

AG WATER QUALITY Newsletter

ISSUE 1 | FALL 26



OREGON
DEPARTMENT OF
AGRICULTURE

Online ag water quality practices tool set for release in 2027, Page 6

Newsletter to focus on topics affecting water quality and Oregon's SWCDs

As we continue our shared commitment to protecting Oregon's natural resources, I'm excited to introduce the first edition of our Agricultural Water Quality Newsletter.



Kevin Fenn
Program
Manager

This is an effort to keep Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) (staff and boards), Local Advisory Committees, and our partners informed. Our plan is to publish this newsletter twice each year to ensure timely updates on program priorities, emerging issues, and the collaborative work happening across the state to protect water quality.

Agricultural water quality is a high priority for the Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA). Through the Agricultural Water Quality Program, we work to prevent and control water pollution from agricultural activities, support voluntary stewardship, and promote practices that protect surface water and ground water.

This newsletter will highlight key topics affecting water quality and the SWCDs, including regulatory updates, strategic initiatives, success stories, and opportunities for engagement. By focusing on these areas, we hope to ensure that SWCDs and Local Advisory Committee members have practical and up-to-date information

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Before photo: Prior to the project, the property was choked with invasive Himalayan blackberry and a failing fence. After photo: Now the pasture is a mix of native grasses, trees, and shrubs. New livestock exclusion fencing also was added.

OWEB grant funding leads to restoration work in South Umpqua watershed

By AMANDA ROBINSON | Oregon Department of Agriculture

The South Umpqua watershed has long been a priority for many natural resource agencies. Years of declining water quality, reduced water quantity, and compromised habitat have contributed to challenges facing coastal coho salmon and other species.

Oregon Department of Environmental Quality Total Maximum Daily Load data shows that several subbasins are not meeting temperature and *E. coli* standards, highlighting the need for meaningful on-the-ground action.

In 2023, Oregon Department of Agriculture designated a Strategic Implementation Area (SIA) within the South Umpqua, making all eligible agricultural properties in this boundary qualify for additional funding through Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board's SIA Restoration Grant. Through hands-on work with agricultural landowners in the SIA, Douglas Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) identified a property as

Project at a glance

Douglas Soil and Water Conservation District

**Beals Creek Tributary Agricultural Water
Quality and Restoration Project**

**Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board
Award Amount: \$11,717**

Project Start Date: April 1, 2025

**Location: Beals Creek Tributary,
South Umpqua Basin**

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HOW CAN WE HELP YOU?

For general information about the Water Quality Program and the Soil and Water Conservation District Program, call 503.986.4700.

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as they engage with the Agricultural Water Quality Program.

Our content will be closely tied to the Agricultural Water Quality Program's strategic initiatives, including agricultural water quality plans and rules, compliance and enforcement, connections with SWCDs, Strategic Implementation Areas, and total maximum daily loads. These initiatives guide our efforts and ensure that we remain responsive to evolving environmental conditions, stakeholder needs, and long-term conservation goals.

Another important purpose of this newsletter is to spotlight the dedicated staff who make this work possible. The Agricultural Water Quality Program and the SWCDs benefit from a team of professionals who bring expertise, innovation, and a deep commitment to stewardship. In each issue, we will highlight staff roles, accomplishments, and ongoing projects. By sharing their stories, we hope to build stronger connections across districts and celebrate the individuals advancing

conservation in every corner of Oregon.

I also want to take this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation to the SWCDs throughout the state. Your work with landowners, on-the-ground technical support, and leadership in local conservation efforts are essential to the success of Oregon's agricultural water quality goals. Thank you for your dedication, your creativity in addressing challenges, and your steadfast commitment to protecting Oregon's natural resources for future generations.

I look forward to sharing more with you in the months ahead and welcome your feedback as this newsletter grows. Together, we can continue strengthening agricultural water quality, supporting Oregon's producers, and enhancing the landscapes we all care about.

