



Mailing: 454 Willamette St. #218  
Eugene, OR 97401  
Office: 8940 N. Bradford St.  
Portland, OR 97203  
503.223.6418  
info@willametteriverkeeper.org

**June 11, 2025**

Michelle Emmons  
Upper Willamette  
Riverkeeper &  
Co-Executive Director

Heather King  
Lower Willamette  
Riverkeeper &  
Co-Executive Director

**Board of Directors:**

Cathryn Tortorici  
President

Tamara Madsen  
Treasurer

Jessie Rohrig  
Secretary

Steve Hernandez

**RE: Public Testimony in Support of SB1196 – Recreation Waiver Protections**  
*Submitted on behalf of Willamette Riverkeeper and the Oakridge Trails Alliance*

Chair Meek, Vice-Chair McLane, and members of the Senate Committee on Finance and Revenue,

My name is Michelle Emmons, and I serve as the Co-Executive Director of Willamette Riverkeeper, and I am a co-founder and board director of the Oakridge Trails Alliance. I'm here today to voice our strong support for SB1196. This legislation isn't just important to our economy and small businesses, it's also imperative for serving the health of Oregon's public lands and waters, and equitable access to Oregon's greatest treasure; our Outdoors.

These organizations rely on hundreds—and in some years, thousands—of volunteers to restore habitat, protect water quality, provide safety support and interpretive services, build and maintain trails, and improve access to Oregon's rivers and public lands.

On average, Willamette Riverkeeper volunteers remove over **250 cubic yards of trash**—weighing nearly **44 tons**—from the banks of the urban Willamette. These are critical efforts to maintain the health of our watershed and the safety of our communities. Additionally, our paddle support volunteers spend hundreds of hours each year in certified trainings and on-water experiences to help staff implement safe, enjoyable, and educational river recreation and stewardship programming.

In Oakridge, volunteers are the backbone of our outdoor recreation economy. They build and maintain trails, care for parks, and provide essential support for improving trailhead access while advocating for multi-modal transportation options. These efforts are foundational to our community's health and our local economy, which depends on tourism and outdoor recreation for business growth and long-term resilience.

According to the Independent Sector, the value of volunteer time in Oregon is **\$33.49 per hour**. Across both organizations, this equates to **hundreds of thousands of dollars in labor** that directly supports public investment in parks, trails, and rivers—work that would otherwise be cost-prohibitive without volunteer participation.

But rising insurance costs—driven by Oregon's current liability environment—are jeopardizing our ability to do this work. Safehold Insurance, one of the few providers willing to cover outdoor volunteer programs, has already exited the Oregon market. Without enforceable waivers like those restored in SB1196,

nonprofits like ours will be forced to redirect limited program funding toward legal defense and liability coverage—cutting directly into mission delivery.

SB1196 provides a **balanced, reasonable framework** that restores enforceable waivers while upholding operator responsibility. It also initiates a long-overdue study into sustainable funding for outdoor recreation—a necessary step for every community that depends on accessible parks, clean rivers, and connected trail systems.

Speaking as a lifelong Oregonian, I believe we all want to see our tax dollars and charitable donations invested in **public amenities—not insurance company profits**. Please support SB1196 to preserve the partnerships that make Oregon's outdoors safe, vibrant, and economically vital.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michelle Emmons', with a stylized, cursive script.

Michelle Emmons

Co-Executive Director & Upper Willamette Riverkeeper/Willamette Riverkeeper  
Co-Founder & Board Director, Oakridge Trails Alliance