



# WaterWatch of Oregon

## Protecting Natural Flows In Oregon Rivers

**SB 5543**

### **Testimony of WaterWatch of Oregon** by Kimberley Priestley

**Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee on Natural Resources**  
**February 20, 2025**

Founded in 1985, WaterWatch is a non-profit river conservation group dedicated to the protection and restoration of natural flows in Oregon's rivers. We work to ensure that enough water is protected in Oregon's rivers and aquifers to sustain fish, wildlife, recreation, and other public uses of Oregon's waters. We also work for balanced water laws and policies. WaterWatch has members across Oregon who care deeply about our rivers, their inhabitants and the effects of water laws and policies on these resources.

#### **WaterWatch urges support of the OWRD Budget, including crucial water management, data and IT needs.**

Rivers in eighteen of Oregon's nineteen river basins are already over appropriated from the late spring to the early fall. At the same time, population growth and climate change are increasing the pressure on Oregon's aquifers, many of which are already in decline. The state is seeing increasing incidents of drought, and water scarcity is widespread.

Oregon's economy and environment require additional science, data and water management capacity to address the challenges presented by the intersection of climate change, economic and population growth and the needs of aquatic habitat and aquatic species. Unless Oregon can find balance in these areas and provide capacity for OWRD to manage the state's water resources all interests are going to suffer.

While we appreciate the investment in water the state has made in recent biennia, it is critical not only that we hold the line as far as water investments but to continue to grow the data, science and management capacity necessary for a sustainable water future. Whether farmer, city, or fish---the Department's work is critical in meeting both instream and out-of-stream needs across the state and into the future. As such, we would urge the following:

- **Maintain OWRD's Current Service Levels**– Maintaining current service levels is of paramount importance. With climate change and increasing competition for our scarce water resources it is of utmost importance that OWRD have adequate staff for on-the-ground management, data collection and analysis, water allocation/re-allocation, technical assistance, planning and the many other statutory duties the agency has.

- **Reject Package 090 Reductions related to data and services (\$2,521,000 GF):** Water data is the cornerstone of responsible water management. While we have seen an increase in funding for data collection and analysis in the past two biennia, the 2025 GRB proposes to cut critical funding for data fundamentals, including \$114k in evapotranspiration funding, \$100 k in agrimet funding, \$769k in groundwater investigation funding, \$272k in gaging station funding, \$1m in complete facilitation funding and \$66 k in water measurement cost share funds. Please reject the proposed cut to these funds , as well as \$200k in services/supplies, proposed to be deleted in Package 090 Reductions.
- **Support Partial Funding of Package 090 Additions (\$4.46m GF):** The GRB includes additions that are of great importance for the 2025-2027 biennium. We would urge support of:
  - (1) One time investment of \$100k GF for planning funds in Information and Technology for a Water Use Tracking and Reporting systems.
  - (2) One time investment of \$4.36 million to assist the Department with legal cost overruns anticipated to carry forward from the current biennium.
- **Support Modernization of IT:** There is a real need for mundane but important information technology work. This work is critically important to the public and the agency alike. Funding IT work should be a priority for the state, including:
  - **Package 107, Strategic Modernization of IT Systems and Tools (\$251k GF):** Modern IT is a foundational piece of agency operations and is critically important to agency strategic objectives. Updating IT will help agency staff, water right holders and the public. It will make the agency more efficient and data more accessible. We cannot overstate how important funding this work is.
  - **Package 111, Improving Accessibility of Agency Website (\$128k GF):** This package would ensure that the OWRD website is up to date with information desired by the public, as well ensuring transparency and accessibility.
  - **Additional IT Needs:** WaterWatch urges attention to the full IT needs of the OWRD, and while we support Packages 107 and 111, we understand they do not fully encompass all of the agency’s IT needs. The OWRD’s IT Strategic Plan<sup>1</sup> outlines additional needs. We urge the committee to fund **full implementation of the plan.**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oregon.gov/owrd/WRDReports/OWRD%20IT%20Strategic%20Plan%2024-29.pdf>

- **Support Package 110, State Scenic Waterway Revenue Gap (\$0 total funds (\$290k GF; (290k OF)):** This package will support the agency's state Scenic Waterway work. It backfills six existing split funded positions with general fund in amounts above contracted amount with OPRD.
- **Add funding for groundwater studies (investigations, observation wells and water budgets) removed in the 2023-2025 budget development process (\$447,830 GF):** Sustainable groundwater management is critical to Oregon's water future. In addition to restoring Package 090 Reductions to groundwater studies (769k) we urge the committee to add back cuts applied in the 2023-2025 budget process meant to fund cooperative groundwater basin studies, groundwater data and the construction and maintenance of observation wells that assist the Department in developing a better understanding of groundwater levels statewide.
- **Support Package 106, American Rescue Plan Act Carryover (\$3.35 m OF):** This package carries over ARPA funding authorized in the 2021-23 budget. This money will fund place based planning, engineering services for flood methodology and inundation assessments, surface and groundwater data collection field equipment, Ordinance Project in Umatilla County, and funding for the water measurement cost share program.

Conclusion: A fully functioning Oregon Water Resources Department that is able to robustly manage our scarce water resources should be a priority for this state. We urge you to resist cuts to services, data and programs, and instead build up agency capacity so it can better serve Oregon. Adequately funding the agency is of more import than funding the many water related general fund appropriation requests the Joint Ways and Means will likely see this session. We would urge you to prioritize this, and other agency budgets, over those types of requests.

Thank you for your consideration of our testimony.

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