

House Committee on Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources, and Water

Testimony in support H.B. 3341

OWEB Community Drinking Water Enhancement and Protection Fund

Wednesday, February 12, 2025

Co-Chairs Helms and Owens, Vice-Chair Finger McDonald and Members of the Committee:

My name is Daniel Whelan, and I am the Government Affairs Director for Sustainable Northwest. Thank you for holding today's hearing.

I am here to testify in support of the HB 3341, which will appropriate an additional \$5 million for the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board Drinking Water Source Protection Grant Program for the current 2025–2027 biennium.

The OWEB Drinking Water Source Protection Grant Program was established with broad bipartisan support in 2023. Demand for the original funding allocation of \$5 million being sought by water suppliers in Baker, Wasco, Clackamas, Clatsop, Douglas, Tillamook, and Curry counties surpasses currently available funds. Not all applicants will be funded in this first round; in fact, a recent survey of community public water providers estimated another \$29 million would be needed to meet the demand from all interested communities from across the state. We believe that continued funding will encourage more communities to look to forestland acquisition as an efficient and cost effective tool to manage their drinking water supply.

Severe drought, extreme weather, increased development, and the loss of working forestlands have all contributed to a growing demand for water. OWEB's innovative program allows communities with populations under 25,000 to purchase land from willing sellers, enter into easements or similar agreements with landowners, or pay back loans used to protect the source waters of critical watersheds. This program is 100 percent voluntary for landowners and does not restrict public access.

The structure of the Drinking Water Source Protection Grant Program provides unique opportunities for leverage and flexibility. It can be capitalized by General Fund, Lottery Funds, Lottery Bonds, and support fee-title acquisition, easements and covenants, as well as debt forgiveness.

These state investments also can be leveraged to deliver significant federal investment by a margin of 2:1 by providing matching funds for the EPA Drinking Water Source Protection Fund, the EPA Clean Water State Revolving Fund, as well as the USDA Forest Legacy and Community Forest and Open Space Conservation Programs.

Clean and reliable drinking water is a right of all Oregonians, and OWEB's Drinking Water Source Protection Grant Program provides a common-sense and effective mechanism to meet these needs and enhance our state's public health infrastructure.

On behalf of Sustainable Northwest and its many partners, we would like to thank you for your prior support and urge you to provide continued funding of \$5 million during the 2025–2027 biennium for the OWEB Drinking Water Source Protection Grant Program.