

Hoping to avoid a water shortage, Oregon begins charging a fee and requiring a map for new wells

by Eric Mortenson, The Oregonian
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Oregonians still don't need a permit to dig a well for typical household use, but a new state law now requires property owners to pay a \$300 fee and file a map showing the well's location.

The law, which went into effect July 1, is the state's first tentative step to get a handle on what's expected to become a crucial environmental and development issue: Oregon's groundwater supply.

The state [Water Resources Department](#) says the mapping information is critical to monitoring the supply and availability of groundwater, and a \$300 fee will fund research. The requirements were established by Senate Bill 788, passed by the 2009 Legislature.

The department and its companion advisory board, the Water Resources Commission, have long pressed for better water planning in the state. As Oregon grows, the demand for water for drinking, irrigation and fire protection increases. The state has about 240,000 wells in place now, and groundwater is expected to increasingly become the source for the water needed by homes, farms and businesses.

But state officials say they've fallen behind because of budget cuts and don't know how much water is available. In an interview with The Oregonian this past spring, one official compared the situation to driving a car without a fuel gauge.

The Water Resources Department estimates they have solid groundwater information on just three of the state's 18 basins. The department is tasked with monitoring about 85,000 water rights. In some areas, development has already been hampered by groundwater shortages.

The issue is complicated by Oregon's system of allowing "exempt" uses of groundwater. By law, groundwater is a public resource and a water right permit is needed to tap it with a well. But permits aren't required for single homes or a group development that doesn't use more than 15,000 gallons a day or for industrial and commercial operations that don't use more than 5,000 gallons a day. Stock watering and non-commercial gardens smaller than a half-acre also are exempt.

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