

Testimony on Senate Bill 1525

Blue Economy Task Force

Tom Calvanese, Director
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Chair Sollman, Vice Chair Brock-Smith, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Tom Calvanese, and I serve as Director of the Oregon Kelp Alliance. I am submitting testimony in support of Senate Bill 1525, which would establish the Blue Economy Task Force to study Oregon's blue economy and create a strategic roadmap for sustainable ocean-based economic development.

ORKA's Blue Economy Work

The Oregon Kelp Alliance exemplifies the blue economy businesses and initiatives this task force would study and support. Our organization bridges marine conservation science with coastal economic development through three interconnected activities:

Ecosystem Restoration as Economic Development - Our \$2.5 million Oregon Kelp Forest Stewardship Initiative, funded by NOAA's Community-Based Habitat Restoration Program, demonstrates how restoration can generate meaningful coastal employment while rebuilding essential fish habitat. In just eight months since launch, this project has provided over 4,500 hours of gainful employment, including 110 hours of living-wage work for commercial sea urchin divers who are developing expertise in restoration techniques alongside their traditional harvesting operations.

Workforce Development in Marine Sciences - We have trained 24 community volunteers as "kelp forest defenders," building local capacity for long-term ocean stewardship. These volunteers learn scientific diving, ecological monitoring, and restoration techniques – skills that translate to employment in marine research, aquaculture, and coastal resource management. This is the blue economy workforce Oregon needs, and we're developing it through hands-on restoration work.

Market-Based Conservation Solutions - ORKA is working to develop markets for sustainably harvested purple sea urchins and cultivated kelp, transforming an ecological problem into an economic opportunity. By creating value chains for urchin roe and kelp products, we support commercial divers while addressing the overgrazing that has devastated Oregon's kelp forests.

The Need for State Support

While federal NOAA funding has enabled us to launch these initiatives, we face significant barriers that state-level coordination could address:

Fragmented Permitting and Regulatory Pathways - Our restoration work requires coordination across multiple state agencies including Department of Fish and Wildlife, Department of State Lands, State Parks, and the Department of Land Conservation and Development. A unified strategic approach would streamline these processes and reduce barriers to blue economy innovation.

Lack of Coordinated Workforce Programs - Oregon has outstanding marine science programs at our universities and community colleges, but we lack coordinated pathways connecting students to blue economy careers in restoration, mariculture, and sustainable fisheries. The task force could identify how to better integrate academic programs with industry needs.

Limited Investment in Marine Infrastructure - Ports like Port Orford are developing working waterfront revitalization plans that would support blue economy businesses, but these efforts need state-level coordination and support. The task force's recommended roadmap could align state investment with local coastal development priorities.

Gap in Research-to-Market Translation - Oregon has world-class marine research institutions, but we need better mechanisms to translate research into commercial applications. The task force's review of best practices from other states and countries could identify models for accelerating blue economy innovation.

Alignment with Executive Order 25-26

This legislation directly supports implementation of Governor Kotek's Executive Order 25-26 on ocean resilience. As we noted in our [November 2025 press release](#) celebrating that executive order, Oregon's kelp forests are Essential Fish Habitat designated by NOAA Fisheries. Restoring these ecosystems isn't just environmental conservation – it's essential for the economic viability of coastal fishing communities and the ocean-reliant industries that define Oregon's coastal economy.

The Executive Order calls for agencies to work with the Oregon Ocean Policy Advisory Council, Oregon Ocean Science Trust, and Oregon Sea Grant to "evaluate opportunities to support long-term resilience of nearshore resources and promote globally competitive ocean-reliant products derived through sustainable practices." The Blue Economy Task Force would provide this strategic evaluation and develop the coordinated roadmap needed to achieve these goals.

ORKA's Documented Success

Our work demonstrates what's possible when blue economy initiatives receive adequate support. Since May 2025, the Oregon Kelp Forest Stewardship Initiative has:

- Removed over 330,000 purple sea urchins from three restoration sites

- Successfully planted 32 bull kelps at Nellie's Cove, with 19 reaching reproductive maturity, with wild kelp emerging at both sites where we released kelp spores.
- Relocated 24 critically endangered sunflower sea stars to restoration sites
- Documented early ecological responses including 281 juvenile fish and multiple adult fish species using restored habitat
- Built a collaborative model bringing together scientists, commercial divers, volunteers, tribal members, and state agencies

This is the collaborative, science-based approach that can be scaled along Oregon's coast with proper state-level support.

Recommendations for the Task Force

If SB 1525 moves forward, I recommend the task force specifically examine:

1. **Existing restoration economy programs** - Organizations like ORKA are already demonstrating how ecosystem restoration creates employment while rebuilding natural capital. These models should inform the state's blue economy strategy.
2. **Commercial fishing community engagement** - Oregon's commercial fishermen have deep ecological knowledge and established infrastructure. They should be central partners in blue economy development, not afterthoughts.
3. **Tribal co-management opportunities** - Tribal nations have traditional ecological knowledge and treaty rights that should inform blue economy development, particularly for kelp forest resources.
4. **Port infrastructure needs** - Oregon's working waterfronts need state support to serve as hubs for blue economy businesses.
5. **Kelp mariculture potential** - Oregon has ideal conditions for kelp farming, which could support carbon uptake, sustainable seafood production, and bioproduct development. ORKA has launched a pilot Restorative Kelp Mariculture project.

Conclusion

The Oregon Kelp Alliance supports SB 1525. We are already doing the work this task force would study – developing workforce, creating employment, restoring essential fish habitat, and building collaborative partnerships across the blue economy. What we need is the state-level coordination, strategic planning, and policy support that this task force would provide.

Oregon has a historic opportunity to position itself as a leader in sustainable blue economy development. Our coastal communities have the knowledge, ability, and desire to participate in climate solutions and ocean-based economic development. SB 1525 would help ensure that Oregon doesn't miss this opportunity.

Thank you for your consideration. I'm happy to answer questions about ORKA's blue economy work and the specific support needs we've identified through our restoration initiatives.

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