

April 20, 2023

Joint Ways & Means Subcommittee on Natural Resources

Testimony on SB 5539: Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board 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 SB 5539, the budget for the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) 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 OWEB on a wide variety of conservation issues, from sage grouse habitat restoration to tide gates, to landscape-scale restoration projects. As a grant administrator for key restoration and conservation programs, TNC supports OWEB's commitment to integrate climate mitigation and adaptation into the agency's budgeting, investing, and policymaking and wants to ensure the agency has the staff capacity and resources to do this critical work. We respectfully ask that the following funding be included in the 2023-25 biennial budget:

**We support the following investments within the Governor's Recommended Budget (GRB):**

- **POP 115 and 215: Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program (OAHP).** OAHP funding serves as a state match to leverage federal funds for conservation and agricultural easements that will benefit rural communities and reduce carbon emissions. TNC supports the investment of \$800,000 for three key staff positions and \$10 million for grants, which is also reflected in HB 3366.
- **POP 145 and 245: Water Acquisitions Continuity.** This voluntary program provides funding for new instream water rights, an important non-regulatory tool for meeting ecological and biological water needs throughout Oregon. Sufficient agency capacity is integral to the tool's success and will leverage \$10M in existing investments to mitigate future impacts of drought on fish and wildlife.
- **POP 160: NCRS Tide Gate Continuity.** TNC supports continued funding for the Tide Gate Coordinator, a critical position to help farming and ranching communities navigate the complex, multi-agency permitting process for tide gate repair and replacement.

**We support the following investments not included in the GRB:**

- **POP 110: Program Continuity for Water and Climate.** TNC supports funding to continue three staff positions that are critical to administering grant programs for landscape-scale restoration, managing the focused investment partnership grants, and coordinating OWEB's efforts to implement water and climate initiatives, such as Oregon's 100-year Water Vision and the Governor's Executive Order 20-04 on Climate through a focused equity lens. Loss of these positions would limit OWEB's ability to participate in and implement climate and water initiatives and would affect the agency's ability to address new and innovative grant-making, monitoring, and reporting opportunities.

We thank you for your thoughtful consideration on the OWEB budget and your leadership on Oregon's critical natural resource funding priorities.