



Dear Co-chair Helm, Co-chair Owens, and members of the committee,

My name is Annie Merrill. I'm the Marine Conservation Manager at Oregon Shores Conservation, whose mission is to educate and empower people to protect the ecosystems and communities on the Oregon coast. **On behalf of our organization and over 3,000 members across the state, I ask the committee to support HB 3580 and all of the conservation initiatives therein.**

Just last Saturday was World Seagrass Day, and I could not be more excited to celebrate it by endorsing HB 3580. World seagrass day was designated to raise global awareness of the importance of these marine meadows to maintaining healthy oceans. So, let me tell you why our native seagrass species, eelgrass, is essential for all Oregonians:

First, eelgrass is an ecosystem engineer, forming underwater meadows in Oregon's estuaries. These meadows serve multiple functions that benefit both people and wildlife. They provide food and shelter for a variety of species—thereby supporting biodiversity. They filter pollutants out of the water and provide oxygen—reducing hypoxia and improving water quality, and they stabilize sediment—reducing coastal erosion.

Eelgrass is also recognized as Essential Fish Habitat by NOAA fisheries, because it provides nursery grounds for a variety of commercially and culturally important species, namely rockfish, herring, Dungeness crab, and salmon. This means eelgrass meadows bolster fish stocks and support our commercial fisheries and seafood industries, which of course drives the coastal economy. **In sustaining healthy ecosystems, eelgrass meadows also contribute to coastal tourism economies and support livelihoods.**

**Eelgrass is also a natural climate solution.** The plant can sequester carbon up to 35% the rate of tropical rainforests, and as it photosynthesizes, it buffers ocean acidification— providing refuge to sensitive shellfish. Protecting this blue carbon habitat can help the state meet its climate goals.

Maintaining this resource is also critical to building resilience on the Oregon coast.

**The problem is.. These essential meadows are threatened.** Eelgrass is declining worldwide and a recent study in Coos Bay found once thriving meadows in the South Slough Reserve have declined by over 90% in a decade. Unfortunately, we don't know the status of our eelgrass meadows in most of our estuaries so we don't know how severe declines may be. Additionally, our current management framework for eelgrass isn't built to respond rapidly or adaptively to these changes, and many of our estuary management plans regulating uses of our estuaries are long outdated. Management is also split between multiple agencies, requiring interagency coordination to meaningfully address loss.

HB 3580 aims to take the initial steps to proactively address some of these challenges by launching a dedicated study and task force to identify gaps, set conservation targets, and develop a coordinated response. The task force, led by DLCD, is directed to:

- Assess information on the current and historical extent of eelgrass resources in our state waters
- Develop statewide targets for conservation and restoration
- Identify policy barriers and environmental challenges to meeting the statewide targets
- Assess monitoring and mapping programs and make recommendations on technical improvements

Findings and recommendations would then be delivered to the legislature in 2027 to provide guidance on improving eelgrass management.

**Importantly, this task force study is designed to happen the Oregon way:** with agencies, scientists, ports, fishermen, conservation groups, and other stakeholders at the table helping to shape the best path forward. Federally recognized Tribes are also members on the task force and are to be consulted throughout the process, as they are original stewards of the coast and eelgrass is of significant cultural importance to many indigenous people. We believe a task force is the best way to ensure that the policies that result are backed by science, jointly informed by our state agencies and technical experts, and endorsed by diverse stakeholders.

**Overall this bipartisan bill has gained broad support and is a clear win-win for the legislature.** The written record is filled with supportive testimony from Oregonians all across the state, the bill is endorsed by the Coquille Indian Tribe and the Confederated Tribes of the Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians, fishermen have voiced their support, and we have also submitted a sign-on letter to the record detailing support from 39 independent organizations and scientists.

For too long eelgrass has been ignored, as a little known species only seen at low tide. Despite its importance to coastal ecosystems and communities, it has not received the same kind of management attention as other equally important habitats. HB 3580 is a necessary first step for Oregon to take a coordinated, inclusive approach to conserve this habitat—before its too late and the habitat is in crisis.

**I urge you to please vote yes on this bill.** Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Annie Merrill  
Marine Conservation Manager  
Oregon Shores Conservation Coalition

***In Oregon, the beaches belong to the people.***

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