



Water

Every community member has access to clean water that supports their needs and all living systems



Goal: Every community member has access to clean water that supports their needs and all living systems.

Description

Equitable access to clean water is a pillar of climate justice. Clean water isn't just a basic human right — it's essential for healthy communities and thriving ecosystems. It fuels public health, fosters well-being and safeguards the natural world. Multnomah County is blessed with incredible water resources, including world class drinking water, aquatic ecosystems, and water-based recreational opportunities. This goal goes beyond drinking water and encompasses clean rivers, streams, and lakes for swimming, fishing, and the overall health of the ecosystem on which we depend.

Climate change, however, intensifies existing water challenges, like controlling stormwater pollution, aiding in the recovery of endangered fish, and restoring ecosystems. Rising temperatures in Oregon are causing a shift from snow to rain, leading to a diminished mountain snowpack and earlier spring melts. This transition results in higher winter flood risks and snow drought conditions that also increase fire risk at higher elevations and decrease summer stream flows. These lower summer flows, combined with heat, raise water temperatures to levels that threaten aquatic species and increase the frequency of toxic algal blooms. Lower stream flows could also diminish the energy output of hydroelectric dams. Furthermore, intensified wildfire activity increasingly compromises water quality by increasing the possibility of post-fire sediment and ash washing into municipal watersheds and treatment systems.¹⁶

Work is already underway to address some of these threats, but more needs to be done to preserve and enhance this most precious of life-giving resources.

How we measure progress

Indicator 1: Number of days in the year when bacteria or harmful algal bloom levels close the Lower Willamette River to swimming.

Description: The City of Portland and Oregon Department of Environmental Quality measure E. coli and cyanobacteria (harmful algal blooms, or HABs), respectively. These measures are necessary to protect public health and ensure humans and their dog companions don't get sick from swimming. These data are monitored continuously or seasonally depending on the location.

Current data: 0 days of harmful algal bloom (HAB) advisory on the Lower Willamette River in 2025

Data source: Oregon Health Authority, [Recreational Cyanobacteria Advisory Archive](#)

Indicator 2: Columbia Slough Watershed Report Card.

Description: The Columbia Slough Watershed is a highly urbanized waterway that has been the focus of advocacy and restoration work for many years. It also transects many of the most diverse neighborhoods in Multnomah County and provides an access point for urban natural lands. The Bureau of Environmental Services maintains watershed report cards for six urban watersheds in Portland. The report card — updated every four years — summarizes a holistic suite of watershed health indicators.

Current data:

Columbia Slough Watershed Report Card

- Water Quality Score: B-
- Habitat Score: D-
- Hydrology Score: B-
- Fish and Wildlife Score: D-

Data source: City of Portland [Watershed Report Card](#)

Strategy 1: Promote pollution prevention programs that will reduce pollution in area waterways.

Why does this matter?

Overuse of pesticides and herbicides is common in urban and suburban areas. Chemical weed killers used to create a “perfect” lawn can cause harm to humans, wildlife, and native fish species if chemicals reach streams because of stormwater runoff. Some chemical insecticides harm pollinators. Other pollutants like motor oil, litter, and fertilizers also have negative impacts on aquatic ecosystems.

Public outreach efforts like “Follow the Water” and “The River Starts Here” help people understand that their choices impact water quality. Public policies like pesticide bans also play an important role in protecting people and wildlife. Municipal agencies should expand partnerships and funding for outreach and education, and explore regulations to prevent the sale or use of especially harmful chemicals.

STRATEGY CATEGORY

- ☒ **County Strategy**
- ☐ Investment Opportunity
- ☐ Community Leadership

STRATEGY TYPE

- ☐ Advocate ☐ Research
- ☐ Convene ☒ Implement

COUNTY CAPACITY

- ☒ Existing ☐ Additional ☐ New

COUNTY CONTROL



COUNTY INFLUENCE



COUNTY PRIORITY



Putting this into practice

- Support “The River Starts Here” and “Follow the Water” campaigns.
- Explore opportunities to limit the use of harmful pesticides and herbicides, particularly in the context of untrained applicators.

Lead department(s)

Department of Community Services





Artist: CETI Collective

Strategy 2: Address Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) in the Lower Willamette River.

Why does this matter?

Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) tend to occur in warm water with low water circulation — runoff containing fertilizers also plays a role. Climate change is increasing water temperatures; with higher water temperatures, areas like Ross Island Lagoon in the Lower Willamette River — created by mining activity — are becoming a frequent source of HABs during the summer months, at times closing the river to recreation.

