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June 4, 2025

Senate Bill 1153

Chair Jama, Vice Chair Bonham, and Members of the Committee:

For the record, my name is Jake Seavert, Union County Commissioner. I am also President of the Union County Cattlemen's Association and Vice Chair of the Animal Health and Identification Committee for the Oregon Cattlemen's Association.

I am writing today in strong opposition to Senate Bill 1153, which proposes new standards for evaluating water right transfers. This bill would require the Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) to determine whether a proposed transfer would "contribute to" reduced streamflows that may harm instream habitat for sensitive, threatened, or endangered species, or contribute to water quality impairments.

Both of these criteria are vague, subjective, and currently lack standardized definitions or testing protocols. The bill provides no clear guidance on how OWRD would evaluate these impacts, yet it would effectively prioritize instream values over critical functions such as food production, flood control, and other public benefits that agriculture provides.

Water right transfers are an essential tool for agricultural producers, offering flexibility to adapt to changing market demands and maximize the productivity of available land. In Union County, where no new water rights are available, the ability to transfer existing rights is often the only means producers have to optimize crop or forage production and respond to evolving challenges.

The existing transfer process is already lengthy and delayed. Implementing the provisions of SB 1153 would only further complicate and slow an already burdensome system, potentially rendering water transfers unworkable in practice. Moreover, OWRD lacks the scientific authority and capacity to assess impacts on aquatic species or water quality in the manner envisioned by this bill.

It is deeply concerning that SB 1153 was developed without meaningful public input or collaboration with agricultural stakeholders. Groups like the Oregon Cattlemen's Association, which represent the voices of rural producers across the state, have not been given due consideration. This bill represents a significant overreach and threatens the ability of farmers and ranchers to responsibly manage their water resources.

I respectfully urge you to oppose Senate Bill 1153. Its passage would have harmful consequences for Oregon's agricultural sector, particularly in rural areas where agriculture remains the backbone of local economies.

Sincerely,

Jake Seavert
Commissioner