



FRIENDS OF THE COLUMBIA GORGE

Testimony on SB 1554

By Michael Lang, Conservation Director for Friends of the Columbia Gorge

Senate Committee on Education and Workplace Development

February 13, 2014

Good afternoon Chair Haas and members of the committee. My name is Michael Lang. I'm the conservation director of Friends of the Columbia Gorge ("Friends"). Friends' mission is to protect the scenic beauty and the natural and cultural heritage of the Columbia River Gorge area. We achieve our mission by educating the public about the outstanding resources of the Gorge, ensuring implementation and enforcement of laws that protect the Columbia River Gorge from inappropriate development and by supporting the purchase of land from willing sellers for the purpose of resource protection and enhancement. Friends has 5,200 members, including hundreds of who live within the Columbia River Gorge area. Friends also has an affiliated land trust, called Friends of the Columbia Gorge Land Trust.

Friends appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony on SB 1554. We have grave concerns over the impacts of this bill on the operation of Friends' land trust and its effect on local and state programs that purchase land from willing sellers for resource protection and recreation purposes. Friends' Land Trust purchases land in two counties eligible for ordinances under SB 1554. We purchase land from willing sellers for conservation purposes. We buy and hold these lands and we also sell properties to government agencies. We pay taxes on these lands that and the taxes vary depending on the property characteristics and land uses.

Protection of the Columbia River Gorge is strongly supported by Oregonians statewide and in Gorge Counties. For example, in June 2013 Friends fielded a poll asking residents of Hood River and Wasco Counties if they favor or oppose protections from development that would harm the Gorge's natural scenic beauty and recreation opportunities. The results show that 60% of voters in these rural counties support Gorge protections and only 29% oppose them.

If passed, SB 1554 could cripple our land trust's ability to function. It would also cripple the ability of state agencies to protect the scenic beauty and natural heritage of the Columbia River Gorge and provide recreation opportunities for families. This would conflict with the broad support for Gorge protection among voters statewide and within the Gorge counties.

In particular, Section 3 of the bill provides an incentive for landowners to discontinue conservation management practices for which an exemption or special assessment applies. It penalizes landowners for selling land to an exempt ownership for the purpose of riparian protection, open space, wildlife habitat protection or a conservation easement.

Section 4 of the bill is even more onerous. It would freeze the amount of land protected as open spaces, wildlife habitat or conservation easements at current levels. Further, it would freeze the amount of nonfederal public land at current levels, despite needs for fish and wildlife habitat enhancement, water quality enhancement, recreation and open space.

While Friends opposes SB 1554, we are sensitive to the concerns underlying this bill. We would support a process with broad stakeholder involvement to examine the concerns underlying this bill and to identify appropriate remedies that ensure fully functioning land trusts, public agency acquisition programs to protect Oregon's special places and stable, adequate school funding for our children.

Thank you very much for considering this testimony.