



February 14, 2023

Senate Committee on Judiciary  
900 Court Street NE  
Salem, Oregon 97301

**Re: Support of SB 754 - Recreational Liability Reform**

Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher and Members of the Committee:

My name is Travis Williams. I am the Executive Director of the non-profit organization Willamette Riverkeeper.

Since 1996, Willamette Riverkeeper (WR) has proudly served as the eyes, ears, and voice of the Willamette River. We believe that a river with excellent water quality and abundant habitat that is safe for fishing and recreation is a basic public right.

Today, Willamette Riverkeeper is submitting testimony **in support of SB 754**, a bipartisan bill that we believe will bring fairness and balance to the outdoor recreation space in regard to liability waivers.

Our mission includes engaging people with the Willamette River. WR hosts numerous events throughout the year, including public engagement programs such as our *River Guardians* monthly cleanup events, engaging hundreds of volunteers each year to help clean up our river. Throughout the year, we also host a series of day trips and overnight paddle trips, most prominently *Paddle Oregon*, the *Harvest Paddle*, and the *Pinot Paddle*. These trips enable participants to spend more time on the Willamette. Our programs help broaden inclusion by providing the means for participants to connect with the river, experience its beauty, and develop a stewardship ethic. These activities require attendees to register and sign a liability release given the inherent risk of water-based activities.

As part of this work, we need liability releases that are effective and enforceable while clearly communicating both the inherent risks of outdoor recreation and the responsibilities of participants to be properly prepared. This includes the use of appropriate gear, following instructions, and taking all necessary precautions to reduce risk.

The current liability law in Oregon is out of balance and exposes our organization to litigation that could potentially reduce or eliminate access to our trips, creating a barrier for many to enjoy safe river recreation.

As the expense and risk of carrying liability insurance continues to climb, so do event costs, putting some smaller recreation companies (some of whom we partner with) out of business. Increased risk of lawsuits will also create barriers for small non-profit organizations like ours, from hosting the events at the core of our mission of stewardship and protection of the Willamette River.

With all outdoor recreational activities, there are inherent risks that are beyond the control of the operator. Our participants understand and are trained by our experienced staff and qualified volunteers about the potential risks of river travel. Enforceable liability waivers allow us to inform and increase the safety awareness of our guests about these inherent risks and allow them to make wise choices about their abilities to paddle in the safest manner possible.

The Oregon Legislature can correct the imbalance in outdoor recreation tort liability. SB 754 helps put the risks and responsibilities of individuals and event organizers back into balance.

Thank you for considering this bill today. I urge the members of the Committee to give SB 754 a DO PASS recommendation.

Thank you,

Travis Williams  
Riverkeeper and Executive Director  
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*Attached: Pictures of recreational and community service activities with Willamette Riverkeeper staff, volunteers and members of the communities along the Willamette River.*

Learn more about Willamette Riverkeeper's stewardship and recreation programs:  
[www.willametteriverkeeper.org](http://www.willametteriverkeeper.org)

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WR partners with the City of Eugene Recreation team to provide basic river recreation safety instruction. Pictured here: participants learn how to properly use throw ropes in a controlled environment.



*Paddle Oregon*, WR's annual multi-day paddling tour on the Willamette River. Pictured here: Participants stop for lunch, educational activities, and a refreshing swim at Tripp Island.



WR works together with community partners, such as the Black Cultural Festival, to remove barriers for more people in the community to experience safe on-water recreational experiences. Pictured here: family learning to canoe in the Whilamut Natural Area in Eugene.



As part of the collaborative *River Guardians* volunteer cleanup program across the Willamette Basin, WR provides several opportunities throughout the year for people of all ages and backgrounds to participate in river stewardship activities.



In partnership with Oregon Paddle Sports, WR helped to host a *Pride Paddle* in Alton Baker Park in Eugene, providing gear and equipment, basic paddling instruction, and safety guidance for an enjoyable on-water recreational experience.