



To: Joint Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Natural Resources  
Co-Chair Dembrow Representative Holvey  
Co-Chair Pham Representative Bobby Levy  
Senator Anderson Representative Emerson Levy  
Senator Frederick Representative Owens

From: Caylin Barter, Oregon Water Policy Program

Date: April 6, 2023

**RE: Comments on HB 5043 – Support for Investments in Data, Field Staff, and Water Resilience**

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

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 5043, which funds the Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) during the 2023-2025 biennium. Wild Salmon Center supports policy approaches that will improve the understanding and stewardship of our state's public water resources, especially as climate change increases volatility in supply and demand. **We support investments identified in the Governor's Recommended Budget (GRB) that will help the agency carry on its current work, with key add-backs from the Agency Request Budget (ARB) to address critical needs related to data, field staff, and resilient water supplies.** These additional investments will help OWRD achieve its two primary goals: (1) Restore and protect streamflow to ensure the sustainability of Oregon's ecosystems, economy, and quality of life; and (2) Directly address Oregon's water supply needs.

Wild Salmon Center is an international nonprofit headquartered in Oregon that has worked with local partners for three decades to protect and restore the strongest remaining runs of Wild Pacific Salmon. We use science to drive policy, lead planning processes, and support implementation, and we know that the health of our water resources is directly linked to the recovery of our iconic wild fish. We appreciate the efforts of OWRD and sister agencies to support sustainable use of our waters, but we all are suffering the snowballing impacts of budget shortfalls, coordination challenges, and shifting priorities. This manifests in data gaps, outdated analyses, siloed information, and ever-worsening overallocation of this vital public resource.

To maintain momentum on key investments in the 2021-2023 biennium and improve Oregon's water resilience, Wild Salmon Center urges the Committee to increase investment in the following Policy Option Packages (POPs), which were either reduced or not funded in the GRB:

**POP 111: Water Use, Supply, and Availability Data**

- **ARB:** \$2,209,905 GF: 8 positions (\$1,756,905 GF), contracting/other (\$453K GF)
- **GRB (\$909,905 reduction):** \$1.3M GF: 4 positions (\$847K GF), contracting/other (\$453K)

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OWRD's mission is to serve the public by practicing and promoting responsible water management, and chief among those responsibilities is ensuring that new water rights are granted only if the resource can support additional demand. The Department's Water Availability Reporting System (WARS) is the publicly accessible online tool that OWRD uses to determine whether water is legally available to support issuance of new water rights. The current WARS tool uses a water supply period of record from the years 1958 to 1987 to gauge water availability, a period broadly acknowledged to no longer be representative of current water conditions, much less the conditions likely in a climate-changed future.

POP 111 would enable OWRD to make critical updates to this vital water allocation tool and to future-proof its foundational IT systems to support ongoing revisions. Unfortunately, only four of the eight positions necessary to implement this update were included in the GRB, and modified POP 111 does not include the requested IT staffing. This reduction will extend the timeline for completion of this long-overdue project, and will enable only a one-time update to the WARS tool because existing staffing is inadequate to upgrade the obsolete IT systems that underpin it. ***Wild Salmon Center urges full funding of POP 111 at the ARB level to ensure WARS can be updated as quickly as possible and can survive future updates to reflect changing water conditions.***

#### **POP 114: Watermaster Staff: Improving Water Management**

- **ARB:** \$1,606,221 GF: 6.25 positions (\$1,434,131), reclass of existing positions (\$172,090 GF)
- **GRB: NOT FUNDED**

OWRD's watermasters are the agency's "boots on the ground" who live and work in the communities where Oregon's water resources support instream and out-of-stream uses. Each watermaster is tasked with administering water rights on streams, reservoirs, and wells across thousands of square miles, and their jobs are only getting harder as the number of water rights increases, climate change stresses overtapped supplies, and water complaints increase.

POP 114 provides critical capacity for field staff in high-conflict basins to provide timely complaint responses, address illegal uses, increase water use measurement, collect data on surface water and groundwater data supplies to inform agency decisions, and act as a liaison between the agency and communities. The package adds a Region Manager and three watermaster staff in the Klamath Falls office to address complex water challenges in the Klamath-Lake County region and one assistant watermaster in Burns, and it reclasses existing watermaster staff to address equity issues, water management complexity, and increased job responsibility. ***Wild Salmon Center urges full funding of POP 114 at the ARB level to equitably and efficiently regulate use of Oregon's water resources in a changing climate.***

#### **POP 109: Adapting to Climate Change & Drought**

- **ARB:** \$1,721,445 GF: 6.5 positions (\$1,521,445), water conservation campaigns (\$200K)
- **GRB: NOT FUNDED**

Oregon is in the midst of the driest 22-year period in the past 1,200 years. Drought impacts are arriving earlier and trending more severe, with hotter temperatures, declining snowpack, drier soils, longer growing seasons, and heavier water demand across all uses during summer months. In 2023,

Jefferson and Crook counties declared drought emergencies in January—the first time any county in Oregon history has made such a declaration so early in the year. Current policies rely on emergency declarations and drought relief to mitigate drought impacts, which does nothing to help the state become more resilient to future droughts.

POP 109 is a critical investment that moves Oregon toward greater water resiliency in the era of climate change. It enhances interagency coordination, increases the pace and scale of voluntary streamflow restoration efforts, promotes water conservation, assists vulnerable community water systems, and expands support for aquifer storage projects. ***Wild Salmon Center urges full funding of POP 109 at the ARB level to help Oregon break the cycle of endless emergency and move toward proactive water management and resilient water supplies.***

### **No Reductions to OWRD’s Current Service Level**

A recent Advisory Report by Oregon’s Secretary of State concluded that “natural resource agencies lack funding and capacity to properly enact their duties.”<sup>1</sup> Now is not the time to reduce capacity within OWRD that supports science (\$531K), groundwater studies (\$448K), water use measurement (\$106K), community engagement (\$450K), streamgauges (\$163K), and field staff for cannabis-related water enforcement (\$368K).

Wild Salmon Center appreciates your careful consideration of our funding recommendations and urges you to make these investments to put Oregon on the path toward a more resilient water future.



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<sup>1</sup> Oregon Secretary of State [Report 2023-04](#), January 2023.