

Chair Jama, Vice Chair Bonham, and members of the Committee—

My name is Suzanna Wehr. I'm a graduate student in Wildlife Management at Oregon State University and the Communications and Advocacy Associate at the Western Environmental Law Center. Our group is a member of the Oregon Wildlife Coalition. I'm sharing this written testimony today in strong support of HB 2977.

Every biennium, ODFW develops their budget with asks for new positions and projects for their species and habitat conservation program. And every biennium, those asks are turned down by the legislature due to lack of funds. As a result, our state fish and wildlife agency does not even have an amphibian or reptile biologist on staff, in addition to other major gaps.

Simply put, we have tried this route for over a decade, and it's not working. Even in the best of years, general funds have been as low as 2% and as high as only 13% of ODFW's budget. From the 13%, less than 1% was for the state wildlife action plan. What funds these conservation programs are federal funds – close to 40% in total. And we all know the risk to federal funds right now. With such high uncertainty, we have no real investment in species and habitat conservation in the state – a state that takes pride in showcasing its natural spaces and the critters that live in it.

Our thriving tourism industry also relies on our beautiful ecosystems and beloved species, which are one of the main draws for visitors. Outdoor recreation supports \$15.6 billion in total consumer spending and over 220,000 jobs, of which hunting, fishing and wildlife viewing contributes \$1.2 billion and 11,000 in jobs.

HB 2977 reinvests in these critical resources that support tourism and livelihood. So, instead of leaving the conservation of our critical habitat and species to completely unreliable federal funds, this bill proposes an increase to a privilege tax, which will not represent an everyday burden for Oregonians. Instead, most of the funding from this tax will come from out-of-state visitors, who benefit from our wildlife thriving for generations to come as much as we do.

HB 2977 draws inspiration from other successful and celebrated solutions developed by other states in recent years. It offers true wins for rural and urban communities, supports the future of our tourism industry, and is the lifeline Oregon wildlife need to recover. We urge you to support HB 2977. Thank you.