Improved monitoring and public communication are helping to protect people and pets from harm, but solutions can be found for specific, known problem areas like Ross Island Lagoon. Restoring flushing channels to allow the river to flow through the lagoon would address the major source of HABs in the Lower Willamette River. In other problem areas, like Oaks Bottom Nature area, solutions may be less obvious but could include controlling polluted runoff and other treatments.

Implementing solutions, however, is complicated, for many reasons, including mixed ownership, overlapping regulatory responsibilities, and permitting and funding. Coordination and engagement between community-based groups, regulators, and state and local governments are needed to ensure equitable, science-based solutions are implemented.

Putting this into practice

- Host annual Lower Willamette River HAB convening to bring together interested parties with a focus on science and solutions.
- Continue the collaboration with Oregon State University to develop mixing channel design for Ross Island.

Lead department(s)

Office of Sustainability

STRATEGY CATEGORY

- ☒ County Strategy
- ☐ Investment Opportunity
- ☐ Community Leadership

STRATEGY TYPE

- ☒ Advocate ☐ Research
- ☒ Convene ☐ Implement

COUNTY CAPACITY

- ☒ Existing ☐ Additional ☐ New

COUNTY CONTROL



COUNTY INFLUENCE



COUNTY PRIORITY



Strategy 3: Prioritize and fund the removal of culverts that block fish passage.

Why does this matter?

Culverts are a legacy of road construction practices from the mid-20th century that did not consider infrastructure impacts on migratory fish like salmon. These fish may have difficulty jumping upstream into, or swimming through, a culvert pipe if the water is flowing too fast.

Culvert replacement projects are both costly and time-consuming and should be prioritized based on the greatest habitat restoration potential. Multnomah County has received funding to replace the final major fish barrier culvert on Beaver Creek. As that project is completed, the County should prioritize other culverts that have created barriers for fish, especially when the culvert is in danger of failing. There are over 300 instream culverts on County roads, although not all of these culverts present challenges to fish.

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STRATEGY TYPE

- ☐ Advocate ☐ Research
- ☐ Convene ☒ Implement

COUNTY CAPACITY

- ☐ Existing ☒ Additional ☐ New

COUNTY CONTROL

Low Med High

COUNTY INFLUENCE

Low Med High

COUNTY PRIORITY

Low Med High

Putting this into practice

- Complete Troutdale Road culvert replacement project.
- Identify future priority projects and develop funding strategies.

Lead department(s)

Department of Community Services



Strategy 4: Prepare residents for prolonged drinking water disruptions.

Why does this matter?

Water access will be disrupted for a prolonged period by the *Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake*, while other natural disasters like wildfires, droughts, and floods also pose a risk to drinking water. An emergency water supply is critical for personal preparation. The recommendation is that each household have a two-week supply of stored water: 1 gallon of water per person per day, for 14 days. Community points of emergency water access should also be encouraged and distributed throughout the county. While Multnomah County is not a water provider, it works with a number of water providers to help coordinate emergency access and readiness. By investing in educational resources, the County can help bridge the gap between individual readiness and community-level action during a drinking water disruption.

Putting this into practice

- Conduct asset mapping of existing emergency water resources, including high-capacity filtration systems and emergency water sources, to identify and bridge service gaps.
- Collaborate with the Regional Water Providers Consortium to align preparedness strategies and long-term resilience planning across jurisdictional lines.
- Develop and deploy culturally specific education campaigns on household water storage to communities who face barriers to traditional emergency communications.

Lead department(s)

Office of Emergency Management



STRATEGY CATEGORY

- ☐ County Strategy
☒ **Investment Opportunity**
☐ Community Leadership

STRATEGY TYPE

- ☐ Advocate ☐ Research
☐ Convene ☒ **Implement**

COUNTY CAPACITY

- ☐ Existing ☒ **Additional** ☐ New

COUNTY CONTROL



COUNTY INFLUENCE



COUNTY PRIORITY



Strategy 5: Reduce impact of 6PPD-Quinone in area rivers.

Why does this matter?

6PPD is a chemical used in the production of car tires. Tire wear particles that are created by normal use can be transported into local waterways through stormwater runoff. When 6PPD comes into contact with ozone, it forms 6PPD-Quinone (6PPD-Q), a compound that is toxic to coho salmon and cutthroat trout at extremely low concentrations. 6PPD has been conclusively linked to endangered coho salmon death. Finding non-toxic alternatives to 6PPD is vital to protecting coho runs, particularly in urban areas like Multnomah County. Multnomah County should continue to convene a 6PPD work group and look for advocacy opportunities at the state or federal level to promote the use of inert chemicals in tires.

