

Water Research Advisory Board Member Spotlight: The Oklahoma Water Resources Board

By Julie Cunningham, OWRB Executive Director



I believe it was always my destiny to spend a career involved in managing, protecting, and planning for the future of Oklahoma's water resources. My passion for Oklahoma's lakes and streams is rooted in my childhood. My earliest memories take me back to fishing off the dock and sailing with my parents and brother at Lake Hefner, and camping with grandparents at Lake Eufaula's Belle Starr Campground. As a teen I spent summers water skiing and hanging out with friends at our family's cabin at Lake Texoma.

As it turns out, my experience with boating helped me land a dream job (for a student) in 1994 as an aspiring scientist in a summer position in the OWRB's Lake Assessment program. Over the years, as I took on different roles and responsibilities at the OWRB, I came to realize that water science and management are central to our everyday lives, although this work is often unseen by most citizens. Nearly 25 years later, as executive director, water remains a calling for me and for our dedicated staff, agency partners, and many others with whom I have been so fortunate to work alongside as we help ensure long-term water security and economic prosperity for our state.



The OWRB was created in the 1950s, at a time when Oklahoma was experiencing the worst drought in history and water pollution problems due to rapid growth and development. In response, a 1955 House Joint Resolution established a committee of legislators and citizens to travel the state gathering information on local water concerns. Their State Water Policy recommendations led to the creation of the OWRB to administer water rights, establish water quality standards, negotiate coming federal policies, and develop state and local projects to ensure effective use of water resources.

The 2012 Comprehensive Water Plan repeated this statewide citizen comment initiative and became the most robust public engagement process in state history. After three years and thousands of logged comments, eight priority policy recommendations were put forward. Today, the OWRB is working with many state and federal agencies, local and tribal governments, private companies, and citizens to implement those recommendations. I am happy to provide some updates on our progress:

- we are making strides in meeting an \$82 billion water infrastructure need of our communities and districts, thanks to a 2012 State Question and support for funding from our loan and grant financing programs and several other public and private lenders
- our expanded statewide water quality and quantity monitoring networks are more vigorously tracking the health and availability of streams, lakes, and groundwater

- water availability studies are being completed on all unstudied basins to accurately issue water rights
- the 2012 *Water for 2060 Act* and several recent pieces of legislation are helping focus efforts to stretch existing water supplies, explore development of untapped marginal quality waters and aquifer storage, and identify practical conservation, efficiency, and reuse practices in every sector.

Through collective input and collaboration, we continue to build on the groundwork laid by many people over the years, and I am honored and proud to be a public servant in this important arena. I look forward to a bright future as we continue to find solutions for drought, flooding, and water infrastructure needs. We remain committed to promoting the value of water and fostering partnerships to leverage funding and advance research and technology. Together, we will ensure that Oklahoma moves forward as a national leader in water resource management and investment.