

AOC ASSOCIATION OF OREGON COUNTIES

Date:	March 28, 2025
To:	Co-Chair Lew Frederick Co-Chair Emerson Levy Members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Natural Resources
From:	Association of Oregon Counties Legislative Affairs Manager Branden Pursinger
Subject:	Senate Bill 5502 – Department of Agriculture Budget

The Association of Oregon Counties (AOC) is a non-partisan member organization that advocates on issues that unite all county governing bodies and have an impact on county functions, governance, budgets, and services.

AOC is in support of the Department of Agriculture’s budget; however, two programs AOC would like to specifically mention for funding this next biennium are the Wolf Depredation Compensation and Financial Assistance Grant Program and USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services.

First, the **Wolf Depredation Compensation and Financial Assistance grant program**. Created in 2011 as a component of the Oregon Wolf Plan, its purpose is to reimburse ranchers that have experienced livestock depredation due to wolves on the landscape. This partnership between counties that administer the program and the department that administers the fund is found in ORS 610.150. Counties that request funding are required to put 30% of the funds toward nonlethal deterrents, and the decision is made by a committee, also found in that statute. The committee is composed of the following individuals: two ranchers, two wolf conservationists, two members of the business community and one county commissioner. Currently, 18 counties are eligible for funding, however in order for their constituents to be eligible for the funds, they must have nonlethal deterrents on the landscape.

On March 25, the Senate passed SB 777, which if approved by the House, would increase that percentage to 50%. The request is to **allocate \$2m to this program**, either as part of the agency’s budget appropriation or through SB 985, to ensure the program is fully funded and counties and the Department can carry out their portion of the Oregon Wolf Plan.

Second, AOC is requesting the continuation of **ODA’s portion of USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services program funding**. Wildlife Services provides a service to Oregonians across the state and counties are a strong partner with the USDA.

Wildlife can cause significant damage each year, not just on natural resources but also with public infrastructure, private property and more. Due to the increased damage, communities rely on Wildlife Services to address the issues brought about by the species found in ORS 610.002. Predatory animals in this statute mean wildlife that can and do cause problems for the agricultural communities and working farms and forests – specifically feral swine, coyotes, rabbits, rodents, and birds that are or may be destructive to agricultural crops, products and activities. It is

important to note that predatory animals do not include game birds, nongame birds ODFW deems in need of additional protection or beavers. Cougars, foxes, bobcats, and bears are included, however the primary purpose of these statutes is to resolve conflicts with the wildlife that the Oregon Department of Agriculture identifies as problematic for farmers and ranchers.

In Fiscal Year 24, Wildlife Services in Oregon made over 46,000 responses to properties. They assisted with conflicts or damage from 174 different wildlife species. This includes 52 different mammal species and 116 different species of birds. It should be noted that Wildlife Services is also a first responder for wildlife disease outbreaks including High Path Avian Influenza.

26 of the 36 counties in the state contract with USDA for various wildlife issues and they provide some level of service as requested in the other 10 counties. These counties choose the level of service their constituents need and cover a portion of those assessed costs. The State and Federal Government cover a portion, and the counties pay the rest. Established in 1959, ORS 610.020 requires the state to set aside a minimum amount of \$60,000 for wildlife services each biennium. That amount would be spread across all counties for the full biennium. That minimum amount is not enough. Counties have borne the cost increases over the past decades with many unable to cover the cost for a full-time Wildlife Services employee. This results in decreased responsiveness to the needs from counties or citizens.

Without sufficient funding, Wildlife Services will not be able to respond to needed service requests, county participation will be reduced as they cannot afford the full cost themselves. Decreased funding from the state will put even more economic burden on counties or the citizens. Trained staff with decades of experience and institutional knowledge will be lost if the positions are not fully funded, which will further impact the level of service delivered.

AOC's request is to fund the USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services amount at \$1m annually.

Landowners have relied on this service to ensure their safety from animals that have the potential to cause either property damage or a risk to bodily harm. Wildlife Services currently responds to thousands of wildlife conflicts annually and the service they provide to Oregonians across the state include education for living within the proximity to wildlife, nonlethal deterrence efforts as well as lethal action for problem wildlife if that level of service is needed as a last resort.

As Oregon expands housing development into rural areas, especially into the wildland urban interface, we will inevitably have more conflicts with wildlife. It is imperative that counties continue this partnership with ODA and the USDA, however if the state decreases the amount allocated, the amount counties will be responsible for obviously will increase for the same level of service. Counties do not have the revenue to cover more of this service.

AOC respectfully requests the committee continue to fund the state portions of Wildlife Services and the Wolf Depredation Compensation program.