At the same time, the County can reduce the impact of 6PPD by constructing stormwater treatment facilities on County-owned roadways. Options include permeable pavements, bioswales, and other best management practices that filter stormwater.

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COUNTY CONTROL



COUNTY INFLUENCE



COUNTY PRIORITY



Putting this into practice

- Participate in Oregon 6PPD-Q work group.
- As funding allows, add additional stormwater treatment to County roadways where stormwater drains to a salmon-bearing waterway.
- As funding and capacity allows, promote practices that reduce tirewear, like driving less and checking tire air pressure.

Authorizing agencies

Department of Environmental Quality; Soil and Water Conservation Districts

Lead department(s)

Department of Community Services; Office of Sustainability



Strategy 6: Work with community partners and water districts to develop water affordability indicators.

Why does this matter?

Water bills — including drinking water, sewer, and stormwater utility charges — can be a substantial burden to low-income households. While these services are indispensable for public and household health, and necessary precursors for a thriving community, many households struggle to pay their water bills. Nationally, 20% of households have outstanding arrearages or were in debt to their water utility.¹⁷ This may be especially true locally as upward pressure on water bills continues to mount due to needed infrastructure investments. Currently, there is no established measure of so-called “water burden” nationally or in Oregon.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), both qualitative definitions and quantitative measurements of water affordability can be useful in evaluating the water burden faced by different communities. The County can explore, with water utility partners, appropriate measures of water burden and track those measures over time with the aim of reducing impacts, especially on those households that struggle the most to keep up with water bills.

Putting this into practice

- Establish a working group to determine the best approaches for measuring water burden.
- Develop a reproducible methodology for tracking water burden over time, ideally disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and other demographic factors.

Lead department(s)

Office of Sustainability



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COUNTY CONTROL



COUNTY INFLUENCE



COUNTY PRIORITY



Strategy 7: Connect residents to safe, accessible swimming areas within local waterways, especially in places that are accessible by active or public transit, and partner to enhance those areas when possible.

Why does this matter?

The Willamette, Columbia, and Sandy rivers offer incredible recreational opportunities. Urban swimming is a climate *adaptation* strategy, particularly for people who can't drive to places outside the urban core, allowing people to cool off on the hottest days.

The Willamette River is especially important for swimming because it's accessible by public transit. Access to swimming in the Willamette River has become easier with the addition of ladders to floating docks and beach cleanups. This work needs to continue, ensuring that beaches and other swimming areas remain accessible to people of all abilities and can be accessed via public transit.

STRATEGY CATEGORY

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STRATEGY TYPE

- ☐ Advocate ☒ Research
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COUNTY CAPACITY

- ☐ Existing ☐ Additional ☒ New

COUNTY CONTROL



COUNTY INFLUENCE



COUNTY PRIORITY



Safety, however, is key. Providing seasonal lifeguards at popular riverside swimming areas and promoting awareness of water safety practices, like using personal flotation devices, will help promote the safe use of water recreation resources.

Putting this into practice

- Designate official swimming areas along Willamette, Columbia, and Sandy rivers, and ensure those locations have personal flotation devices that can be accessed by users of all ability levels.
- Promote seasonal awareness of water safety and ensure some designated swimming areas have lifeguards.

Authorizing agencies

City of Portland Parks & Recreation; Oregon Metro; Soil and Water Conservation Districts



Strategy 8: Work toward drinking water, storm water, and sewer utility affordability measures, including ensuring that eligible customers are aware of programs that can reduce their bills and bill assistance programs.

Why does this matter?

Water can be among the most expensive utilities people have to pay for. Water utility bills include drinking water, sewer, and stormwater utility charges. Water agencies, potentially with the help of community-based organization partners, should educate customers on the water system, how to read bills, and ways to conserve water and save money.

Every city in Multnomah County offers water utility discount programs. Making sure residents know about the programs and can access them when needed will require navigation assistance and coordination. Service providers, community-based organizations, schools, and health clinics should all be equipped to help residents access these programs. Multnomah County, through its utility assistance program, already coordinates emergency bill assistance programs for Portland Water Bureau and could become a central clearinghouse for information on similar programs.

Residents may be unaware of other programs that can help reduce bills and protect the environment, like bill discounts for downspout disconnection and tree planting. Access to clean water is a human right, a public good, and vital to public health, so cost should never be a barrier.

Putting this into practice

- Work with the Regional Water Providers Consortium to coordinate information on utility bill discount programs, emergency bill assistance, and other incentives. Create a central clearinghouse of information on these programs in each jurisdiction and ensure information is accessible in multiple languages.
- Work with Regional Water Providers Consortium to ensure social service providers can easily access bill discount and assistance information to help their clients access these programs.

