

Oregon Outdoor Council

Public Testimony before

The Joint Ways and Means Committee's Sub-committee on Natural Resources

Regarding the

Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board

Good afternoon Co-Chairs and members of the Joint Ways and Means Committee.

My name is Stan Steele. As President of the Oregon Outdoor Council, it is my pleasure to come before you as a representative of the outdoor recreational community, affiliate organizations and sponsoring businesses who share with us the common goal of enhancing and promoting Oregon's outdoor lifestyles that are connected to science-supported hunting, fishing and trapping activities.

There are many in today's modern society that downplay the social, economic and conservation importance of those who choose to participate in historically significant recreational activities such as hunting, fishing and trapping and the shooting sports. The right of all Oregonians to individually choose to participate in regulated hunting, trapping and angling activities is the proverbial conservation cornerstone that maintains Oregon's rich diversity of species, protects imperiled habitats and benefits the quality of life for all Oregonians.

There is no better example of the willingness of Oregon's licensed hunters, anglers and trappers to fund and support the conservation of Oregon's fish and wildlife than what occurred during last Friday's, (March 8, 2013), Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife Commission meeting. The Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission approved a land swap on the Phillip W. Schneider Wildlife Area, located near Dayville in eastern Oregon's Grant County. The additional lands added to the Wildlife area will provide easier public access to federal lands for hiking, wildlife viewing and hunting as well as protect winter habitat for the Murders Creek Unit's mule deer, Rocky Mountain elk, pronghorn antelope and a wide array of non-game game wildlife. **The most important point I want to stress to the committee today is that the exchange was paid for by the federal tax on firearms and ammunition and the monies from a prior land donation from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.** Oregon's hunters, anglers, trappers and shooters are proud to add to the quality of life enjoyed by all Oregonians, and we respect their personal choice regarding their participation in our traditional recreational pursuits. However, we are becoming uneasy with the trail some of our fellow citizens and natural resource managers seem to be taking.

While hunters, anglers and trappers on one hand applaud the efforts of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to increase access to private and public lands, we on the other hand are becoming increasingly concerned with land acquisitions and habitat projects administered by the Oregon Watershed and Enhancement Board (OWEB) that increasingly exclude hunting, fishing, trapping and shooting enthusiasts. Simply put, the Oregon Outdoor Council is deeply concerned about the Oregon

Watershed Enhancement Board's "Long -Term Investment Strategy For Conservation" if this developing management strategy does not include all traditional uses where and whenever practical.

Hunters, trappers and anglers are being restricted or outright prohibited from practicing their traditional sports in once popular elk hunting haunts such as the north coast's Ecola Creek or waterfowl hunting in the mid-coast's Beaver Creek Natural Area. These areas are just two of many lands acquired by OWEB public funds and similar OWEB habitat rehabilitation projects that now prohibit traditional sporting activities and seemingly demonstrate a pervasive and often overt anti-hunting, trapping, fishing and shooting bias within the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board and some OWEB-funded watershed councils.

The recovery of Oregon's Coastal Coho has been an Endangered Species Act and Oregon Coastal Coho Conservation Plan success story and was the impetus behind the formation of OWEB and the associated watershed councils. More Oregon coastal wild Coho have returned to our rivers and streams in the last two years than at any time since the early 1950's. Oregonians working together collaboratively have successfully accomplished the mission of the Oregon Coastal Salmon Restoration Initiative by restoring our coastal salmon populations to productive and sustainable levels based on natural, cultural and economic values to the people of Oregon.

The recovery goals outlined by Governor Kitzhaber in his 1996 letter to all Oregonians have been biologically achieved, but the increasingly OWEB action's far exceed the state agencies' original legislative mandate and this is alarming to many. The consequences of OWEB's recent actions could play havoc on how our state's fish and wildlife resources are managed and utilized.

I have attended countless meetings during the last decade regarding management of the Alsea Basin's fisheries resources and was, at one time, a Board Member of the Alsea Watershed Council (AWC). The Alsea Watershed Council is a watershed council's watershed council. The members of the AWC believe in the concept of taking care of our local streams, rivers, wetlands and natural areas and have worked diligently with private and public land managers. However, there has been considerable conflict and often much confusion about who is actually in charge of habitat stewardship in the Alsea River Basin – the AWC or the Mid-Coast Watershed Council. This has been a classic example of a political power struggle that has left many Alsea Valley residents confused and has blurred the once proud vision of a community-based approach to improving watershed health.

