

Oregon House Land Use Committee
Oregon State Capitol Building
Salem, Oregon

Chair Clem and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on HB 2173. My name is Mary Wahl. With my siblings, I own two sheep and timber ranches in northern Curry County. We are the fourth generation of our family to operate these ranches, and my perspectives on HB 2173 are based on our experience ranching, and integrating conservation into our ranch operations.

For several reasons, including those listed here, I think HB 2173 is a bad idea for Oregon as well as for ranchers and farmers:

1. Wetland restoration is a voluntary activity on ranches and farms, many agricultural landowners have found effective ways to incorporate the wetlands into their operations, and have even in some cases been able to get a financial return for their work from people who are mitigating for wetland damage or destruction elsewhere. Putting barriers in the way of those landowners who are willing to restore wetlands, and are interested in providing that kind of land stewardship, will clearly be a disincentive to the restoration Oregon and the US Department of Agriculture have long been trying to encourage.
2. Ranchers, farmers and timber operators across Oregon are finding ways to incorporate natural resource protection in their operations. The importance of wetlands for water quality, habitat and natural resource conservation is well documented, and we have already lost thousands of acres of these areas across the state. Agriculture, like other sectors in Oregon, has increased efforts over time to protect these areas, and we are getting better at it as we go.
3. Discouraging wetland restoration --or other conservation practices -- is the wrong direction, especially after the progress we have made in integration of conservation with ranching and farming. Oregon should be encouraging ranchers and farmers to restore wetlands when that is feasible, not discouraging them by making such restoration a conditional use, or removing the liability protection for people who step up and do the restoration on their land.
4. Wetland restoration is an important contribution to recovering habitat for salmon and other wildlife. Ranchers and farmers consider themselves good land stewards, and this is a key way we demonstrate our stewardship and join other segments of Oregon's economy such as the timber industry in protecting natural resources. Oregon should not put new hurdles in front of ranchers and farmers doing their part for conservation.
5. On our ranch at the mouth of Elk River near the town of Langlois, just over twenty-five percent of the total area on the ~860 acre ranch is set aside as conservation area. This includes the river and creek riparian areas, the bluff above the ocean, and several wetland restoration areas. Production has not suffered as the conservation areas have been protected and taken out of production. In fact, production on the ranch is more than four times what it was before the conservation efforts started. Much of the increased production is from operational improvements, and some of it is from concentrating time, effort and

“inputs” like fertilizer and compost on the most productive acres. Importantly, it also turns out that conservation can and does provide substantial benefits to the agricultural operations.

6. Setting aside areas for conservation is beneficial to the agricultural areas in numerous ways, including that the operations time and work can then be concentrated on the production areas, the wetlands and other protected areas provide water quality benefits like sediment filtering, and any fertilizer and compost can be concentrated on the production areas. Further, the areas best for wetlands are frequently the low productivity areas for ranching or farming, so giving a small area over as a restored wetland can provide all the filtering and habitat benefits from the wetland without taking prime production areas.

The pictures below are a few examples of the type of wetland restoration we have done on our ranch property. This work has been done with important help from at least three places: our local watershed council, the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB), and the US Department of Agriculture’s NRCS program. As noted above, the production on this ~860 acre ranch is multiples of what it was before one quarter of the area was fenced off from livestock and set aside for conservation.

I hope you will consider voting “no” on HB 2173 so Oregon can continue to encourage rather than discourage landowners who are willing to do wetland restoration and other conservation practices on their farms and ranches.





