

**Testimony before the Senate Environment and
Natural Resources Committee
Supporting SB 217
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Founded in 1968, the Oregon Environmental Council (OEC) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, membership-based organization. We advance innovative, collaborative solutions to Oregon's environmental challenges for today and future generations.

Chair Dingfelder, Vice-Chair Olsen and members of the committee:

Oregon Environmental Council supports SB 217

Oregon's waterways are under increasing strain. A growing population, a changing climate, and the need to protect stream flows for endangered species add complexity to the challenge of meeting our water needs. At the same time, the funds dedicated to protecting and managing this precious resource are declining.

Oregon's Water Resources Department (WRD) manages more than 85,000 water rights—providing for industrial, agricultural, municipal and instream purposes across the entire state—with fewer staff than ten or even twenty years ago due to declining General Funds.

Water belongs to all Oregonians, and all of us pay into the general fund to protect it. A nominal \$100 fee would allow Oregonians who use this public resource for private gain to help pay for the costs of managing the resource they benefit from. Given how critical water is to the success of an agricultural operation or a manufacturing industry, \$100 is a minimal price to pay for such a valuable input.

WRD needs a reliable funding source now more than ever before, and the need for funding was identified in the Integrated Water Resources Strategy. We have more users, more competition, more complex science, and a changing water supply. In southeast Oregon, for example, the District 9 watermaster is responsible for distributing water across 11,000 square miles of land. In order to ensure we are managing this precious resource fairly and efficiently, the Water Resources Department needs stable funding and adequate staffing. This nominal fee puts more staff in the field, and better information in the hands of water experts.

The fee will benefit the water users who pay it by funding field staff and data collection that have been cut over the years. Regional offices will get groundwater hydrogeologists, groundwater availability studies matched with federal funds, surface water hydrologists,

and assistant watermasters to improve customer service, eliminate backlogs and improve understanding of water availability. We need people trained in resolving disputes, navigating the complicated needs of all water users, and making decisions based in sound science for the good of us all.

OEC supports increased General Fund for the Water Resources Department and for all natural resource agencies. But the reality is that all natural resource agencies combined receive only about 1% of the General Fund. They simply do not receive the level of funding that goes to education and social services, and we do not believe that reality will change any time soon. Establishing a water rights management fee will ensure that WRD has the adequate funding it needs to perform its vital role for everyone who depends on reliable water resources.

The fee proposal was developed by the Water Resources Commission during a public process with input from a variety of stakeholders, and that concept was vetted further by a workgroup convened by the Department. OEC participated in that process, and we would be happy to continue working with other stakeholders to ensure that the Department is adequately and equitably funded.