Kevin Fenn is the Agricultural Water Quality and Soil and Water Conservation District Program Manager. He can be reached at kevin.fenn@oda.oregon.gov or 503.510.8214.



Before and after photos showing restoration work on a project in the South Umpqua watershed.

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an outstanding candidate for an SIA Restoration Grant (see Page 4 for information about the grant). Situated along a tributary to Beals Creek, the site offered an excellent opportunity to reduce sediment and bacteria levels and strengthen riparian habitat.

“This landowner contacted me after the SIA landowner meeting,” said Cindy Bright, a Conservation Technician with Douglas SWCD. “On a site visit, (I observed that) they had a pasture adjacent to the stream with a failing fence and blackberry invasion.”

Bright received buy-in from the landowner to apply for the grant and Douglas SWCD was awarded \$11,717 for the project dubbed as the “Beals Creek Tributary Agricultural Water Quality and Restoration Project.” Work began in April 2025.

During initial site visits, Douglas SWCD staffers identified several issues within the project’s small, 0.3-acre footprint. Active streambank erosion was delivering sediment directly into the creek, a downed livestock exclusion fence that was allowing cattle access to the stream, and dense stands of nonnative Himalayan blackberry that were crowding the riparian area and providing little functional bank protection. Even though livestock use of this portion of the property is intermittent, these on-the-ground conditions were collectively degrading water quality and limiting the creek’s ability to support a healthy riparian habitat.

Carrying Restoration Work Upstream

The Beals Creek Tributary Agricultural Water Quality and Restoration Project was designed to build on a previously successful project downstream, continuing the effort to further improve water quality and habitat conditions in the Beals Creek tributary. The project goals were clear and practical:

- Reducing sediment by reshaping eroding banks and establishing deep-rooted native vegetation,
- Lowering bacteria inputs through new livestock exclusion fencing, and
- Enhancing habitat by removing invasive blackberry and planting native grasses, shrubs, and trees.

Restoration in Action

Douglas SWCD staffers fully removed invasive blackberry, including roots, to prevent regrowth and open space for native vegetation. The eroding streambank was reshaped into a stable, plantable slope to reduce sediment loss and support new plantings. Immediately after shaping, native grass seed was applied along with hydrogel and mulch to help ensure quick germination and early stabilization.

To further strengthen the riparian area, a diverse mix of native live stakes and plugs was planted along both upper and lower bank zones. A new livestock exclusion fence now protects the creek and restored vegetation from future disturbance, supporting long-term improvements in water quality.

Douglas SWCD staffers noted that the bank reshaping helped the project move forward more efficiently than expected, reducing the need for repeated vegetation treatments before planting could begin.

What Was Learned Along the Way

When reflecting on the project, Douglas SWCD staffers highlighted how effective hydrogel was in supporting early grass establishment. Follow-up inspections showed stronger-than-expected vegetation growth, contributing to improved long-term bank stability.

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What is an SIA Restoration Grant?

The Strategic Implementation Area (SIA) Restoration Grant was created to support SIA partners in implementing restoration projects that address ecological and agricultural water quality issues identified through the SIA process. It is open to SIA lead organizations who received an Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board SIA Technical Assistance grant between 2017–2025. The maximum ask amount is \$30,000 per application and applicants may submit more than one project per grant cycle.

The next grant cycle is scheduled to open late fall 2026 with applications due in early 2027. For information regarding the SIA Restoration, go to <https://oda.fyi/SIA-Grants>

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Final Thoughts

Douglas SWCD reports that the Beals Creek restoration effort was successful. The streambank is now stable, livestock are fully excluded from the creek, and invasive blackberry has been replaced with diverse native vegetation. They emphasized that combining bank shaping with hydrogel application played a key role in meeting restoration goals efficiently and effectively.

“The landowners were very happy after completion,” Bright said. “They really liked the bank reshaping and the wildlife-friendly fencing. We were all amazed at the success of the native grasses and live stakes installed.”