At no time has this conflict been more apparent than what many believe is an anti-trapping agenda concealed as a salmon restoration project sponsored by the Mid-Coast Watershed Council for the Five Rivers Basin. The Mid-Coast Watershed Council's beaver habitat restoration plan is theoretically designed to improve stream habitat for beaver in a manner that will result in increased dam building activity which would provide additional Coho rearing habitat.

The theory is scientifically sound but apparently someone forgot to tell the beavers! Beavers are plentiful and thriving in the Five Rivers and Alsea Basins according to recent research conducted by Vanessa Petro, Graduate Research Assistant, Department of Forest Ecosystems and Society, Oregon State University. Oregon's coastal beavers burrow into suitable streamside banks to construct their

dens; they are not lodge building beavers. Dams are not constructed nor needed in many sections of the basin due to ample escapement and travel water being present near their denning and foraging sites. The proposed beaver habitat restoration project appears to have a very low salmonid conservation value when compared to other "risk reducing" activities that many believe should be planned and supported by the Mid-Coast Watershed Council.

On a mid-February 2013, drift boat trip on the mainstem Alsea River (Rivers Edge to Walter's), I observed more beaver activity than at any other time in the last forty years. I probably should qualify my observation by pointing out to the committee that I have trapped beaver in this section of the Alsea Basin and far up into the upper reaches of Five Rivers off and on for the past forty years. I can factually state that I have never encountered a higher beaver population in that time span than what presently inhabits the area!

It is my firm belief that the Mid-Coast Watershed Council's Upper Five Rivers Salmon and Beaver Habitat Improvement Plan project is simply an attempt by the anti-trapping biased Mid-Coast Watershed Council's board and coordinator to over reach their authority and step from habitat management into wildlife management. I will quote from page six of the Upper Five Rivers Salmon and Beaver Habitat Improvement Plan "**Trapping** – Trapping within the focus sub basins could be counter-productive to increasing beaver activity. Mid Coast Watersheds Council could request that ODFW explore the benefits and the impacts of a trapping limit within a targeted focus area to sustain the beaver population. Beaver are likely to disperse from mainstream reaches into tributaries (Marty Bray, Wildlife Biologist, Siuslaw National Forest). Therefore, it may be necessary to include some mainstem Five Rivers reaches within the target area. Forest Service has offered to provide a letter of support to ODFW. Mitigation of damage caused by beaver and prevention of losses by protecting trees and culverts may help to reduce the need for trapping for the purposes of pest control." It is unknown whether the U.S. Forest Service conducted a public scoping process regarding their involvement in requesting termination of trapping on their properties within the OWEB proposed project area.

I personally spoke to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Regional Wildlife Biologist Doug Cottum, regarding the Mid-Coast Watershed Council's beaver restoration plan. He had not been consulted by the Mid-Coast Watershed Council regarding the need for the project or for their desired changes to the Oregon furbearer regulations that would facilitate the project. I personally spoke to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife Carnivore - Furbearer Coordinator, Dr. Tim Hiller regarding the proposal. He, also, had not been contacted by representatives of the Mid-Coast Watershed Council to discuss the project or the need for regulatory changes.

The Mid-Coast Watershed Council has clearly stepped outside of their legislatively mandated authority when designing and contacting the public regarding the Upper Five Rivers Salmon and Beaver Habitat Improvement Plan and went directly from a habitat management agency to a wildlife management agency.

On July, 18, 2012, I sent an e-mail to Mid-Coast Watershed Council Coordinator Wayne Hoffman and asked the following questions: What percentage of increased Coho returns, spawning success and

rearing capacities can we objectively expect from limiting or terminating recreational furbearer and wildlife damage (beaver) management? How many more beaver ponds/dams or beaver can we expect to gain with the proposed project and additional trapping regulations?

I also contacted Mr. Hoffman by telephone to discuss the merits of the proposal. Mr. Hoffman was unable to provide answers to the above questions, but did make a statement that best displays the sentiments that I and many other Oregon hunters, anglers and trappers fear the most by those we have entrusted with management of our natural resources. **Mr. Hoffman stated, "The banning of beaver trapping would not negatively impact many people – after all there are not very many trappers!"**

I sincerely hope that the members of the committee will ensure that all users and uses of our natural resources be objectively considered by the responsible agencies when management decisions are being made and that the process will be open and transparent. Oregon's hunters, anglers and trappers have grave concerns about the impact to our scientifically regulated sports by the "normative science" that is apparently being practiced by OWEB and some Watershed Councils.

Thank you,

Stan Steele, President  
Oregon Outdoor Council