



NETWORK of OREGON

WATERSHED COUNCILS

April 21, 2021

To: The Natural Resources Subcommittee, the Joint Ways and Means Committee

Re; The Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA) Budget

Co-Chairs, Representative Reardon and Senator Taylor:

The Network of Oregon Watershed Councils (NOWC) opposes several of the changes in the Oregon Department of Agriculture's (ODA) Natural Resources Policy Area in Package 090.

NOWC represents 52 Watershed Councils state-wide, which are non-regulatory groups based in local communities to assess and monitor environmental conditions, and work with partners to conduct voluntary conservation projects to restore or enhance the waters and lands for animals, fish and native plants.

Watershed Councils value the ability to work with ODA, and are specifically concerned about these identified reductions:

- **The elimination of two Ag Water Quality positions**
- **The shift of some staff from Noxious Weed Control Lottery Funds to Other Funds in the Hemp Program**
- **The elimination of a position, support services and supplies in the Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) Program**

Re: The elimination of two Ag Water Quality positions

When Watershed Councils conduct projects with partners on working lands, such as replacing tide gates, improving fish passage, or restoring riparian habitats, it is imperative to work with colleagues in the ODA. ODA provides assessments of compliance and opportunities for improvement for working lands, and Watershed Councils often partner with farmers and ranchers to restore watershed habitats and also help our partners meet ODA regulatory requirements.

For example, in 2019 in Lake County, ODA met with local organizations and agencies to identify and select the Chewaucan River as a Strategic Implementation Area (SIA). An SIA is a geographic area of focus with the intent of providing targeted outreach and assistance to

landowners to implement restoration projects that improve water quality in local watersheds, while helping landowners adhere to state regulations. ODA provided an assessment of the Chewaucan River and compiled water quality data to help partners identify concerns and generate a plan. ODA personnel further led efforts in developing a water quality study to gather baseline data on temperature, phosphorus, and total suspended solids along the mainstem Chewaucan River. ODA monitoring leads have been instrumental in designing the study and ensuring the local watershed council and SWCD are trained and prepared in data collection strategies to ensure the most accurate data is obtained. These data will help ODA and partners identify source problems that contribute to water degradation. Partners can then work to engage stakeholders and address source problems leading to restoration work. The SIA process as described is made possible through ODA personnel and is likely to gain other funding support when backed by quality data and planning.

The Water Quality positions identified for elimination would help ODA to keep pace with the scale of work planned in SIAs across the state.

The shift of some staff from Noxious Weed Control Lottery Funds to Other Funds in the Hemp Program

Watershed Councils conduct most of their upland and floodplain restoration work in areas that are subject to weed invasion: weed populations take up space for other plants, and in some cases 'strangle' out native plant communities that are the target of restoration work. Designated weeds on the State's priority control list often create other problems once they gain mobility, typically by wind, water, or animal (including humans) transport mechanisms. Moreover, noxious weeds pose significant threats to natural resource based economies including timber, ranching, and farming.

For example, gorse is an invasive bush on the southern Oregon coast that grows quickly and is difficult to remove. It hastens erosion and renders grazing/farming lands unusable. Gorse has large waxy leaves that are highly flammable and, thus, a fire hazard.

Weed control and management is most effective when the plans are coordinated at a high level, fully supported during project development, and poised for early detection/rapid response to prevent expansion, rather than the more costly strategy of trying to mitigate a weed invasion that is well underway. ODA provides robust, consistent coordination and support on weed control which directly and indirectly supports Watershed Council restoration work. The potential loss of ODA resources for weed control is amplified by similar reductions in the Oregon State Weed Board Grant Program.

The elimination of a position, support services and supplies in the Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) Program

Watershed Councils often partner with farmers/ranchers and SWCDs on conservation/restoration projects on working lands. We agree with the Oregon Association of Conservation

Districts (OACD) that it is important for SWCD's to have ODA staff with which to partner on their new responsibilities, including:

- Wildfire prevention and wildfire restoration programs
- Climate mitigation work on the ground with landowners
- Equity in conservation district programs

Continued reductions in ODA technical staff places a heavy workload on managing staff who must work across multiple administrative areas. These reductions will have ripple effects with multiple agencies and organizations. For example, ODA staff serve on the Core Planning Teams for NRCS National Water Quality Initiative projects alongside Watershed Councils and SWCDs. ODA contributions and perspective are important factors to these projects' development and success.

We urge your help in providing ODA with the capacity to provide leadership, guidance and coordination across all of these important areas. As we all look towards planning and implementing the Oregon Water Vision, it will be increasingly important to have experts available to help strategize and coordinate restoration work.

Sincerely,



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