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Groundwater management: Some progress toward defining roles and developing long-term plans

News Article



This is a one-year follow-up to our 2020 report, "Groundwater: City identified risks, must develop a long-term plan to address them."

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Our 2020 audit of management of the City's groundwater found the Portland Water Bureau had work underway to meet the challenges of seismic and emergency preparedness, water quality and capacity planning, and asset management. We made recommendations to formalize decision-making roles and organizational structure for groundwater management and develop a long-term plan to prioritize groundwater system needs.

One year later, the Bureau has made some progress toward implementing our recommendations. The Bureau uses a steering committee to help guide

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groundwater decisions and has worked to clarify roles for the members of the group. The Bureau has made slower progress toward developing a consolidated long-term work plan. The Bureau said both the COVID-19 pandemic and its focus on implementing a 2019 Strategic Plan have slowed its progress.

Recommendation Status: In Process

Management roles and decision-making being defined

We recommended that the Water Bureau clarify and document the decision-making roles and organizational structure of the groundwater program to help ensure issues are addressed in a timely and complete manner. The audit found that the collaborative management structure needed to be defined and documented. Staff and managers from three divisions – Engineering, Operations, and Resource Protection – met regularly as the Groundwater Steering Committee, but it wasn't clear how decisions were made once issues had been presented to the Committee, and no one person or group had ownership of groundwater.

The Bureau is developing a charter for the Groundwater Steering Committee and also reviewing groundwater staffing levels. The Bureau said the charter will be similar to charters in place for other multidisciplinary work groups at the Bureau and will spell out the members of the Groundwater Steering Committee and the roles and responsibilities for those members. The Bureau said it plans to have the Groundwater Steering Committee determine the decision-making authority for the groundwater system and assign a point person to the Committee.

Recommendation Status: In Process

Consolidated, long-term plan in development

We recommended that the Water Bureau document all identified needs for groundwater system improvement and develop a consolidated, long-term plan to prioritize actions within limited resources. The audit found the Bureau had identified risks to groundwater in the areas of seismic preparedness, emergency management, water quality and capacity, and aging infrastructure and had projects underway in each area, but did not have a comprehensive work plan that laid out a long-term approach to prioritize competing needs. The context for this recommendation was the history of groundwater as a lower priority than the higher-profile Bull Run watershed.

The Bureau said it is working on an assessment of five-year and long-term budgetary requirements for the groundwater system and will improve communication about groundwater projects across the Bureau. The Bureau

also said it is nearing completion of an analysis of groundwater supply needs that will drive decision-making for investments in the groundwater system.

Visit our website to view the [original 2020 audit report](#).

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