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OREGON **rural** ACTION

SOWING SEEDS OF **CHANGE**

April 7, 2025

Chair Sollman, Vice Chair Smith, and members of the Senate Committee on Energy & Environment,

My name is Kaleb Lay, and I'm Director of Policy & Research with Oregon Rural Action (ORA), a grassroots, community-led nonprofit organization working with community members in northeast Oregon on the frontlines of some of the state's worst water and air pollution. **I write in strong support of SB 1187, the Make Polluters Pay Act.**

ORA works extensively in the Lower Umatilla Basin, which spans the northern parts of Morrow and Umatilla Counties in eastern Oregon. The Basin is a rural and sparsely populated area roughly the size of Houston, Texas, and is also home to some of the most diverse communities in the state. Those who call the Basin home are disproportionately working-class, low-income, and non-English speaking compared to the rest of our state.

Not coincidentally, **the Lower Umatilla Basin is also one of the most heavily polluted places in Oregon.** It has become infamous in recent years due to the decades-long crisis of nitrate pollution in drinking water supplies, which has consistently gotten worse since at least 1990. Morrow and Umatilla Counties also ranked among the most heat-vulnerable counties in Oregon in the recent Oregon Dept. of Energy Cooling Needs Study, and, critically, an overwhelming and disproportionate share of Oregon's industrial air pollution is emitted in the Lower Umatilla Basin.

In 2023 alone, **42% of all emissions from large industrial facilities in Oregon was concentrated in Morrow & Umatilla Counties – more than 5.8 million metric tons.** That's roughly equivalent to putting more than 1 million cars on the roads of northern Morrow & Umatilla counties, despite the fact that only around 45,000 people live here. This includes the emissions from four of the five dirtiest fossil fuel power plants in Oregon, but it does not include the considerable pollution from mid-level industry or from vehicle, freight, and agricultural emissions.

This pollution has been concentrated in the Basin despite the fact it is also prone to atmospheric inversions and air stagnation, meaning that those who live and work in the region are subject to significant exposure to this pollution and the health consequences associated with it. And while

one would hope that Oregon's investments in the energy transition and our environmental justice values would mean reduced air pollution in the Lower Umatilla, that is not the case. Emissions from large industrial facilities actually rose in 2022 and in 2023, according to data from the EPA, and there is little reason to believe pollution will not continue to rise without regulatory intervention and legislation to ensure that polluters are held accountable.

The burden of cleaning up pollution should not fall to Oregonian taxpayers while the corporations responsible for that pollution continue to make billions of dollars in profits and continue to pollute our communities. Those who make a mess should be the ones to clean it up, and those who cause harm should be made to make it right. SB 1187, the Make Polluters Pay Act, would invest critical resources in Oregonian communities that have been sacrificed for the sake of corporate profit, and those investments are critical to their long-term recovery and health.

We encourage full support of SB 1187 and holding polluters accountable in Oregon.

Sincerely,

Kaleb Lay
Oregon Rural Action