting, File

barriers to expanding it further. DEQ's Laura Gleim reiterated the

agency's position on enforcement: It would take action where it could, but its reach was limited.

"DEQ is using what regulatory authority we have to reduce nitrate contamination from specific sources, including enacting stricter limits on food processing wastewater facilities," she wrote in an email. "However, DEQ only has regulatory authority over a small portion of the identified sources of nitrate in

Liz Beeles of ODA said her agency would continue to monitor and regulate groundwater pollution from animal feeding operations and certain irrigated agriculture. But the latter could be difficult to track.

"The current monitoring framework makes it difficult to identify specific irrigated agricultural nutrient sources and link them to water quality outcomes in groundwater," she

Beeles added the department was looking into ways to "support or enhance" voluntary measures proposed in a 2020 plan.

Instead of focusing on enforcement, Oregon Health Authority spokesperson Jonathan Modie detailed his agency's legislative efforts.

In an email, Modie wrote that OHA will seek money from the Emergency Board for well treatment systems and replacement water filters for affected households through

Drazan

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"I'm running for governor because I want to fix it. I don't want people to leave, I want to fix it."

Drazan told the Herald in an interview after the meetand-greet that bridging the divide between the state's rural and urban counties is a priority.

"We can't have a vibrant I-5 corridor and an abused, forgotten, left behind Eastern Oregon," Drazan said. "It's got to be a focus."

Despite the daunting recent electoral history, Drazan told the audience that the current political environment is favorable for Republicans.

"This year is different, because it's a true open seat in a midterm election with an opposing party in the White

House," Drazan said. "The last time that happened was 2010."

Gov. Kate Brown, a Democrat, is not eligible to run for reelection due to term limits.

Drazan served in the Oregon House of Representatives from 2019 to 2022 and was minority leader until 2021. She represented the 39th district, which includes parts of Clackamas County.

She hopes to defeat Democrat Tina Kotek, who served as the speaker of the Oregon House from 2013-2022, and independent Betsy Johnson, a longtime Democratic Oregon legislator.
"You recognize that the

people in Salem — Kate Brown, Tina Kotek, Betsy Johnson — have not served your needs," Drazan said.

A late June poll sponsored by the Republican State Lead-

ership Committee had Drazan leading Kotek by one point, with Johnson further

Drazan won May's crowded GOP primary with 23% of the votes, defeating more than a dozen other candidates including Baker City Mayor Kerry McQuisten.

Although Drazan hopes to garner a large voter turnout in November from counties in Eastern Oregon, she will still inevitably need votes from the other side of the state as well. During her speech Tuesday in Baker City she mentioned drugs and homelessness in Portland.

Recently Drazan vowed to declare Oregon's homelessness crisis a state of emergency should she take office, something she repeated in Baker City.

She offered an anecdote to

the crowd, describing a time when she did a police ridealong in Portland and witnessed, for the first time, people taking hard drugs on the streets. She vowed to re-criminalize meth, heroin and fentanyl, a statement that drew loud applause.

In 2020 Oregon voters approved a ballot measure making possession of relatively small amounts of those and other drugs similar to a traffic infraction, rather than a

A majority of Baker County voters rejected that measure.

After her opening remarks, Drazan fielded questions from the crowd, which were delivered by notecard. Questions addressed taxes, abortion, voting laws, medicare, gun laws and agriculture.

"If I've learned anything from traveling our state, it's

that every single part of our want fixed and what you want state is unique," said Drame to work on for you." zan, who grew up in Klamath Drazan headed to John Day County. "I want to be a part of Tuesday night to continue her having a conversation where campaign trip through East-

you guys tell me what you ern Oregon. **Baker County** Veteran's office has moved! 2200 4th Street Baker City, Oregon 97814

Hail damages Union County crops

The Observer LA GRANDE — Farmers

in Union County are describing the hailstorm that hit Union County late last week as among the worst they have seen.

"It was pretty significant, pretty severe," said Matt Insko, a farmer in the Imbler area.

Insko said he and many farmers were just getting ready to start harvesting their wheat when the hailstorm hit at about 4 p.m. on Thursday,

It would have been nice if it had been a couple of weeks later. It did a lot more damage because of when it hit," he said.

Insko lost about 30% of his 450-acre wheat crop. Fortunately, he had purchased hail insurance.

"That will definitely take some of the sting away," he said.

Insko has been farming in the Grande Ronde Valley for 23 years and said he has seen few storms drop so much hail over such a wide area so quickly. This made driving during the hail storm difficult.

"My windshield wipers could not move fast enough," Insko said.

The hail hit during a thunderstorm that started south of La Grande and moved northeast through the Wallowa area. Insko said he always fears thunderstorms because of the hail they can bring. He said thunderstorms are more likely when there are temperatures in the 90s, as was the case last week.

Seth Hassinger, a farmer in the Cove area, said that the hailstorm missed his family's farm. He knows firsthand, though, just how devastating hailstorms can be to crops. Hassinger said that even small hail stones can have a big impact. He recalled how once a hailstorm filled with small stones destroyed much of the peppermint crop on his family's farm.

"It shredded the leaves off," he said.

Ronde Valley farmer, said the storm destroyed as much as 35% percent of his 500-acre canola crop.

The storm also ruined up to 10% of his 150-acre wheat crop.

'The hail knocked the seeds out of their heads," he said.

Rudd, like Insko, describes the hailstorm as one of the worst he's seen.

Brett Rudd, also a Grande "It was definitely a memorably bad storm. It was so widespread," said Rudd, who is 45 and has lived in Union County all of his life.

Curt Ricker, who farms in the Island City area, also sustained heavy losses.

The hailstorm destroyed 30% of his 40-acre fall wheat crop, 70% of his 80-acre spring wheat crop and 70% percent of his 50-acre barley crop.







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