



Coalition defends farmland against Portland's urban water plant proposal

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Rural Gresham, Oregon (September 25, 2024) – A coalition opposed to the city of Portland's proposal to build a water treatment plant in the heart of Multnomah County farmland held a town hall meeting September 20. The purpose was to provide information about the project and to dispel misinformation. The meeting was held at a grange hall, a few miles from the proposed site of the plant.

Background: The Portland Water Bureau applied for and was approved to build a drinking water facility and communications tower located in rural Gresham, at the eastern end of S.E. Carpenter Lane, with raw and finished water pipelines connecting to the existing Bull Run conduit system. The proposal was approved on November 29, 2023. The decision was appealed to the Oregon Land Use Board of Appeals (LUBA) by a coalition of community and agricultural groups. Although the appeals process is ongoing, construction work began in June with excavation and road work progressing rapidly.

Grounds for appeal: The Oregon Association of Nurseries filed a brief on the water treatment plant. It focused on three issues: 1) the city's failure to justify citing of its pipeline infrastructure on land zoned for exclusive farm use, 2) the county's failure to properly consider and analyze identified farm impacts, and 3) the county incorrectly accepting a narrow impact study as part of the project review process.

Why does Portland need the plant? The Portland Water Bureau says the plant is mandated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. But the EPA only asked Portland to address *Cryptosporidium* in the water, said Tami (Roberts) Wensenk, property owner and representative of Cottrell Community Planning Organization (CPO), which is fighting the plant. Portland could have chosen another option. "Portland water bureau told Oregon Health Authority that they were going to treat *Cryptosporidium* with this water filtration facility," Wensenk said. "Portland Water Bureau spent about \$16 million to have a UV treatment plan designed to submit to the EPA. Based on other cities who have successfully implemented UV filtration, the cost of UV filtration would be approximately \$100–150 million. That's notably less expensive and a much more cost-effective and less environmentally invasive solution that the route they ultimately chose."

Instead, they went ahead with the plant and the costs ballooned from \$350 million, to \$850 million, to \$1.25 billion. "Now we're already up to \$2.13 billion and that's before they broke ground in June," Wensenk said. The plant is to be completed by September 2027.

Who's paying the cost? "It's 100% ratepayer funded," Wensenk said, adding that this is not widely known to ratepayers. "They took the page off their website that showed the rates through 2032 that showed a 300% increase in water rates."

In a KGW report on April 12, Jodie Inman, chief engineer for the Portland Water Bureau was quoted as saying rates would increase by 7.9% in 2024, then 8.1% each year after that until 2030. The rates would also increase for cities who buy water from Portland. "Three of Portland Water Bureau's largest wholesale customers — City of Gresham, City of Rockwood, and Tualatin Valley Water District — have all determined it will be cheaper to drill their own wells than endure the massive increase in the cost of purchasing water from Portland Water Bureau they would have to pass on to their customers. And this is not a recent development — news articles published in 2019 reported on this possibility, yet PWB still went ahead with the most expensive and elaborate treatment plan," Wensenk said. An agreement with Multnomah County also rolled in the cost of road improvements that the county required as a condition for approving the project.

Community concerns not heard: "Many residents are raising questions and concerns and they're not getting good answers back," said Sam Diaz, executive director of 1000 Friends of Oregon. "They're not seeing alternative solutions

back from our government. And in order for a strong land use system to be in place we have to have cities and counties be responsive to the voices and concerns of Oregonians.”

Non-farm use of farmland: “This project in a lot of ways is the epitome of a lot of the issues that we’re dealing with in Oregon,” said Jim Johnson, land use and water planning coordinator with the Oregon Department of Agriculture. “What I’m really worried about is the integrity of the Oregon (land use) planning program as well as the integrity of the agricultural land out here. The footprint out there is nearly a hundred acres and that’s not only going to be a non-farm use of farmland but it’s sitting on class 2 prime soil. We don’t have a lot of class 2 prime soil in the state of Oregon and what we have we’re very concerned about.”

Others expressed concern that if the appeals fails and the project goes through, it could set a precedent for cities to use rural farmland for non-agricultural uses. “We’ve got the semiconductor industry, we’ve got these energy banks, we’ve got Google ... these things don’t belong in farmland,” said Wensenk.

Impact: Area nurseries, a backbone of farming in the area, will have a huge impact. “It’s not just two, five, [or] seven of my members that are directly impacted,” said Jeff Stone, executive director of the Oregon Association of Nurseries, “but it is 257 members that are impacted directly by this project. That’s a lot. That’s \$187 million in annual sales. So there’s real economic consequence.”

Beyond the disruption of the construction site, Stone said there will be disruption from traffic in surrounding areas that hapers shipping and the destruction of soil from buried pipelines. “Once you disturb the soil in that manner, it does not have the same growing capacity,” Stone said.

Why wasn’t an alternative site chosen? Opponents of the project said there were five possible sites and Powell Butte would have been the most obvious choice. “Powell Butte sits within the urban growth boundary, there’s already a water treatment plant there and all of the infrastructure is already there and they wouldn’t have to build miles of pipeline,” Wensenk said. “The reason that they didn’t choose Powell Butte and they chose Carpenter Lane is because they were afraid residents would cause so much of a fuss that they would be delayed in building it. And they would get held up in a land use battle and not be able to get going on time to meet the date they chose with the [Oregon Health Authority] to get online by September 2027.”

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The Oregon Association of Nurseries, based in Wilsonville, represents more than 700 wholesale growers, retailers, landscapers and suppliers. Oregon’s nursery and greenhouse industry is the state’s leading agricultural sector, with annual sales of \$1.22 billion in 2022. It is also a traded sector, with about 75 percent of the nursery plants grown in Oregon being shipped out of state. For information, visit www.oan.org.