Authorizing agencies

Water districts in Multnomah County



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COUNTY CONTROL



COUNTY INFLUENCE



COUNTY PRIORITY



Strategy 9: Increase swimming and water safety education for youth, prioritizing those with the least access to basic swimming skills and opportunities to practice.

Why does this matter?

Although drowning is preventable, it is one of the three leading causes of unintentional injury and death among persons aged 29 years or younger.¹⁸ Access to swim lessons and neighborhood pools is key to developing water safety skills. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Black children aged 10-14 years drown in swimming pools at rates over seven times higher than white children. North and Northeast Portland, home to many Black residents, lack access to swimming facilities and swim lessons. Investing in facilities and lessons is critical, especially as extreme heat makes swimming an important adaptive strategy for staying cool.

Going forward, summers in Multnomah County will be hotter than in past decades, with more days over 90 degrees Fahrenheit on average. Swimming, and access to safe places to swim, will become an increasingly important adaptive strategy for staying cool and coping with heat. Without deliberate effort, national patterns in disproportionate death and injury from drowning are likely to persist in Multnomah County.

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COUNTY CONTROL



COUNTY INFLUENCE



COUNTY PRIORITY



Putting this into practice

- Increase the general availability of youth swimming lessons and promote culturally specific swimming lesson outreach and programming to populations at highest risk.
- Analyze proximity to public pools and availability of swim lessons in Multnomah County to determine areas with lower access.

Authorizing agencies

City of Portland Parks & Recreation



Strategy 10: Clean and restore the Lower Willamette River and surrounding land.

Why does this matter?

The Lower Willamette River — the area that runs through Portland north of the Fremont Bridge — is contaminated by the legacy of industrial uses along the river. The area is listed by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as a *Superfund site*; the planning for a cleanup of contaminated sediments has been in process for over 20 years. Organizations like the Portland Harbor Community Coalition have been pushing for an equitable and thorough cleanup of the river while minimizing harm to frontline communities who live near the cleanup.

The full scope of impacts from the cleanup extend beyond the river itself. Air quality, public health, and safety for local communities and people living along transportation corridors or near the disposal site intended for the waste are also important considerations. Cost is a major factor — with most cleanup costs stemming from the transport of sediment to faraway disposal sites — especially because cleanup is funded in part by local water utility ratepayers and taxes. Advocacy organizations like Verde and Neighbors for Clean Air are advancing alternatives that could significantly reduce costs and environmental and safety burdens as much as possible.

Putting this into practice

- Support community-led efforts for a fair and just cleanup of the Lower Willamette River.
- Support efforts to minimize impacts of the cleanup on impacted communities.

Authorizing agencies

Environmental Protection Agency



STRATEGY CATEGORY

- ☐ County Strategy
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STRATEGY TYPE

- ☒ Advocate ☐ Research
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COUNTY CAPACITY

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COUNTY CONTROL



COUNTY INFLUENCE



COUNTY PRIORITY



Strategy 11: Ensure that there are publicly available restrooms and plan for prolonged disruptions in sanitary sewer access.

Why does this matter?

Access to basic sanitation is a core public health need. It's also a matter of human dignity and care. Public restrooms offer a low-barrier place for people to use the bathroom and wash their hands. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends carefully washing your hands with soap and water after going to the bathroom and changing diapers to prevent the spread of infectious diseases like shigella. Without proper sanitation, this basic public health recommendation can't be followed.

Many urban areas lack adequate public access to toilets. In Portland for example, there are about 17 public restrooms per 100,000 people, and access to public restrooms may be further limited by factors like maintenance issues.¹⁹ While adding and maintaining more public restrooms would contribute to public health and sanitation, it is also a large capital and operating expense.

STRATEGY CATEGORY

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STRATEGY TYPE

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COUNTY CAPACITY

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COUNTY CONTROL



COUNTY INFLUENCE



COUNTY PRIORITY



If sewer service is disrupted for any reason, including a Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake, emergency management measures for human waste need to be in place to prevent the spread of disease. The [Oregon Resilience Plan](#) estimates that basic wastewater health and safety will take weeks to restore, making preparation at the household and community level an important strategy for limiting the spread of illness.²⁰

Putting this into practice

- Map the availability of public restrooms, especially 24-hour restrooms, and explore partnership opportunities to increase the availability of publicly accessible restrooms, like the Portland Loo, in the community.
- Partner with culturally specific organizations to promote emergency preparedness strategies for human waste disposal; pilot self contained dispersed technologies like composting toilets at *community resilience hubs*.

Authorizing agencies

Multnomah County cities

Lead department(s)

Office of Emergency Management