

April 6, 2023

Joint Ways & Means Subcommittee on Natural Resources

Testimony on HB 5043: Oregon Water Resources Department Budget

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Co-Chair Dembrow, Co-Chair Pham and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on HB 5043, the budget for the Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) for the 2023-25 biennium.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a science-based, non-partisan organization committed to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. In Oregon, TNC has over 80,000 supporters and members in every county. Based in communities around the state, we manage lands and waters in varied ecosystems and partner with ranchers, farmers, fishers, timber, and environmental interests on some of the most challenging conservation issues facing people and nature.

TNC works closely with the Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) and other water stakeholders to ensure a sustainable water future for people and nature. For example, TNC is a founding member of the Community-Based Water Planning Collaborative in the Harney Basin, joining state agencies, irrigators, conservation organizations, and domestic well users to work through the groundwater crisis in that basin. Water management in Oregon is one of the state's most critical environmental and economic challenges. Oregon must invest in programs within OWRD which support collaborative water planning, address information gaps, and focus on the future of water availability.

TNC supports the following funding items and urges you to support them for OWRD's budget in the upcoming biennium:

We support the following POPs, which are partially funded in the Governor's Recommended Budget (GRB):

- **POP 111: Water Use, Supply, and Availability Data.** The Department's current model of reporting on water availability—influencing resource management and water right allocation decisions—is outdated and does not incorporate the impacts from a change climate. The investments outlined in POP 111 to modernize systems and fund additional technical positions are critical for a sustainable water future in Oregon. TNC urges you to fully fund POP 111.
- **POP 115: Supporting Resolution of Complex Issues.** Addressing complex water management issues is not easy and often requires strong leadership and coordination to bring different stakeholders to the table. OWRD is a natural leader in this space but is unable to fulfill this role without investments in agency capacity. To collaboratively engage with communities and to provide expert guidance and process leadership, TNC recommends fully funding investments in staff capacity in the agency budget as outlined in POP 115.

In addition, we encourage the legislature to fund the following proposals not included in the GRB:

- **POP 106: Water Planning, Funding, Support, and Data.** Collaborative water planning efforts require access to expert guidance and data development to make informed decisions. TNC supports investing in staff capacity to ensure consistent engagement across planning efforts for more equitable and effective processes. Funding includes pre-planning work, community capacity building, integrated water resources planning, and implementation coordination of place-based plans.
- **POP 109: Climate and Drought Readiness.** TNC supports funding for additional staff positions to focus on climate change and drought response, to assist OWRD in effectively coordinating with state agencies, cities, and districts to promote water conservation, and to identify and improve vulnerable water systems.
- **POP 113: Continuing Legislative Basin Investments.** TNC has worked closely with OWRD, OWEB, the Harney Basin community, and many others to bring a groundwater incentive program (called a Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program) to southeast Oregon. The program is intended to permanently reduce water use by 40,000 acre-feet per year while offering economic benefits to irrigators. TNC strongly supports funding OWRD capacity to continue administering the program and to facilitate voluntary approaches to water use reduction.
- **POP 114: Watermaster Staff: Improving Water Management.** OWRD Watermasters are the on-the-ground staff responsible for measuring water use and enforcing regulations—and there are too few of them to do this critical work. As surface and groundwater in the state becomes fully or over-allocated, the Watermaster’s job become more complex and more important for equitable resource management. Additional Watermasters are a crucial investment in OWRD’s capacity to prevent or mitigate water conflict and to foster more proactive, collaborative relationships between water users, conservation organizations and the agency.

The Oregon Water Resources Department will play an integral role in ensuring that we have enough water for people, ecosystems, and agriculture in the decades to come, and we encourage you to invest now in the data and tools that our state will need to make informed future decisions about water management. Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments and your consideration on the OWRD budget.