



Testimony in Support of HB 3222

My Background

I first saw Malheur Lake in 1958 and was enthralled by the marshes and wetland birds. But just as I have changed, so has Malheur Lake. The expansive marsh filled with birds is significantly diminished. The Lake looks like a sea of chocolate milk with very little of the bulrush and cattail that characterized the marsh when I first saw it. One of the reasons for the change is the superabundance of common carp that have taken over as the dominant species in the Lake. Associated with the invasion of carp is the loss of emergent bullrush vegetation.

I have had a career in natural resources in Oregon and was Deputy Director of the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) from its creation by the 1999 Oregon Legislature until I retired in 2013. Since retirement from state service, I have been involved with the High Desert Partnership to help find resources to address the conditions of Malheur Lake and the privately owned wet meadows that provide flood irrigated hay and pasture for ranchers in the Harney Valley.

An Early Approach to Address Conditions

The High Desert Partnership provided a critical forum to improve relationships between Malheur Wildlife Refuge staff and the Harney County community. The partnership came out of a collaborative effort that developed the Malheur Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) in 2013. Following that collaborative effort it was clearly recognized that the health of the flood irrigated wet meadows of private ranchers for hay production and migratory bird stopover on the Pacific Flyway were intimately entwined with the health of Malheur Lake. The Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative was established to both continue the conversation about the restoration actions and cooperative efforts that could help both the private meadows and the Lake.

What is the Need?

The 2013 CCP identified a simple relationship between carp and Malheur Lake conditions. That understanding focused attention on reducing carp biomass to restore Malheur Lake conditions. Over the last number of years, we have learned that the situation is significantly more complex. We have learned that reduction of carp alone is both not feasible and unlikely to accomplish the goal alone. Once the emergent vegetation is lost, wind maintains turbidity in the lake and drought affects the lake level and opportunity for bulrush establishment. There has been more learned about Malheur Lake ecosystem and the flood irrigated wet meadows over the last decade than for the previous century. **The need is to follow up on what has been learned to take actions that can maintain the critical resource for not just the local community but the resources of the Pacific Flyway.**

Why the Harney Basin?

Closed lake basins throughout the west are drying and losing habitat for migratory birds at an alarming rate. Lake Abert, Summer Lake and even the Great Salt Lake have either dried completely or are drying at a rapid rate. There are a number of factors that makes Malheur Lake and the surrounding area of critical importance. First and foremost is the cooperative effort led by the High Desert Partnership of the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative that have worked together for more than a decade to explore and apply solutions to maintain the habitats for wildlife and ranchers that both depend on the water resources of the basin. The social cohesion found in the Harney Basin has not been developed in other places and is a critical resource to allow for solutions not available through other means.

What Can Be Accomplished?

It has become clear that the conditions of Malheur Lake and the flood irrigated wet meadows of the Harney Valley are dependent on precipitation which is wildly varied year to year. As we see more drought conditions with climate change, the consequences for both the wet meadows and Lake conditions will change. The partners of the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative are prepared to work with landowners and Malheur Refuge to make changes that are based on our new understanding of the situation. The partners are poised to make significant advances that will materially benefit bird habitat critical to the Pacific Flyway while other stopover areas on the flyway are rapidly declining or have dried completely (Lake Abert, Summer Lake, Klamath Refuge, Great Salt Lake). Taking action now seizes the opportunity to protect this continental asset.

Why Now?

Time is not on the side of the waterbirds and ranchers that depend on the Harney Valley for a livelihood. As other terminal lakes dry out, there is an unprecedented opportunity to make a difference in the Harney Valley. The ranchers are ready to look at ways to cope with a changing climate and the migratory birds are depending on actions to enhance the habitats they need for resting and feeding before they travel to their nesting areas in the far north. The Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative is ready to go, they have projects that can help understand and address lake conditions, they have cooperative landowners using improved management measures for hay production and bird habitat benefit, what they need is interim financing for the next two years to put the improvements on the ground.

Why this Bill?

The Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative is a nationally recognized collaborative that has developed efforts to protect and restore internationally important wetlands on public and private lands in Harney County. The initiative brings together ranchers, conservation groups, local communities, the Burns-Paiute Tribe, state and federal agencies and others, on what was once one of the most conflicted landscapes in Oregon, to work together to restore wetlands that represent some of the most important breeding and migratory habitat for wild birds in the Western United States, support local economies and promote recreational activities such as hunting and wildlife watching. The Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative has been recognized as among the most important bird conservation initiatives and one of the most innovative conservation collaboratives in the Western United States. House Bill 3222 will provide \$2 million over the 2023-2025 biennium to implement actions that will have decades of consequences. While others struggle, the Harney basin has found a way to work across private and public lands for common benefits.

I urge you to consider passing HB 3222 out of Committee when you have a Work Session with a do pass recommendation.