

**To:** Joint Ways & Means Subcommittee on Natural Resources

**On:** April 21, 2021

**Re:** Senate Bills 5502 and 5503

Dear Co-Chairs Taylor and Reardon, Members of the committee,

For the record my name is Mike Powers, and I am the President of SEIU Local 503. SEIU represents more than 72,000 workers in the state of Oregon, including more than 22,000 state workers such as those at the Department of Agriculture (ODA). I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today in general support of SB 5502 and SB 5503, for the ODA 2021-2023 biennium budget.

Prior to being elected President, I worked for ODA for nearly 20 years. For a relatively small agency, ODA has an outsized impact on our members, and all Oregonians, from the shores of the Pacific Ocean to the banks for the Snake River. Oregon agriculture has a farm gate value of an estimated \$5 billion, and continues to be a top job and economic driver. The specialists, field staff, and other workers at ODA provide a multitude of services including food safety, worker safety, water quality management, pest and disease control, laboratory product testing, national and international certification inspections, and a host of others.

We support the Governor's proposed budget for this agency, with changes. To protect the ODA services vital to our state, we urge the restoration of ODA's staffing to 2019 levels, and provide the additional positions needed to address increasing demands.

Some specific items we wish to bring to your attention include:

- Food Safety Program (Restoration of Positions; Policy Package 450):  
We object to the elimination of two positions. Food safety inspectors keep every single Oregonian safe from food contamination, and help our local businesses to do it. As part of the agency's COVID response, ODA staff helped businesses and farms prevent the spread of COVID. This provided much needed continuity of the food supply chain, kept businesses in operation, and protected workers.
- Water Quality (Restoration of Positions; Policy Packages 340, 350 & 360):  
We object to the proposed loss of two agricultural water quality positions and a Soil and Water Conservation position and associated support. Though variable in scope and responsibility, these positions include work with Oregon producers and their partners to protect and improve water quality, and improve soil health.
- Worker Protection Standard (Continued Position; Policy Package 320):  
ODA personnel provide training and technical assistance to agricultural employers and workers under the federal Worker Protection Standard. This is important to keep workers safe.

- Equity Officer (New position; Policy Package 130):  
We greatly appreciate ODA's commitment to diversity that will strengthen the agency and contribute to meeting its mission. It will help ensure that all Oregonians have equal access to ODA services no matter what they look like or where they live.
- Emergency Management Coordinator (New Position; Policy Package 110):  
The impacts of climate change and other variables have contributed to many of the state emergencies and hardships suffered by Oregonians. Already the Oregon Department of Forestry has responded to a record number of fires so far this year. ODA needs this position to respond to climate changes and help rural and agricultural communities.
- Soil Health Assessment (New Position; Policy Package 370):  
Improving farm and ranch soil health increases soil carbon and can improve producer income with a mix of fewer inputs and improved production. The practices that build soil health also build farm and ranch resiliency in the face of more extreme weather. This policy package is a good first step.
- State Hemp Program Support (New Positions; Policy Packages 087 and 395):  
These new positions are critical to support ODA's workload as hemp plantings continue to increase in rural Oregon.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you and testify in support of ODA's budget. I would be happy to answer any questions.