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Morrow County Clean Water Consortium holds first two meetings, prepares for challenges ahead

MORROW COUNTY, OR — Morrow County has taken a significant step toward securing access to clean drinking water through the launch of the Morrow County Clean Water Consortium (MCCWC). The first official meeting of the consortium was held on February 4, 2025, marking the beginning of a countywide effort to address high nitrate contamination in drinking water, particularly in the West Glen area.

The initiative, led by Morrow County Board of Commissioners (BOC) Chair David Sykes, is a partnership between Morrow County and the Port of Morrow. The consortium was established to develop, fund, and build water infrastructure projects aimed at providing safe drinking water to unincorporated areas affected by contamination.

The MCCWC is overseen by a four-member Board of Directors, including Port of Morrow CEO Lisa Mittelsdorf, Port Commissioner Kelly Doherty, BOC Chair David Sykes, and Morrow County Planning Director Tamra Mabbott. Morrow County Administrator Matthew Jensen was appointed as the managing director, responsible for overseeing daily operations and project implementation.

Establishing Priorities and Governance

At its first meeting, the consortium's board focused on foundational issues, including electing leadership positions. David Sykes was named



Contributed image

Chair, Kelly Doherty was selected as Vice Chair, and Tamra Mabbott was appointed Secretary.

While the long-term goal of the consortium is to build sustainable water infrastructure, Sykes and Jensen emphasized the importance of first securing funding before initiating construction. Jensen noted that grant writing and planning would be the consortium's immediate priorities, stating, "We're not looking to pull the trigger on projects yet, but grant writers, some other things like that."

Debate Over Advisory Board Representation

A key point of discussion during the first meeting was the selection of advisory board members. These non-voting members will provide strategic guidance to the board.

Jensen proposed including representatives from the cities of Boardman and Irrigon, since some water projects—such as the West Glen initiative—might require municipal water system connections. While the board was open to the idea, Kelly

Doherty stressed that rural residents in unincorporated areas must also be represented. She pointed out that the consortium's primary focus is delivering clean water to rural communities, not just urban areas, stating, "We're not delivering clean water to the city. We're delivering clean water to the unincorporated areas, and those people need to be represented."

Sykes ultimately decided not to allocate advisory positions to specific groups but instead asked board members to bring recommendations for potential advisory members to the next meeting. The board did agree, however, to appoint Justin B. Green, Executive Director of Water for Eastern Oregon (H2OEO), as an advisory member.

Funding Strategy and Financial Considerations

The board recognized that the primary source of funding for clean water projects would be grants. Concerns were raised about potential federal budget cuts, but Morrow

County grant writer Nick Ducote reassured the board that infrastructure funding remains a priority and is unlikely to be affected.

To fund initial operations, the board approved a \$25,000 spending limit for the managing director to begin hiring grant writers and consultants. Morrow County will serve as the fiscal agent for the consortium, ensuring financial oversight.

Planning and Feasibility Studies Begin

The consortium has already begun identifying priority projects with the help of GSI Water Solutions, a consulting firm specializing in water infrastructure. GSI Chief Operating Officer Ronan Igleria joined the meeting via Zoom to discuss the firm's preliminary feasibility assessments.

Jensen underscored the consortium's commitment to action, explaining that previous reports on water contamination would finally lead to real-world solutions. "We are boots on the ground. That's our priority. We're finally going to bring all these reports off the shelf and actually start making it available to our residents."

Sykes stressed that the consortium's approach would extend far beyond West Glen, creating a structured, long-term plan for clean water infrastructure across the county. "To have success in building future infrastructure for clean water, we need a sustainable, long-term struc-

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Cavan-Harris becomes first girls' district champion



(L-R)Emilia Cavan-Harris, Journey Cavan-Harris, Keeley Nairns and Coach Tyler Robinson. -Contributed Photo

Heppner Girls Wrestling- Journey Cavan-Harris became our first district champion, qualifying herself for the state tournament. Keeley Nairns finished 4th

clenching her ticket to state as well, both girls being the first in Heppner's history to do so. Emilia Cavan-Harris also placed 6th. The team finished 9th out of 29 teams as Heppner is competing 1A-4A.

Damaged, missing road signs are headache for crews, cost for county



Contributed image

Damaged and missing road signs continue to be a problem throughout the county, according to Morrow County Public Works Director Eric Imes.

Imes told the Morrow County Board of Commissioners at its last regular meeting that he wanted the public to be aware of the problem. More than that, he also asks members of the public to speak up if they see something.

Imes said, for instance, that road crews had recently seen indications that people were attaching chains to the

signposts and using pickups to pull them down. They then simply unbolt the signs and take them.

Not only is the issue of road signs a nuisance for road crews, but it also racks up costs for the county. Imes said he had just received a sign order totaling about \$15,000, and there would be another order for about the same coming up.

"And I just want the public to know how expensive this is and the time that it takes," said Imes.

"Are the same signs being stolen repeatedly? Is it a geographic area?" asked Morrow County Commissioner Gus Peterson.

Imes replied that there are places where the same signs get stolen repeatedly, and the county had done some work to mitigate those instances.

"I don't want to say -Continued to PAGE EIGHT

Heppner community bands together to tackle flooding and mudslide threat



Pictured (L-R): Dennis Wall, Stacy Lauritsen, Eric Chick, Adam Bergstrom, Babette Wall, John Doherty, Chad Doherty, Tylor Schlaht, Charlie Ferguson, Doug Johnson, Trevor Rhea and MCSO Deputy Brandon Royal. -Photo by Steve Freeland

Heppner residents faced a muddy mess Monday afternoon after a combination of warm temperatures and steady rainfall led to flooding across the area. The sudden snowmelt, combined with heavy rain, sent water rushing through neighborhoods, leaving muddy driveways, carpools, and even some basements submerged.

Despite the potential for significant damage, quick action from local agencies and community

members helped prevent the situation from worsening. Responders worked swiftly to divert water and mud away from homes, using trenches and sandbags to create barriers. Their efforts helped keep Heppner's roads and properties from experiencing even more severe flooding.

The emergency response was a true team effort, with the Morrow County Sheriff's Office, Emergency Management, Public Works, Heppner

Fire Department, Columbia Basin Electric crews, and the City of Heppner all stepping in to assist. Local volunteers also played a crucial role, coming together to protect their neighbors and keep the flooding under control.

While the cleanup effort continues, the teamwork and dedication shown by Heppner's first responders and residents highlight the strength of the community.



Cleaning up the mud. -Photo by Steve Freeland

Morrow County officials discuss legal accuracy, AI use for meeting minutes

Artificial intelligence, or AI, has been all the buzz lately, and it seems Morrow County may be dipping a toe into the waters of this new technology.

Feb. 5, Morrow County Board of Commissioners David Sykes asked the other commissioners for their thoughts on using artificial intelligence (AI) to take minutes at BOC meetings. The Morrow County Broadband Consortium

had apparently used an AI program to type minutes at a recent meeting.

"Not that Valerie's not doing a great job," Sykes added, referring to executive assistant Valerie Ballard. "It'd be a tool that would help her be more efficient and free her up."

Morrow County Administrator Matt Jensen said he had never used AI to take minutes but knew -Continued to PAGE THREE

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