Building on these successes, this project marks an important milestone and also represents the first step in a broader restoration effort. Douglas SWCD plans to continue planting additional native trees and shrubs in this area to fully restore the riparian buffer. These future plantings will further enhance shade, improve bank stability, and increase filtration of runoff, strengthening long-term water quality and habitat outcomes.

Hot Tip from Douglas SWCD

When faced with a vertical, highly erodible bank, reshaping the slope greatly improves the chances of establishing vegetation. Apply a deep-rooting native grass seed (such as blue wild rye) as soon as possible to further improve stability. Adding willow stakes at the toe of the bank can also help slow water velocity. Fall and winter are ideal seasons for placing stakes so they can sprout with the spring moisture.

Closing Note from ODA

ODA appreciates Douglas SWCD’s work on this project and its effort to improve water quality and riparian habitat in the South Umpqua watershed. We value their partnership and thank them for sharing information about this completed project. ODA looks forward to continuing collaborative restoration efforts across Oregon.

Amanda Robinson is the Strategic Implementation Area Specialist with the Agricultural Water Quality Program. She can be reached at 503.551.8448 or amanda.robinson@oda.oregon.gov.

Meet the Ag Water Quality TEAM

Nick Sirovatka

Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area/Integrated Water Resources Strategy Lead



Nick Sirovatka started with ODA in June 2025 as the Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area/Integrated Water Resource Strategy Lead. Based out of Pendleton, he also represents the agency on the Oregon Drought Readiness Council. Prior to joining ODA, Nick served as the NRCS Agronomist on the eastern side of Oregon before accepting a position as a Regional Soil Health Specialist/Agronomist covering Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming, as well as acting responsibilities for North Dakota and South Dakota. He earned a B.S. in Crop and Soil Science from Oregon State University. A Pendleton native, Nick has farmed and ranched in the U.S., Canada, and New Zealand.

Away from work Nick enjoys spending time in the mountains with his family, hunting, fishing, cutting firewood, and camping. He is a coach with the Pendleton High School Trap Team and volunteers with different community groups, including the Pendleton FFA Alumni Association, Pendleton Round-Up, and the Happy Canyon Night Pageant.

Amanda Robinson

Strategic Implementation Area Specialist



Amanda Robinson joined ODA four years ago as the Strategic Implementation Area and Grant Administration Specialist and works out of Salem. Originally from Michigan, she earned her B.S. in Environmental Geography from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and then jumped into fieldwork that took her all over the map. Her past work includes native seed and restoration projects in Nevada, leading a conservation crew across Texas and the South, and survey work with the Champaign County Soil and Water Conservation District/Natural Resources Conservation Service in Illinois.

Eventually she packed up, moved to Oregon sight unseen, and hasn’t looked back. In her free time, Amanda dives into arts and crafts projects, catches as many concerts as she can, and hangs out with her two wonderful kitties, Magnolia and Douglas.

Practices that make a difference with animals grazing near water

Oregon ranchers are the stewards of millions of acres of rangeland and pasture, many of which border streams, rivers, and wetlands. Ranchers understand the importance of streamside areas because they provide late-season forage, shelter livestock from summer heat, and store water when everything else has gone dry.

That's why the Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA) works with ranchers across the state to ensure agricultural activities near waterways follow common-sense practices that protect streamside functions and also work for your operation. Whether you manage rangeland in Eastern Oregon or pasture in the Willamette Valley, there are straightforward ways to comply with ODA's agricultural water quality rules while maintaining productive, resilient land for future generations.

The Agricultural Water Quality Rules

Oregon's agricultural water quality rules require landowners to prevent and control pollution from agricultural sources. These rules don't ban grazing near waterways, nor do they impose standard buffer widths or fencing mandates. Instead, the rules require that streamside areas be managed to:

- Allow vegetation to establish and grow,
- Stabilize banks,
- Provide shade (where applicable), and
- Filter pollutants from runoff.

