



April 21, 2021

To: Natural Resources Subcommittee, Joint Ways and Means Committee

RE: Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA) Budget

Co-Chairs Rep. Reardon and Senator Taylor:

OACD opposes the cut in the department's Natural Resources Division that are part of Package **090** that continues the vacancy of the critical management position in the SWCD Department that provides support and program development for the 45 soil and water conservation districts statewide to achieve program success while leveraging the work that can be accomplished.

There are 45 SWCDs statewide, generally organized by county, serving both rural and urban residents with conservation and natural resource technical assistance and securing funding for constituent project work. Districts are local governments with countywide elected officials.

History

In the past, ODA has been a good partner in jointly working with districts on natural resource programs to leverage the work to be accomplished. Today there are three continuing vacated positions in this division: one manager to work with districts and natural resource programs and two water quality specialists. Currently the water quality director has been burdened with combining the two positions (water quality manager and manager of SWCD programs) and that leaves a significant gap in what districts need to be successful and also lessens the work that can be accomplished in the water quality area by taking time away from that responsibility. While districts actively work in the water quality area, that area represents only about 10% of the technical work we provide so the SWCD manager position is much more important as it encompasses all of our programs.

New Horizons

Losing the manager who works with SWCDs has been detrimental as districts continue to add new programs on behalf of ODA with insufficient internal support. That support at the management level provides the planning and support to assist the districts in implementing significant new programs.

These new programs are added to district responsibilities without providing comparable SWCD support at the department:

- Wildfire prevention and wildfire restoration programs
- Climate mitigation work on the ground with landowners, including sequestration and conservation practices
- Interface with multiple agencies regarding Water Vision with other natural resource agencies, as well as integrated water planning and place-based water planning work
- Integrating equity into conservation district programs

In addition, districts already manage many different programs within their counties, including:

- Weed management and management of invasive species, often acting as the county weed board
- Water quality programs on agriculture lands, providing technical assistance and some funding to enable private landowners to comply
- Services for flood control protection and restoration
- Basin ecosystem work partnered with watershed councils and other basin partners
- Prevention of soil erosion and provision of technical assistance for conservation management practices on the ground
- Protection of wildlife and the fishery resource in restoration projects

In January of 2020, Natural Resources Program Director Stephanie Page wrote to the Department of Administrative Services about this position, stating that “in order to move the program (SWCD) forward consistent with the ODA strategic plan, mission, vision and core values, it is necessary to add an additional manager and strategically focus work to deliver successful outcomes.”

The position, as identified in the department’s budget is:

- LF expenditure \$202,000 for the biennium, as identified as part of **Package 090**, in the Analyst Adjustments section

The work leveraged by the districts will multiply this expenditure many times over.

The state’s revenue may now exceed earlier projections. If the position is not funded now, we would urge that it be filled as a priority when additional funds are available, identifying it with a budget note.

Water Vision: Work must begin in earnest now to support the state’s Water Vision program, a coordinated work plan among the natural resource agencies. In addition, integrated water planning and place-based water plans will need to be developed statewide. But ODA has only one staff person who works on water issues and that person also covers the land use issues. Districts are picking up some of that work applicable to the Water Vision, but again, we need a department interface to be most successful in organizing and carrying out this work and integrating districts’ work into ODA planning.

Sequestration to Reduce Greenhouse Gases: Districts have begun work on sequestration projects to reduce Oregon’s greenhouse gases. We need an interfacing partner at ODA to work with us as this and other programs evolve, not just to do a plan, but to help us develop a program we can implement. The Oregon Global Warming Commission and OWEB are conducting surveys and performing a study on the potential of natural and working lands’ role in reducing greenhouse gases. We need that partnership at ODA to best achieve the ability for the 45 conservation districts to continue to move forward to jointly implement a program with ODA and NRCS. Districts will provide the technical assistance necessary to carry out this work with constituents on-the-ground.

Collaborative and local regional work is the key to effecting many of the state’s natural resource programs. Technical support at the local level is needed now more than ever before as the state moves forward with new programs in wildfire, natural resource protection, climate and equity. We urge your help in providing the needed partnership between ODA and the conservation districts.

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