



TO: Chair Ken Helm, Vice Chairs Annessa Hartman and Mark Owens, and Members of the House Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources, and Water Committee

FROM: Branden Pursinger, Association of Oregon Counties; Michael Martin, League of Oregon Cities

RE: Bipartisan Drought Relief and Water Security Package

DATE: April 18, 2023

Dear Chair Helm, Vice Chairs Hartman and Owens, Members of the House Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources, and Water Committee:

The Association of Oregon Counties and the League of Oregon Cities represent over 275 different local governments and municipalities in the state. We stand in strong support of HB 3124, the Bipartisan Drought Relief and Water Security Package of 2023.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony in support of this very important piece of legislation which aims to provide assistance and information, not only to our community members that live within our borders, but also for our governments in preparing for the future.

A water supply that is resilient and reliable is critical for the protection and enhancement of the environment in Oregon. It is crucial for the economic development and public health of our constituents. And, it is imperative that we ensure the continuation of fish in every watershed. Many different areas of the state have experienced some degree of water scarcity or drought within the past five years and, already in 2023, we have had four counties which have declared and received a drought from the Governor and the Water Resources Department.

According to the US Drought Monitor, 29.9% of Oregon is abnormally dry and 57.2% of the total land mass in Oregon are in areas of drought (as found the week of April 10, 2023).

With changing climate and the prolonged droughts that many different parts of Oregon are facing, the Bipartisan Drought Relief and Water Security Package attempts to address seven different yet equally important categories. Although there are many items in the thirty-nine pages put together by Chair Helm, Vice-Chair Owens and their staff, which The Association of Oregon Counties and the League of Oregon Cities are in support of, we would like to identify a few that we believe are critical to local governments.

- **1-3: Community Funding and Agency Capacity for Place-Based Integrated Water Resources Planning.**
 - This is the funding associated with the Place-Based Planning Program which is a top priority for both AOC and LOC this session. Allowing local individuals to make the necessary plans for water in their region / basin / area is critical to planning for the long

term. One size does not fit all nor should it when planning for water usage. Plans should look at addressing both the instream and out of stream users.

- **1-9: Implementation of Place-Based Actions to Increase Drought Resilience for Instream and Out-of-Stream Water Needs.**
 - This is the second half of 1-3 above; however, this allocates continued funding for the four Place-Based Planning groups that were selected by OWRD in 2015 (Union County, Seal Rock Water District, Harney County Watershed Council, Gilliam County Soil and Water Conservation District).
- **2: Data Collection**
 - According to the Oregon Water Resources Department, the vast majority of basin-wide studies were last conducted in/around 1969, and many were well before then. If they have been updated, they have not been released to the public. As an example, the Umpqua Basin had its study in 1958 and the Powder Basin in 1967. The Willamette Basin is the largest river basin in Oregon and contains 70% of Oregon's population. However their OWRD Basin-Study has not been released to the public. Local Governments are responsible for making decisions every. We approve of building, community development and residential housing – things that rely on the water in these basins. As the climate changes and the droughts continue to get worse, the information collected will be very much needed.
- **3-3: Assessing and Addressing Vulnerabilities of Small and Very Small Community Water Systems.**
 - Everyone deserves to have safe and reliable drinking water. Regardless of the size of the community they live in. Local Governments are contracted with Drinking Water Services to perform much of the program work on small community water systems. Small Water Systems serve anywhere from four to fourteen service connections and commercial or public premises used by ten to twenty-four people at least 60 days per year.
- **4-1: Protecting Producers Against Losses Due to Drought**
4-2: Safety Net Resources for Disaster Relief of Producers and Irrigation Districts
4-3: Safety Net Resources for Disaster Relief of Agricultural Workers.
 - These three safety net programs build off emergency relief that was established in previous drought packages. Local Governments believe that if the state is able to provide funds through the Emergency Board, these allocations will ensure that those who are in need outside of a legislative session, when the warmest and driest seasons occur, will have the ability to access the needed resources. By helping ranchers, producers, irrigators, and workers, we can ensure the industry continues into the future.

- **5-4: Process-Based Restoration, Natural Storage, and Watershed Benefits.**
 - By depositing funds into the Oregon Conservation and Recreation Fund, there will be an opportunity for restoration of natural storage areas, watershed capacity, aquifer recharge, lower water temperatures, and other environmental opportunities. Without a thriving watershed, we will continue to experience hardships – both for those using the water as well as those who live in it.
- **6-3: Water Reuse Coordination.**
 - Local Governments believe that now is the time to invest in water reuse. We need to evolve the regulatory framework so wastewater utilities can access an environmentally protective permitting path that is less onerous, costly, complex, and one that opens a broader range of opportunities. Reclaimed wastewater can help address the growing climate change impacts. When used to maintain riparian areas, wetlands, and other green spaces, beneficial application of treated wastewater can support community efforts to adapt and become resilient to climate change impacts and it can help sustain declining or stressed habitats. Also, recycling water can help mitigate extended drought conditions, supporting agricultural and municipal irrigation and needs of industrial processors – all while leaving water in-stream for fish and other purposes.
- **6-8: Western Juniper Removal and Watershed Restoration in Eastern Oregon.**
 - Local Governments believe we need to do everything we can to ensure water remains for individuals and fish. Juniper removal is a key factor in how to make that happen. Over the past 60 years, Juniper trees have covered 1000% more area than they used to. Ten juniper trees can consume all the annual precipitation in the area that they grow in. Juniper trees drain streams and tributaries and, by causing the area to be so dry, can lead to massive risk of wildfire. One year of active western juniper removal will increase stream flows by 225%.
- **7-1: Statewide Water Conference and Research and Learning Agenda.**
 - Local governments believe that we need to ensure a sustainable, clean and adequate water supply for current and future residents, agriculture, other industries, and the natural environment in a way that reduces waste and encourages and incentivizes conservation. By having Oregon State, Portland State, University of Oregon, and Eastern Oregon Universities convene statewide water conferences to facilitate learning and relationship-building between sectors, identify research needs, and develop a statewide approach to research.

These are just a few of the allocations in the Bipartisan Drought Relief and Water Security Package that the Association of Oregon Counties and the League of Oregon Cities are in support of. We believe that



the funding included in this package provides important resources to help plan for drought resiliency and water scarcity throughout the state. It will ensure the various state agencies have the resources they need to update programs and improve multi-agency coordination. It will help farmers and ranchers deal with the impacts of drought, while also ensuring water is kept instream for salmonoids and the environment.

It is for these reasons, among many others, that AOC and LOC stand together in strong support for HB 3124, the Bipartisan Drought Relief and Water Security Package.

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