

# County waits for state funds for water crisis

## The county and businesses have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars working to fix the nitrate contamination problem

BY ALEX BAUMHARDT  
Oregon Capital Chronicle

It's been more than two-and-a-half months since Mayra Colin found out the water coming from her kitchen tap in Boardman contained high levels of nitrates, which can cause serious health issues.

She's still waiting for a permanent fix.

"We're on the list to have a filter installed in the future," she said in a text message on Monday. "We have been provided with bottled water and more recently, water jugs weekly."

For three months, Morrow County officials have been testing the tap water of residents who rely on wells, and more than a month ago, the county commission declared an emergency over the contamination. The county is paying for bottled water deliveries, and a consortium of area businesses is paying for reverse-osmosis filters for homeowners in the area.

The state has provided some help – but no direct money, county officials said.

Jim Doherty, chair of the Morrow County Board of Commissioners wants the state to contribute \$4 million to expand nitrate testing in the county, pay for reverse osmosis filter systems and help fund the digging of new wells.

That's how much the state recently gave to Klamath County to subsidize the cost of new wells for homes where they've gone dry.

Regional state lawmakers told Doherty to wait until a meeting of the Legislature's Emergency Board in September when county officials can request funds.

The contaminated water comes from the Lower Umatilla Basin, used by residents in Umatilla and Morrow County. It has become increasingly contaminated with nitrates during the last 30 years from farm fertilizers, animal manure and wastewater from the Port of Morrow and area food processors. Water that contains more than 10 parts of nitrates per million is unsafe to drink, according to the Federal Environmental Protection Agency.

Colin's water tested more than three times that.

About 1,300 households rely on private wells in Morrow County. So far, the county has tested nearly 270 wells for nitrates, with nearly half showing

high levels, according to Ana Pineyro, communicable disease specialist at the Morrow County Health Department. The highest so far has tested more than six times the EPA limit. Many people who rely on wells in Morrow County are Latino, officials at the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality said.

They've largely been ignored by state and local lawmakers and officials – and agencies. State officials do not regulate water quality in private wells.

At least two state lawmakers have met with leaders at the Port of Morrow, with area food processors and large area farm owners. And in June, the Eastern Oregon Economic Summit, sponsored by the Port of Morrow, included a regional water tour through Morrow and 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



Kathy Aney/For Oregon Capital Chronicle

**Gerald Boulesteer, right, shows Morrow County Commissioner Jim Doherty how he uses pool testing strips to test the water in the home of his recently deceased father-in-law, Don Drayton. Test of the filtered water revealed below 10 parts per million for nitrate, while a test of unfiltered water was between about 13 and 20 ppm. Boulesteer uses the filtered water even to brush his teeth.**

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 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, 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 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 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 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 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 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 fund-

ing 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.

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 postdoctoral 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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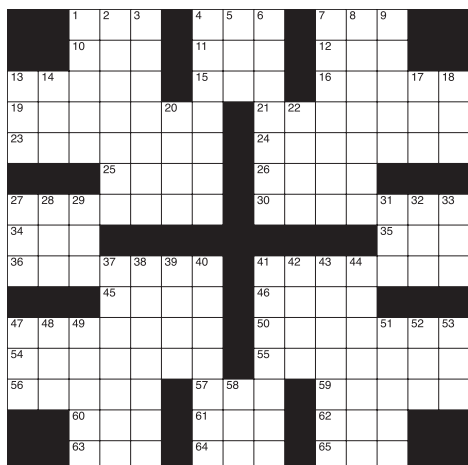
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  - Boasted
  - Eel-like vertebrate
  - Small freshwater lakes
  - Morally base
  - Not odd
  - Where you live
  - Fixed in place
  - A very large body of water
  - Moved quickly
  - Winged horse
  - Small waterfall
  - Hoopster
  - Gasol
  - One who mimics
  - Tropical plant
  - Used of walls
  - A citizen of Iran
  - Christian hermit
  - She marries the groom
  - American patriotic society
  - Wine grape
  - Wine grape
  - School of Buddhism

- A team's best pitcher
- Consumed
- Time zone
- Part of a company name
- Type of bulb
- Marine protozoan
- You use it for your eyes
- Set aside for a later time
- Mitral foot
- Famed journalist Tarbell
- Consumes quickly
61. Eccentric person
62. Consumed
63. Time zone
64. Part of a company name
65. Type of bulb
37. Changed
38. Prominent
39. Genus of seabirds
40. Event regarded as wrong
41. Skipped in a lively way
42. Multi-function radar (abbr.)
43. A country in W. Africa
44. Burn a corpse
47. Women's \_\_\_ movement
48. NHL great Bobby
49. Coarse, green material
51. Treated with calcium oxide
52. When you hope to get there
53. "Partridge" actress Susan
58. What thespians do

**WORD SCRAMBLE**

Rearrange the letters to spell something pertaining to irrigation.

**SMSYTES**

\_\_\_\_\_

**SUDOKU**

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		3			9			
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			2	8		4	1	

Level: Intermediate

**Guess Who?**

I am an actor born in Massachusetts on July 25, 1967. I worked as a model before getting into acting. I was one of a group of friends who starred in one of the biggest television hits of the 1990s.

**CRYPTO FUN**

Determine the code to reveal the answer!

Solve the code to discover words related to irrigation. Each number corresponds to a letter. (Hint: 4 = R)

**A. 23 3 16 11 10 1**  
Clue: Living organisms

**B. 25 4 22 20**  
Clue: Get larger

**C. 20 16 10 26 4**  
Clue: Hydrogen and oxygen

**D. 7 22 1 26**  
Clue: Flexible tube

**IRRIGATION WORD SEARCH**

Find the words hidden vertically, horizontally, diagonally, and backwards.

**WORDS**  
BASIN  
BERN  
BORDER  
CHEMIGATION  
CONFINEMENT  
CROPS  
DISTRIBUTION  
DRIPPER  
EFFICIENCY  
EMITTER  
FIELD  
FLOOD  
FLOW  
HOSES  
MANAGEMENT  
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