



February 24, 2025

Representative Helm, Co-Chair
Representative Owens, Co-Chair
Representative Finger McDonald, Vice-Chair
House Committee on Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources, and Water

Re: HB 2342–ODFW Funding: Balancing Investment and Reform

Co-Chair Helm, Co-Chair Owens, Vice-Chair Finger McDonald, and Members of the Committee,

Native Fish Society¹ thanks you for the opportunity to submit written testimony to HB 2342 regarding the proposed adjustments to Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) license fees. While we acknowledge the need for increased funding to support ODFW's vital work, we believe it is imperative to address the agency's current budget allocation to ensure that these funds are utilized in a manner that best serves its core mission: the conservation and enhancement of Oregon's fish and wildlife resources.

Lessons from Success: The Oregon Coast Coho Model

Oregon's iconic fish species, including Chinook, chum, and sockeye salmon, as well as steelhead, are facing critical declines. Many populations are listed as threatened or endangered under state and federal regulations. While external factors like climate change and land use contribute to these declines, ODFW holds a significant responsibility to implement effective strategies for species recovery and the development of resilient, abundant populations that support both healthy ecosystems and sustainable harvest opportunities. This includes managing the negative impacts of hatchery fish on the health of wild populations.

Oregon Coast coho salmon's recovery, a testament to the efficacy of targeted conservation and recovery efforts, provides a blueprint for Chinook and steelhead. Yet, this success was hard-won, achieved only after federal Endangered Species Act listing. We cannot afford to wait for other species to reach such critical lows. By acting now, we can implement proven strategies and avert the costly consequences of further decline.

The Unsustainable Paradigm of Hatchery-Centric Management and the Necessity for Strategic Prioritization

ODFW's budget is disproportionately allocated towards hatchery fish production, a model that is both financially and ecologically unsustainable. This imbalance is evident in the fact that conservation and recovery efforts within the agency's inland fisheries division receive less than 8% of the budget, while annual hatchery

¹ The Native Fish Society is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit with a mission to restore abundant wild fish, free-flowing rivers, and thriving local communities across Oregon and the Pacific Northwest.



operating costs are more than double that figure. A century of indiscriminate hatchery fish planting has yielded a starkly negative return on investment: collapsing wild fish populations and severely restricted harvest opportunities.

In addition, a 2023 legislative directive to assess ODFW's hatchery system revealed a staggering \$230+ million (and growing) in deferred maintenance for state-owned facilities. This substantial financial burden underscores the need for a comprehensive review of the current management paradigm.

Addressing infrastructure alone will not solve the crisis. We need a clear, science-based framework to prioritize watersheds for a deliberate transition to a management paradigm that centers the goal of wild fish recovery and abundance. This framework must outline which watersheds warrant immediate investment to support thriving wild populations, and what future investments will be needed in other watersheds to follow suit. Without this strategic prioritization, we will continue to misallocate state resources, hindering species recovery and the durability of our harvest fisheries.

Recommendations

We respectfully recommend the following actions:

1) Conduct a Comprehensive Analysis of the Oregon Coast Coho Salmon Recovery Model:

- Identify the key strategies and actions that contributed to the coho salmon recovery success.
- As a first step, evaluate the transferability of these strategies to Chinook salmon and steelhead populations in other coastal watersheds, considering ecological and hydrological differences.
- Produce a report detailing the findings and actionable recommendations for implementation.

2) Develop and Implement a Science-Based Strategic Transition Framework to Watershed Management that Prioritizes Wild Fish Abundance:

- Build a phased transition plan with defined timelines to move priority watersheds to wild fish abundance management.
- Detail investment priorities for habitat restoration, barrier removal, and other actions that support wild fish recovery in priority watersheds.

3) Strategic Reallocation of ODFW Resources to Prioritize Wild Fish Abundance and Watershed Restoration:

- Reallocate budgetary resources to significantly increase investments in conservation and recovery actions within designated wild fish abundance watersheds.



- Prioritize investments in these areas on green infrastructure, including habitat restoration, barrier removal, and streamflow enhancement.

By implementing these recommendations, the legislature can ensure that ODFW is equipped to effectively manage Oregon's fish and wildlife resources for the benefit of present and future generations.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Fairbrother
Legislative & Policy Director