



Testimony in Support of HB 3017

My Background

As Deputy Director of the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) from its creation by the 1999 Oregon Legislature until I retired in 2013, I have been involved with the significant efforts Oregonians have made to collaboratively address natural resource issues around the state. During my tenure, I was responsible for helping organize watershed councils throughout the state as non-regulatory entities to address resource issues. I was also engaged in the development of approaches to head off regulatory and lawsuit solutions to natural resource issues. Since retirement I have been involved with collaborative efforts around the state helping communities to address regulatory concerns with collaborative solutions.

Collaboration as an Oregon Approach

Oregon has invested significantly in cooperative approaches to habitat restoration through OWEB and other efforts to address community issues through conversation and cooperation. Most collaborative efforts have been locally led but dependent on a "champion" that is typically relying on one-time, or project-based funding. Only in Harney County have I found a community based attempt to provide a stable platform for collaboration. The High Desert Partnership was formed to create a collaborative space to address the many resource, economic and social issues in their rural community. For a County the size of Massachusetts with a population of less than 7,500, this undertaking is short of miraculous.

Why Harney County?

It is a more than 5 hour drive from Salem to Burns, likewise it is about a 2 and a half hour drive from Seneca to Rome across Harney County. Harney County is one of the most sparsely populated areas in the country, yet it remains a close community that tries to solve their own issues. The spirit of collaboration has been a hallmark of the region for more than a decade. Looking at collaboration as a useful approach to bring community members together and solve problems for all community members. The High Desert Partnership was founded to ease the tensions between the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and local ranchers. From that beginning the effort grew to look at forest management, wildfire management, youth engagement, and economic conditions as issues that are amenable to a collaborative approach to address. This is a remarkable achievement that has saved Oregonians time and money that could have easily been spent on legal fees and community conflict.

The Importance of a Model

The Oregon Consensus Center and the High Desert Partnership model decades long efforts to approach community issues in a new way. The importance of modeling collaborative behavior in these divided times could not be more important. The opportunity for this relatively small investment is to model collaborative behavior throughout the State. By investing in a stable location and venue for collaboration the Oregon Legislature can look at education in a very different way. The model of collaboration has been recognized across the west. The article from the High Country News last November provides a good illustration of the value of the approach and the importance of modeling an approach that solves problems rather than focuses on conflict.

I urge you to consider passing HB 3017 out of Committee when you have a Work Session with a do pass recommendation.

The extremism vaccine

Amid rising political tensions, one strategy can inoculate communities against anti-government ideologies.

BY SARAH TRENT | ILLUSTRATION BY LAUREN CROW

ON JAN. 2, 2016, ARMED anti-government extremists led by Ammon and Ryan Bundy occupied the headquarters of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in eastern Oregon's Harney County. They'd hoped to ignite a national uprising against federal land management, but after 41 days, they accomplished little beyond creating a \$2 million mess of trash and trenches. After the Bundys were acquitted of conspiracy and weapons charges, Ammon led an attack on the Idaho Statehouse in 2020 and urged his followers to travel to Washington, D.C., for the rally that preceded the Jan. 6 storming of the U.S. Capitol. Now he's running for governor of Idaho.

Meanwhile, in Harney County, the work of conserving the refuge and its surrounding rangelands has continued almost uninterrupted. Here, locals consider the occupation a mere bump in the road — though its failure was no accident, according to political ecologist Peter Walker, whose book, *Sagebrush Collaboration*, tracks the refuge takeover from start to fizzle. Thanks in large part to a land-management strategy that local ranchers, conservationists and federal employees developed 15 years before the Bundys arrived, the community was

largely inoculated against their simplistic solutions and fiery but empty rhetoric. Through years of homegrown collaboration led in part by the nonprofit High Desert Partnership, the community was already tackling many of the issues that inspired the Bundys to take up arms: fences, water access, poverty. To many locals, these were not ideological struggles, but tangible problems they were solving together.

Western states are home to the vast majority of public lands, and anti-government sentiment runs deep in the region. Nearly three-quarters of Harney County is managed by federal agencies for logging, grazing, conservation and other purposes; agriculture and forestry drive the economy, and cows outnumber people by 14-to-1. Frustration with agencies is common, especially in places where livelihoods depend on land-management decisions, and for more than a century, extremists have periodically harnessed that tension for their own ends. Researchers say that recent national and global upheavals — economic recession, the pandemic and the accelerating effects of climate change — have encouraged a further embrace of extremist views, as people on both

left and right feel increasingly helpless in the face of disaster and ignored by those in power.

Harney County's approach is, in many ways, an antidote to that sense of alienation. "Very few people would go away from one of our collaborative meetings saying they weren't heard," said Brenda Smith, director of the High Desert Partnership, which now oversees six collaboratives working on issues from wildfire prevention to youth empowerment. The organization was founded in 2005 by Gary Marshall, a local rancher, and Chad Karges, then director of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge, who realized that the area's history of litigation and conflict over public lands had created more problems than solutions. Today, Karges said, restoration work on Forest Service land is generating biomass that heats local institutions; planned fire resilience projects on Bureau of Land Management acreage involve a once-unlikely alliance of ranchers, scientists, tribal members and government staffers; and refuge staff have partnered with nearby landowners to remove invasive carp. None of this was possible 20 years ago, he said, and the collaboratives are still gaining momentum.

Interest in collaborative conservation is rising across the West. "It's the direction a lot of communities are moving," said Walker, who is now studying southern Oregon collaboratives that were created to manage wildfire risk. The approach is well-suited to the complex problems facing society today, said Peter Harkema, who leads Oregon Consensus, a state program for resolving public policy disputes that has facilitated several collaboratives in Harney County. "There's a recognition that in many cases no one entity, no agency, no decision-maker can really solve it on their own," he said.

Which is not to say the work is easy: Karges said it took two years to overcome the initial distrust between the conservation and agriculture communities. Friendly relationships had to be established before a single formal meeting could be held. While many community leaders and funders are used to pushing their pet agendas, that strategy doesn't work here, Smith stressed. Instead, she said, participants need to trust that a shared mission will emerge from the process itself. Harkema added that the process only works when "the full diversity of perspectives are willing to engage."

This kind of inclusive collaboration, Harkema said, is more vital than ever. "Every opportunity we have to bring people together across our divisions, to understand one another, to work together, to see and cultivate community — those are important, and they're especially important right now." ✨

