

Jim James, Testimony Opposing HB 2357 on March 2, 2021

Chair Witt and members of the House Agriculture and Natural Resource Committee

My name is Jim James, a professional forester and I work for the Oregon Small Woodlands Association (OSWA). OSWA opposes HB 2357 and all bills that make any changes to Oregon Forest Resource Institute (OFRI) or propose a new Severance Tax on timber harvest like HB 2379, that also eliminates OFRI. My testimony will focus on all bills that would make unacceptable changes to OFRI.

OFRI was set up legislatively in 1991, as a Commodity Commission for forest owners, with funding collected from the Forest Products Harvest Tax paid by everyone who harvests timber. Forest owners can opt out of the Harvest Tax allocated to OFRI, if they wish, but very few do. As explained on February 18th, this harvest tax funds many programs that are important to forest owners and the public.

As explained by Erin Isselmann, OFRI's Executive Director, on February 18th, OFRI has a great partnership with Oregon's educational system and teachers. Annually, OFRI funds, K-12 in classroom and field-forest education programs, around 1000 teachers participate in OFRI's forestry education workshops, 60% of the fourth- to sixth-grade students visit the Rediscovery Forest at the Oregon Garden Natural Resources Education Program, and these programs are with Title 1 schools, which serve a high percentage of families with lower incomes.

More than 70% of OFRI's funding is used to provide education for K-12 programs and the general public. While only about 12 percent of OFRI's funding goes back to landowners through educational programming, which I will note, has positively impacted the management of 1/3 of Oregon's private forests owned by Oregon's 79,000 family forest owners.

A public benefit from OFRI's educational programs is an understanding of Oregon forestry and the wood products industry, which is one of Oregon's key industries, particularly in rural Oregon. Oregon is the nation's largest supplier of lumber and plywood.

It is clear, OFRI is a Commodity Commission for Oregon's forest owners. I am sure you know, Oregon's land use laws mandate lands zoned as forestland must be maintained as forests with some minor options to convert to agricultural land. By statute, the purpose of Oregon's private forests is to grow and harvest trees. Just like the purpose of land zoned for agricultural needs to grow an agricultural crop. The need for a Commodity Commission for timber and forest land is no different than the need for another crop's Commodity Commission for crops grown on agricultural land.

Like other Commodity Commissions, the voting members on OFRI's board are among those who pay for it. OFRI meetings are open to the public, with the opportunity for public comment when the board meets quarterly. Let me explain by using a mannerism. If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and sounds like a duck, it's a duck. No offense to my beaver friends. OFRI has performed exactly how it was set up to do by providing forestry education to the public and to forest owners, as a Commodity Commission operating in a manner consistent with its statutory requirements.

The proponents of HB 2357 and other anti OFRI bills were likely influenced by misleading reports by some media outlets who have led the public to believe their own tax dollars are being spent to lobby on behalf of the timber industry, when in fact, it's the forest owners who use a portion of their Harvest Taxes to support science-based, peer reviewed forestry education for the public's benefit.

As a result of this erroneous reporting, the Secretary of State's office is currently conducting a performance review of OFRI, which is expected no later than this summer. I am confident OFRI will be found to be in compliance with its statutory boundaries. There is no emergency to change OFRI. It is premature to even be having these discussions until the audit is completed.

I plead with the House Agriculture and Natural Resource Committee to not move HB 2357 or any other bills that reduces OFRI's ability to function so successfully as it has for the last 30 years for the public's benefit. Any such bills are without merit.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.