

Testimony in Support of HB3580 Coastal Conservation Association Friends of Tillamook Bay

The Coastal Conservation Association, a nationwide organization with approximately 300,000 members including 2,000 members in Oregon and whose mission is to ensure the health and conservation of our marine resources, along with Friends of Tillamook Bay, a local grassroots effort to protect the eelgrass in Tillamook bay advocate for the passage of HB3580.

Our organizations are particularly concerned about the destruction of eelgrass beds in Tillamook bay by a single oyster farming operation, who for the past ten plus years, has been using mechanized methods without ever having the required dredge permits from the Army Corps of Engineers. Dragging harrows to rake the bottom either to keep oysters from settling into silt and suffocating or to prepare the bottom for new crops, and dragging dredges across the bottom to harvest mature oysters, this operator is removing massive amounts of eelgrass by uprooting it. All other oyster farming operations in Tillamook and Netarts bays are using hand methods that do not compete with the grass.

Tillamook Bay, deemed a “national bay of significance “ by the EPA, is unique in that five rivers: the Miami, Kilchis, Wilson, Trask, and Tillamook flow into it. All of these rivers have steelhead and salmon runs. There have been huge efforts by state, federal, Native, and nongovernmental organizations to restore upstream riparian environments for the benefit of anadromous fish, especially the ESA listed coho salmon. When these fish spawn and their young smolt travel downstream and acclimate to the salt environment while transitioning through the bay on their way to begin their ocean journey, they need nutrition and cover from predators. Eelgrass beds provide these needs and all of these restorative efforts go to waste if the eelgrass is removed.

And its removal is not just evident antidotally. A recent completion of a two year study of eelgrass in Tillamook bay by Tillamook Bay Estuaries Partnership using high resolution drone camera technology as well as satellite imagery clearly show areas of eelgrass removal and destruction in the areas farmed by mechanical means.

HB3580 does not solve the fact that there are so called “legacy” permits the Oregon Department of Agriculture has issued that have allowed unrestricted use of mechanical means of oyster farming in sensitive areas of eelgrass, or the fact that a farmer is operating without the necessary permits. And though, in our opinion, the bills goal of recommendations of protection and restoration targets to be met by the year 2040 is too low of a bar considering the eelgrass in Tillamook bay may largely be raked out by then, HB3580 is a good start in recognizing an extremely vital ecosystem that, if left unprotected, will certainly have a negative effect on us all. We recommend that you support the passage of this bill.

Thank you,

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