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Joint Ways & Means Subcommittee on Natural Resources

Testimony on SB 5518, Department of Forestry Budget

Submitted by: Amelia Porterfield, Senior Policy Advisor

Co-Chair Taylor, Co-Chair Reardon and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on SB 5518, the budget for the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) for the 2021-23 biennium.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a science-based, non-partisan organization committed to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. In Oregon, TNC has over 80,000 supporters and members in every county. Based in communities around the state, we manage lands and waters in varied ecosystems and partner with ranchers, farmers, fishers, timber and environmental interests on some of the most challenging conservation issues facing people and nature.

As landowners, forest stewards, scientists, and fire managers, TNC works closely with ODF on a range of issues. Our work has long focused on ecological restoration and fire use in Oregon's dry forests to increase forest resilience, reduce wildfire risk to communities, and sustain the many benefits these forests provide now and into the future. We plan, implement, and monitor large-scale, ecological forest restoration and prescribed fire projects on our own lands and in partnership with local, state, federal, and tribal partners on thousands of acres each year. We also support climate-smart forestry in the highly productive forestlands across western Oregon and the Coast Range, which have the potential to play a globally significant role in sequestering and storing carbon to mitigate climate change while providing habitat conservation benefits.

TNC supports the pursuit of a holistic policy for forest and fire management to advance a multi-pronged strategy balancing resilient landscapes, fire-adapted communities, and safe and effective wildfire response. Both the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy and Oregon's Wildfire Response Council recommendations underscore the importance of such an integrated approach. We advocate for the ODF budget to reflect a similar balance of investments across these three areas, because while fire is often thought of only as a problem, we also know that fire is an essential part of the solution. Fire is a critical element of many of Oregon's cherished landscapes, a tool that indigenous peoples have utilized to sustain healthy fire-adapted forests since time immemorial, and a reality that we must prepare our forests and communities for into the future.

With this in mind, we respectfully request that the following investments be made in ODF this biennium:

Fully Fund the Federal Forest Restoration Program (FFRP) at \$4.9 million:

We support the proposal in the Governor's Budget to make this an independent program and ask that it be fully funded at the \$4.9m total funds level. However, we note that the Governor's Budget achieves

this funding level through a proposed fund shift that leans more heavily on federal dollars, which as far as we understand it, are not secured. If the federal dollars do not materialize as the Governor's Budget projected, the remaining general fund allocation would result in an effective cut to the program. We ask this committee to ensure that this funds shift does not undermine this important program's total funding should ARPA dollars or other federal funds be unavailable for this purpose. In that case, we request the legislature keep the program whole through sufficient general fund allocation.

Support Policy Option Packages included in the Governor's Recommended Budget:

POP 160 – Forest Climate Change Mitigation & Adaptation (\$3,227,675 GF, (\$305,565) FF, 9.00 FTE)

- The Oregon Department of Forestry is a key actor in the state's efforts to develop a natural and working lands goal to mitigate climate change, working alongside the Oregon Global Warming Commission, the Oregon Department of Agriculture and the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board. In conjunction with the reduction of fossil fuel-based emissions, natural climate solutions, including climate-smart forest management, are a critical part of our approach to climate mitigation and adaptation. This POP supports ODF to undertake agency actions that contribute to the state meeting its greenhouse gas emissions reductions goals, prioritize actions that help vulnerable populations and impacted communities adapt to climate change impacts and collaborate with the Environmental Justice Task Force.
- **POP 172 – Diversity, Equity and Inclusion** (\$238,738 GF, \$452,433 OF, 2.00 FTE). The department requires additional capacity to forward agency strategies and meet statutory requirements related to diversity, equity and inclusion, environmental justice, and enhanced sustainability.

Support Policy Bills directly related to the Department of Forestry Budget:

- **SB 762 – Wildfire Omnibus Policy Package:** The most significant update to Oregon's wildfire policy in decades, this bill includes policies and investments that take a comprehensive, active approach to addressing wildfire. This broad-based legislation, built on tested practices and the best-available science, is critical from an ecological perspective as well as an economic and social one. It takes urgent, proactive steps to support healthy, resilient ecosystems and livable communities for generations to come. Sustaining our forest and rangeland ecosystems and reducing risks to people and property require the solutions presented in this bill to prepare landscapes and communities to be safer and more resilient in the face of future fires. We ask that funding be allocated for the agency staffing and investments needed for successful implementation of this legislation.
- **HB 2572 - Prescribed Fire:** We support both elements of this bill – launching Oregon's Certified Burn Manager Program and creating enabling conditions for cross-boundary prescribed burns. The contents of this bill were integrated into SB 762, so if the omnibus wildfire policy package moves forward this bill vehicle is not needed.

The Department of Forestry, and the state of Oregon, face some incredible challenges during this pivotal time, including managing and mitigating catastrophic wildfire risk and modernizing the state's approach to forestry to address climate change and consider the public value of carbon sequestration. We continue our appreciation for this committee's work, and urge that the ODF budget embrace these opportunities, utilize the best available science, and balance the needs of disparate voices.

Thank you for your consideration.