

Submitter: Chelsea White Brainard
On Behalf Of:
Committee: Senate Committee On Rules
Measure: SB775

Dear Chair Lieber and Committee Members,

I am an employee of East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District and a resident of East Portland. I am writing to you today from both of my roles.

Ever since I learned of these archaic restrictions on board eligibility, it has personally colored my experience as an employee. We do amazing work, but that doesn't change the fact that we are functioning within a racist and outdated system. In our district, which spans Multnomah County from the Willamette River to the Gorge, land is very expensive, which means that in order to own 10 acres of land you almost assuredly need to have inherited land or generational wealth. The racist history of land access in Oregon – from excluding black people from our borders, to the racist history of access to farming resources perpetrated by the USDA – has led us to a situation in which you see almost exclusively rich white people with generational wealth on large parcels of land. Not to mention that we are all on land stolen from the indigenous peoples of the area.

I was Chair of our internal Equity Team in 2021 when a survey was sent to conservation district boards around the state. If you ask the people in power if they want to keep their power or give it up, they will almost always try to keep their power. So I am not surprised that 78% of districts opted to keep power in the hands of the few. Additionally, the survey questions themselves were leading and biased, which the East Multnomah SWCD board expressed in a public letter at the time. Instead of asking the people in power if they want to willingly give theirs up, we should we be asking the millions of people that are being taxed without representation what they think about the law.

Finally, I've always been baffled by the logic that people who are already managing so much land should also be making land use decisions for everyone else. Their impact on our natural resources is already disproportionately high. And to assume that people who don't own land don't know enough to make those decisions is paternalistic and erroneous.

I have not heard a single argument in opposition of this law that makes sense. It's all been smoke and mirrors from people that are afraid of losing their power.

Thank you for considering moving this bill forward.

Best,
Chelsea White-Brainard