

Submitter: Greg Pettit
On Behalf Of:
Committee: Senate Committee On Rules
Measure, Appointment or Topic: SJR28

Written Testimony in Favor SJR 28

Senate Committee on Rules

Public Hearing

March 26, 2025

Submitted by Greg Pettit

Dear Chair Jama, Vice-Chair Bonham and members of the Committee,

My name is Greg Pettit. I retired from DEQ 2014. I had the great privilege of working for DEQ for over 37 years. My positions included Agency Groundwater Coordinator, Manager of Water Quality Monitoring for 11 years, and Administrator of the Laboratory and Environmental Assessment Division for 12 years.

Oregon has a proud and distinguished record of being a national leader in environmental protection. From the Bottle Bill to the Beach Bill to cleaning up the Willamette River we should be proud. Oregon has over 100,000 miles of rivers and streams, 360 miles of coastline, and more than 1,400 named lakes. From the Chetco to the Imnaha, from Owyhee to the Necanicum our amazing environment defines Oregon, and we Oregonians treasure it. We have made tremendous progress in reducing air and water pollution over the last 50 years. However, there is still much to be done. Aquifers are polluted with nitrates and pesticides contaminating rural drinking water supplies, air toxics exceed health-based criteria, and thousands of miles of Oregon streams still don't meet water quality standards. I strongly support the Environmental Rights Amendment for the following reasons:

1. Oregon's environmental action in both Legislative and Executive branches is driven by volume of pressure from lobbyists, public outcry, and lawsuits on specific issues. The amendment would help level the playing field and reduce harm to innocent victims who do not have political power.
2. The Constitution is where we document our inherent values, fundamental values as people of the state. That is what directs all our government action whether by Executive or Legislative branches.
3. Industries that are not causing harm to health or the environment have nothing to worry about.
4. No person has a right to pollute and cause harm to their neighbors. A polluted environment, a degraded ecosystem is not a victimless occurrence. It impairs people's health, has negative economic consequences, affecting real people.

I am going to tell you about one example where the amendment could have been

very helpful. In 1986 while working as an Environmental Specialist in the Water Quality Monitoring Section I conducted a statewide survey of agricultural chemicals in groundwater. The survey discovered widespread groundwater contamination of private drinking water wells in agricultural areas throughout the state with nitrates and pesticides at concentrations well above health-based criteria. I am sad to say the groundwater contamination discovered in 1986 has not been adequately addressed and is getting worse. One area that had particularly high levels of nitrate was in the lower Umatilla basin. The area was declared a Groundwater Management Area in 1990 and has had an advisory committee working on it ever since. This water is not healthy to drink, and nitrates are going up.

Why has the situation not improved some 40 years later? Because it wasn't taken seriously by the state. Resources were diverted to other programs. There wasn't a strong federal regulatory driver to force a solution. No one was putting pressure on the polluters to change their practices. Perhaps most importantly the victims were without political power. They are largely low-income Hispanic people. There is a tremendous social power gap between the polluters and the victims.

It should be a fundamental tenant that we can all agree on, that every person deserves a clean and healthy environment. The proposed amendment is common sense, morally right and without negative consequences. It will help our agencies do a better job in accomplishing their mission. It would have helped the victims in Morrow County.