

## Deschutes Land Trust

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CONSERVATION. COMMUNITY. CARING FOR THE LAND.

February 26, 2025

**To: Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee on Natural Resources**

**From: Deschutes Land Trust**

**RE: Support for HB 5039 and HB 5040, Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) 2025-2027 Budget**

**Co-Chair Frederick, Co-Chair Levy, and Members of the Committee:**

The Deschutes Land Trust (DLT) writes to you today in strong support for HB 5039 and HB 5040 and OWEB's 2025-2027 Budget. OWEB is an essential partner in DLT's work to conserve and care for the lands and waters that sustain Central Oregon so that local communities and the natural world can flourish together for generations to come. Together, OWEB and DLT have permanently conserved over 10,000 acres of land and restored over 10 miles of stream. Our work would not be possible without OWEB's dedicated source of statewide funding for habitat protection and land acquisition in Oregon.

Over the past two biennia, OWEB has increased its program offerings to include funding for farm and ranchland protection through the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program (OAHP), funding for natural climate solutions on natural and working lands, grants to water suppliers to protect drinking water through the Drinking Water Source Protection Grant Program, and new fiscal administration responsibilities under the Oregon vs. Monsanto settlement. In response, OWEB's budget request has almost doubled, while adding only four positions. While the Governor's Budget includes General Fund investments in two key OWEB grant programs—OAHP and Natural and Working Lands—additional investments in OWEB are needed to improve customer service, ensure efficient program delivery and provide tangible conservation outcomes that support Measure 76 and Oregon's climate goals.

**When considering OWEB's 2025-2027 Budget, DLT asks that this Committee also support the following three priorities:**

1. Enhanced funding for the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program through H.B. 3131

The Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program is Oregon's only program that directly protects farm and ranchlands from fragmentation and conversion to non-farm use. OAHP was created by agriculture and conservation groups in 2017, with broad bi-partisan support, and funded in the 2022 and 2024 short legislative sessions. These funds have led to the permanent protection of over 12,000 acres of farm and ranch lands throughout the state and leveraged record federal investment through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

OAHP funds working land conservation easements, conservation management planning, succession planning, and technical assistance, providing our community with a statewide source of funding that protects our agricultural and ranchland from development while keeping it in production.

The Governor's Requested Budget (GRB) includes \$2 million in funding for the program, but a 2024 survey conducted by the Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts (COLT) found robust demand for additional funds that far exceeds the \$2 million included in the GRB. Specifically, the survey identified 25 projects across the state that

would protect 38,000 acres of working lands and require a \$17.3 million investment from the state legislature. DLT alone is currently working with on six projects in Central Oregon that would protect over 14,000 acres of farm and ranch land and require a \$4M OAHP investment.

DLT urges this Committee to provide OWEB with the \$17.3M needed for the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program. This funding request is currently before the Ways and Means committee in HB 3131 that passed unanimously out of the House Agriculture Committee in February.

2. Continued funding for the Drinking Water Source Protection Grant Program through H.B. 3341

The Drinking Water Source Protection (DWSP) Grant Program was established by the legislature in 2023 with strong support from communities to provide grants for the protection, restoration, or enhancement of sources of drinking water through land acquisition and conservation. The protection of drinking water sources is the most impactful way communities can ensure the quality, reliability, and resilience of their drinking water and is typically more cost effective than hard infrastructure investments.

There is robust demand for additional funds for this program. . Funding requests in the first grant cycle concluded in December 2024 and exceeded available grant funds. In addition, last year, an OWEB survey of water providers and partners identified a total of \$34 million in existing project needs, with more than \$27 million in funding needs identified over the 2025-2027 biennium. DLT asks this Committee to provide an additional \$5 million in funding to the DWSP for the biennium. This funding request is captured in HB 3341, which has already had a work session in the House Agriculture Committee and is expected to pass out of Committee unanimously to Joint Ways and Means.

3. Supporting staffing and program continuity through Policy Option Packages (POPs)

Governor Kotek has made clear her priorities for Oregon's agencies include improving customer service and program delivery. OWEB's Agency Requested Budget includes multiple Policy Option Packages (POPs) that provide staffing and program continuity for well-established and newly created grant programs. We urge this Committee to support the following POPs that will allow OWEB to continue to support grant programs and deliver conservation outcomes across the state:

- **POP 090:** General Fund investments for OAHP, Natural and Working Lands fund, and DWSP Program.
- **POP 100:** a permanent position to lead all land and water acquisitions and stewardship work at OWEB.
- **POP 102:** a permanent position to coordinate the agency's monitoring of permanent interests in land.
- **POP 105:** two limited duration positions to continue operation of the OAHP.
- **POP 106:** a permanent positions to administer the water acquisitions program.
- **POP 107 & POP 108:** OWEB positions to support the Environmental Restoration Council.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board's (OWEB) 2025-2027 budget.

Sincerely,



**Natasha Bellis**  
Conservation Director