

Submitter: Audrey Spencer
On Behalf Of: McKenzie River Discovery Center
Committee: Joint Committee On Ways and Means Subcommittee On Capital Construction
Measure, Appointment or SB5701
Topic:

Dear Co-Chairs and Committee Members,

I write in strong support of state funding for the McKenzie River Discovery Center, a shovel-ready project under active construction that will deliver immediate economic recovery to the fire-impacted McKenzie River corridor.

The MRDC is not a concept—it is happening now. With all permits secured, construction underway, exhibits ready for fabrication at OMSI, and pilot programming in development for implementation in 2027, this project represents a smart investment in rural economic resilience. The Discovery Center will attract an estimated 50,000 annual visitors generating \$7 million in regional economic activity, creating year-round jobs in a community still recovering from the catastrophic 2020 Holiday Farm Fire. These visitors will travel through Oregon's tourism gateway cities—Portland, Eugene, Bend, and Medford—supporting hotels, restaurants, and retail throughout the state while discovering a world-class environmental education destination in rural Lane County.

The funding request is \$4.8 million. If obtained, this gives the MRDC money to finish capital assets—buildings and exhibits—and open the Discovery Center in 2027!

As the sole proprietor of a 40-year old family-owned guiding business, I can attest to the difference that a world-class learning facility would make for the McKenzie River community and small business economy. Growing up on the McKenzie, I may have some implicit bias, but as an education professional who has spent years working globally through Peace Corps and USAID, I can attest that the traditions, geology, hydrology, and biology of the McKenzie River are like nowhere else in the world. Compound impacts of the 2020 Holiday Farm Fire—infrastructure loss, population displacement, business closures, and ongoing recovery challenges—have left our tourism economy operating at 60-70% of pre-fire capacity despite visitor demand returning. We need anchor destinations like the MRDC to drive overnight stays, extend visitor seasons, and provide the economic stability that allows fire-impacted businesses to not just survive, but thrive.

The MRDC represents exactly what rural Oregon needs: strategic infrastructure investment that creates jobs, attracts visitors year-round, and positions our region as a premier destination for conservation education and outdoor recreation. Our guiding business, like others in the area, has served thousands of families through fly fishing

and whitewater trips—many of whom could benefit from MRDC programming that deepens their connection to McKenzie River ecosystems. The synergy between environmental education and outdoor recreation creates a sustainable tourism model that benefits guides, lodges, restaurants, and the entire Upper Willamette Valley economy. Moreover, as someone who has managed federal grants ranging from \$14M to \$80M, I understand the importance of fiscally responsible, shovel-ready projects with demonstrated community support and clear deliverables. The MRDC meets every criterion.

The project is already 54% funded through \$7 million in funds already raised. State investment will complete what the community has already started, delivering a first-of-its-kind Oregon environmental education center that honors our natural legacy while driving economic recovery where it's needed most.

I urge your support for SB 1507 and the McKenzie River Discovery Center.

Respectfully submitted,

Audrey Spencer
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