Landowners have flexibility in how they meet these goals. ODA focuses on outcomes, not one-size-fits-all prescriptions. Following are six practices landowners should consider.

Six Practices That Make a Difference

1. Rotate When and How Long You Graze

Allowing continuous, year-round access to streamside areas for your livestock can degrade vegetation and destabilize streambanks. Instead, consider:

- Seasonal grazing rotations that avoid wet, vulnerable periods,
- Rest periods for vegetation recovery,
- Short duration grazing periods followed by rest.

Even small changes, such as not grazing until grasses and woody vegetation take root, can make a difference.

2. Use Hardened Crossings, Water Gaps, or Virtual Fencing

Allowing cattle direct access to streams for water is permitted but it needs to be managed to prevent stream-channel erosion and manure and sediment from entering the water. In addition to exclusion fencing along waterways, please consider:

- Managed and limited watering time,
- Hardened access points (e.g., gravel pads),
- Narrow water gaps for drinking,
- Moveable fencing for controlled access.

Virtual fencing, using GPS collars and software, is a flexible and labor-saving solution. It allows precise livestock movement



Ryan Beyer
Water Quality
Compliance
Lead

and stream exclusion without physical infrastructure. It's especially promising on large pastures, flood-prone areas, or terrain where traditional fencing isn't practical.

3. Encourage Streamside Vegetation

Native streamside plants stabilize banks, provide shade, filter runoff, and can compete against invasive species. To support vegetation, consider:

- Excluding livestock,
- Re-seeding or planting native species,
- Controlling invasive plants.

ODA does not require fencing or no-touch buffers, but vegetation must be allowed to establish to stabilize banks, filter runoff, and provide shade if there's water flowing in the summer.

4. Control Manure Near Streams

Nutrients and bacteria from manure degrade water quality and can create drinking water concerns for communities downstream. Other threatened beneficial uses include recreation, aquatic habitat, and irrigation. Reduce risks by:

- Relocating feeding areas away from drainageways,
- Cleaning winter sacrifice or heavy use areas,
- Installing berms or filter strips to control runoff,
- Applying manure to pastures or crops at agronomic rates.

5. Document and Monitor Your Efforts

Keep records, take photos, document improvements, and work with your local conservation organization. ODA's water quality compliance program is partially complaint-driven, and documentation shows proactive stewardship.

6. Let Beavers Be Your Ranch Hands

Beavers can raise water tables, reduce erosion, and trap sediment. Beaver dams create wetlands that:

- Improve forage productivity,
- Provide water during dry seasons,
- Create more fire-resistant landscapes,
- Slow flows and reduce erosion,
- Enhance aquatic habitat.

A Shared Responsibility and a Changing Toolbox

Today's ranchers have more tools than ever to manage their operations, from high-tech fencing to natural partners such as beavers. Streamside health supports forage, regulatory peace of mind, and long-term ranch resilience.

Resilience, Not Regulation

There's no one way to do this right, but there are plenty of ways to do it well. ODA is here to support ranchers, and not with rules and regulations, but with technical help, cost-share guidance, and good old-fashioned collaboration. Together, let's keep Oregon's water clean and our ranching communities strong.

Ryan Beyer is the Compliance Lead of the Agricultural Water Quality Program. He can be reached at 503.877.0773 or ryan.beyer@oda.oregon.gov.

Online ag water quality practices tool set for release next year

Often, the hardest part of doing work to improve water quality on a farm or ranch is just knowing what to do and where to begin. Imagine an online tool that would automatically pull descriptions and plans for the best agricultural water quality conservation practices for a given landscape and operation.

Such a handy resource is under construction and projected to be ready by the end of 2027 for use by landowners, conservation professionals, and Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA) staffers. ODA, Oregon State University Agricultural Water Technical Assistance Program, OSU Extension Service, and the OSU Biological and Ecological Engineering Program are developing a Water Quality Practices Planner website that will have the ability to provide practice options to protect water quality with specific guidance given a site landscape/operations, local rules, and location.

