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Joint Committee on Ways and Means Sub-Committee on Natural Resources

Testimony in support of SB 5539 and SB 5540: Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board 2019-2021 Budget

Submitted by: Kathleen Brennan-Hunter, Director of Conservation Programs, The Nature Conservancy

On behalf of The Nature Conservancy, I am testifying in support of **SB 5539 and SB 5540 to fund the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) operations and grant programs in the 2019-21 budget.** These funds support the protection and restoration of healthy watersheds and natural habitats for future generations.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a science-based and non-partisan conservation organization. Our mission is to protect the lands and waters on which all life depends. The organization has over 70,000 supporters statewide with members in every county in Oregon. Our staff, based in communities across the state, work collaboratively with tribes, government agencies, elected officials, landowners, businesses, and stakeholders to develop solutions to the challenges facing people and nature.

Since 1999, OWEB has invested $566 million in improving fish and wildlife habitat throughout the State of Oregon through grant-making to local organizations. Funding comes from lottery dollars, federal programs such as NOAA's Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund, salmon license plates revenues and other sources. To fulfill this mission, OWEB has targeted grant programs to fund state-wide priorities. OWEB now offers 17 grant programs to fulfill strategic habitat restoration needs throughout the state. Over the last 20 years, 8,700 grants to local efforts have resulted in:

- 5,100 miles of stream restoration;
- 6,100 miles of habitat made accessible;
- 1,135,000 acres of upland habitat restoration; and
- 51,000 wetland or estuarine habitat acres addition.

OWEB also maintains the Oregon Watershed Restoration Inventory – the largest database of restoration information in the western U.S. This database has documented and mapped more than 18,000 projects since 1995.

The Nature Conservancy supports the Governor's Recommended Budget for OWEB. Included below are specific budget priorities of interest to us:

Policy Package 110 for personal services contracting. The land acquisition grant program requires an extra set of expertise that relies on contracted services. This policy package gives OWEB the ability to continue to work with transaction specialists that support long-lasting land conservation in Oregon.

Policy Package 210 for Forest Collaborative Grants. Funding to OWEB from Oregon Department of Forestry for implementation of the competitive grants under the Oregon Federal Forest Health Program. $500,000

Policy Package 130 for Conservation Policy and Strategy Coordination. Provides contracting resources to assist with conservation policy and strategy coordination on complex, landscape-scale natural resource issues. Examples include tide gates, sage-grouse habitat conservation and Governor Brown's initiative to create a secure, safe and resilient water future for all Oregonians. Using a model that has been successfully implemented for other programs, this package requests contracted services for effective program delivery. $325,000

Policy Package 250 for Upper Klamath Basin Grants. Provides funds to support the reintroduction of salmon and steelhead into the Upper Klamath Basin and enable associated habitat restoration work through on-the ground grants, subject to availability of federal funds are available for this purpose. $13,400,000

In addition to the above priorities, the following investments in OWEB would advance the stewardship of working lands across Oregon, which have not been included into the recommended budget. *TNC has already weighed in support of HB 2729 which directs the General Fund to OWEB for purposes related to programs for grants from the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Fund.*

Policy Package 120 for Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program-Operations. This package would provide staff and funds for contracting to support the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program. $738,652

Policy Package 220 for Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program-Grants. This package proposes funding for grant for implementation of the OAHP to help farmers and ranchers voluntarily keep their land in agriculture and maintain or improve fish and wildlife habitat. $9,250,000

To underscore the importance of a bold and robust investment in OWEB's strategic contributions, I highlight a recent OWEB funded project that was recognized by the American Fisheries Society Oregon Chapter with its "Fishery Team of the Year" award for fulfilling a decade-long vision of providing dramatically improving over-wintering habitat for Coho salmon while also providing benefits to local agricultural landowners in the Coquille watershed. This 1,700-acre project helped (a) improve fish passage on grazing lands by replacing failing tide gates, (b) restored 407 acres of tidal wetlands for fish and wildlife, and (c) revegetated the wetlands. The outcomes of this project include better water management and longer grazing seasons for landowners plus increased survival rates for up to 200,000 juvenile Coho salmon and habitat for many other species.

The Nature Conservancy is proud partner on this project with our local, state, federal and tribal partners.

OWEB's budget supports important projects, such as the one above, that are collaborative, complex and invest strategically in our state's ecological and economic needs. They fuel conservation organizations like ours that work from the ground up to achieve statewide initiatives like the Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds and the Oregon Conservation Strategy.

The Nature Conservancy urges you to support SB 5539, SB 5540 and the above-mentioned policy packages as you consider prioritizing investments in the OWEB 2019-2021 budget.

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