



Oregon

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Before the House Energy and Environment Committee

Testimony on House Bill 2516

Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board

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Introduction

The Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill (HB) 2516, which relates to conservation education. OWEB is neutral on the bill, but has concerns about the necessity of the bill and the text as introduced. OWEB already has a merit-based, locally driven grant program open to applicants statewide for outreach, which can include projects with school children that increase awareness and understanding of watershed restoration and protection related to native fish or wildlife habitat, water quality or stream flows. HB 2516 is not needed to provide this statutory authority.

OWEB believes the bill presents an opportunity to explore partnerships that could address some aspects of the current need associated with conservation education.

Background

OWEB is a state agency that provides grants to help Oregonians protect and restore watersheds throughout the state to address fish and wildlife habitat and water quality issues. OWEB grants are funded primarily from constitutionally dedicated funds from the Oregon Lottery, but also are supported by federal salmon recovery funds and state salmon license plate revenue. Under the Constitutional dedication and implementation statutes, OWEB's program funding is organized into two accounts, the Watershed Conservation Operating Fund (Operating Fund) and the Watershed Conservation Grant Fund (Grant Fund).

Discussion

HB 2516 proposes to allow moneys from both the Operating Fund and the Grant Fund to be used "for educating elementary school students concerning protection and restoration of native fish or wildlife habitats, watersheds and ecosystems."

In its fourteen-year history, OWEB has invested in local education and outreach related to conservation. With the passage of Constitutional Ballot Measure 76 in 2010, funds for those projects became more limited. Thirty-five percent of the Lottery funding is in an Operating Fund account. As set out by Measure 76 and statute, those funds can be used for education, among other purposes. The funds are allocated through the budget process by the Legislature, and are currently used to support programs within several natural resources agencies related to fish and wildlife habitat and water quality. Support of these programs leaves little funding for other uses, such as watershed education activities by local groups.

The remaining 65 percent of the Measure 76 Lottery funds are located in a Grant Fund account. Under the Oregon Constitution and statute, these dollars have specifically prescribed uses that include outreach, but do not include education. OWEB has defined outreach as increasing awareness and understanding of watershed restoration and protection tied directly to efforts to protect or restore native fish or wildlife habitat, water quality or stream flows. As a result, the agency has made numerous grant investments in outdoor classroom-like activities meeting those criteria.

Since 1997, OWEB's education and outreach funding has supported a number of important activities such as landowner outreach, community outreach, in-classroom and experiential conservation education with children, watershed and teacher professional development, and interpretative displays. In the current biennium, 32 percent of OWEB's outreach investments fall into the outdoor classroom-like activities category. Through its merit-based, competitive grant program, OWEB has invested in several long-standing natural resources "camps" and other educational opportunities across the state, including in the Siuslaw, Hood River, Klamath and John Day basins, the Eugene area, and in northeastern Oregon. In addition, programs like the Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership utilize OWEB funds to provide outdoor classroom-like opportunities to Metro-area school children.

Aside from the fact that OWEB can currently award grants to support these programs with the caveats noted previously, OWEB would also like to note that Ballot Measure 76 prohibits OWEB from distributing Grant Funds directly to state and federal agencies. This prohibition raises the question of the Oregon Department of Education being an eligible single applicant for or recipient of OWEB Grant Funds. Conversely, local elementary schools are already eligible recipients of OWEB Grant Funds.

Ongoing Discussions

In recent discussions with the bill's sponsors and supporters, OWEB has explored the idea of funder-to-funder partnerships to more effectively leverage the limited funding that each entity has to support conservation education activities. By pooling resources and strategically investing, OWEB and other funders could make a meaningful contribution to address a portion of the funding gap that exists. While these funding partners cannot alone address the full need, partnerships that encourage coordinated, strategic investment can begin to make a difference.

Summary

OWEB currently is statutorily authorized to award grants to support outreach related activities, including activities such as outdoor school. HB 2516 is not necessary for OWEB to support such activities. OWEB believes the bill presents an opportunity to explore partnerships that could address some aspects of the current need associated with conservation education.

If committee members have questions or would like more information, please contact me at 503-986-0180.