Following are questions and answers about the Water Quality Practices Planner:

Question: Why would landowners want to use the tool?

Answer:

- To get suggestions for agricultural practices that could solve a water quality issue on their property, considering land and operation conditions, as well as local water quality rules and Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs). The site will allow landowners to submit and save pictures and notes and ultimately share the output summary with others via email.
- To complete a self-assessment of property, as the website lists common water quality issues for agricultural properties (general, livestock, crop farms) through a set of questions.
- To understand water quality issues, questions, and agricultural practices that are highlighted in a particular watershed.
- To boost opportunity to obtain grant funding. Practices that ODA prioritizes may be given an advantage in a grant proposal.

Q: Why would a conservation professional want to use the tool?

A:

- To get ideas and suggestions for agricultural practices that could solve water quality issues, get updated on local rules and water quality TMDL (rule) boundaries and recommendations, and identified prioritized practices in an area.
- To serve as a training or refresher tool for agricultural water quality practices. It can be challenging for conservation professionals to stay up to date with agricultural water quality practices and TMDLs.
- To use as a communication tool with landowners on their property since the location can be marked, notes taken, and site photos preserved. Suggested



Agricultural water quality practices protect water sources from livestock waste, erosion, and sediment. Implementing management practices such as the off-stream water trough, riparian fencing, and engineered culvert stream crossings seen here can significantly reduce pathogen loading and improve stream health.

practices are described with sample pictures, and the resulting plan summary can be stored and emailed for reference and future discussions.

- For a site visit for which a landowner is not present or where not all landowners are present. The tool allows pictures, notes, and suggested practices to be readily shared with all parties.
- To boost opportunity to obtain grant funding. Practices that ODA prioritizes may be given an advantage in a grant proposal.

Q: What is the difference between a “Conservation Professional” and “Landowner” user?

A: Developers are working to provide plain language for landowners and avoiding conservation jargon, although the detailed references will be listed if desired.

Q: What is the difference between a “Conservation Professional” and “ODA Staff” user?

A: ODA staffers commonly work together on specific properties, so they will have the ability to share data and plans with other ODA staffers, but not with “Landowners” or “Conservation Professionals.”

Q: What about privacy issues?

A: No user can see any data or plans from another user.

Q: Why is site location needed to use the tool?

A: Having a specific site location allows the planner tool to obtain local Area Rules and water quality concerns, such

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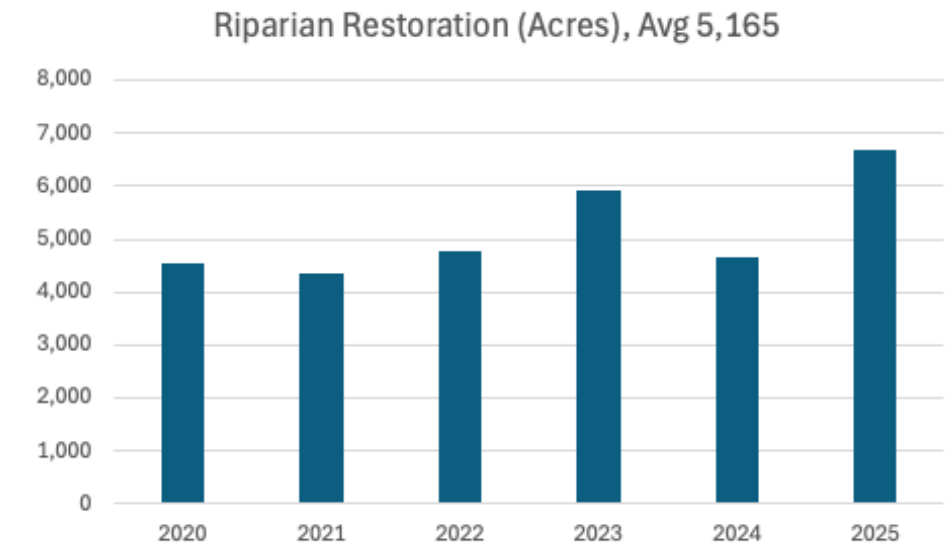
New ODA data hub helps tell better story of restoration

Thanks to the new Oregon Department of Agriculture Water Quality Data Hub Site, the program is now able to pull together data from SWCDs to tell a better story of restoration on agricultural lands.

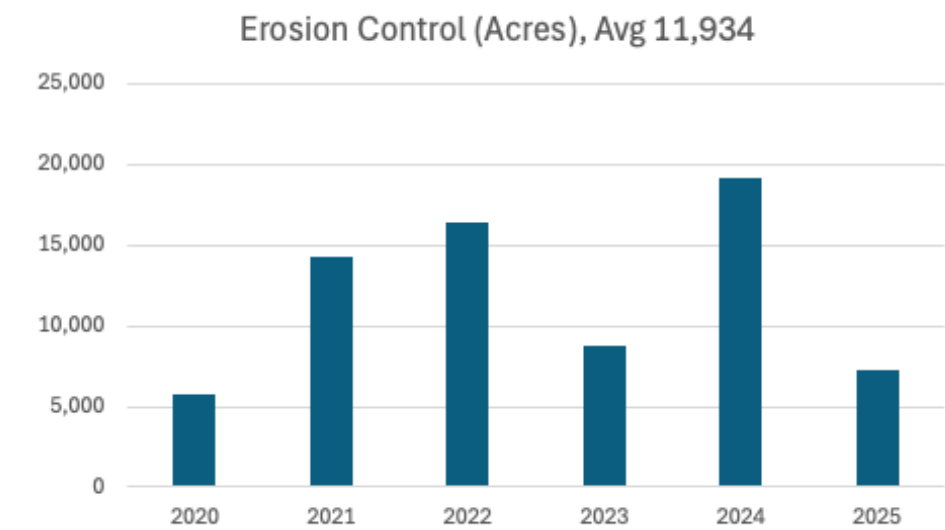
ODA can now create graphs showing practices implemented at the local and statewide level that will be shared with Soil and Water Conservation Districts and Local Advisory Committees. Conservation practices are organized by Natural Resources Conservation Service practice code.

Prior to the hub’s creation, data submitted by SWCDs in Scope of Work, Focus Area Action Plan, and Strategic Implementation Area Technical Assistance reports was contained in static PDFs, therefore limiting the data’s value. The hub has transformed this “frozen” information into a hub that provides interconnected data and new ways of processing data to reveal trends.

ODA appreciates the SWCDs’ diligence in entering data into the hub on time. Check out the following graphs representing conservation practices implemented statewide for a better sense of the great work that SWCDs have been doing to protect water quality.



This graph shows an average of 5,165 acres of riparian restoration work was completed by SWCDs statewide between 2020 and 2025.



This graph shows an average of 11,934 acres of erosion control work was completed by SWCDs statewide between 2020 and 2025.

Tool, from Page 6

as TMDLs. It also allows the tool to suggest agricultural practices based on the local environment.

Q: Conservation practices can be interpreted in different ways. For instance, a “filter strip” can be viewed in many ways. How is this handled?

A: An important aspect of this tool is to have common terminology among user groups backed by pictures with local representation to clarify the intent and function of specific practices.

Q: Will the tool be accessible on a phone?

A: Yes. It will be accessible via mobile phones, tablets, and computers.

Q: How is the project being paid for?

A: Through a portion of a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Columbia Basin Toxic Reduction grant of \$645,000 awarded to ODA. ODA awarded OSU \$140,000 of those funds for the project. ODA is using the grant for development of its Focused Ag Solutions initiative.

Q: When will the tool be available for use?

A: The goal is by the end of 2027.