



SB 201

Testimony of WaterWatch of Oregon Submitted to Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources February 16, 2015

Founded in 1985, WaterWatch is a non-profit river conservation group dedicated to the protection and restoration of natural flows in Oregon's rivers. We work to ensure that enough water is protected in Oregon's rivers to sustain fish, wildlife, recreation and other public uses of Oregon's rivers, lakes and streams. We also work for balanced water laws and policies. WaterWatch has members across Oregon who care deeply about our rivers, their inhabitants and the effects of water laws and policies on these resources.

WaterWatch of Oregon opposes SB 201.

SB 201 amends the Regional Solutions bill of 2014 (HB 4015) to add a "natural resources alignment coordinator" to the regional solutions mix. While this seems innocuous, Section 1(5)(a) then directs this coordinator to "improve the manner in which state agencies make regulatory decisions, particularly in regard to complex projects of regional or statewide importance". Moreover, Section 1(5)(b) directs this coordinator to "assist" state agencies in making sure "high priority projects" are advanced.

There are two concerns with this directive in Section 1(5)(a). First, it allows broad regulatory streamlining of natural resource agencies without any directive that this streamlining be consistent with agency mission and/or statewide environmental and sustainability goals. Second, it directs that this streamlining be done under the umbrella of Regional Solutions, which is, at its core, an "economic development" program.

Section 1(5)(b) is also of concern. It grants the natural resource alignment coordinator the power to ensure that natural resource agencies tow the "regional solutions" party line on "high priority projects", regardless of whether or not the project conflicts with agency mission.

The Regional Solutions program's reach over natural resource agency decision making and priority setting is of growing concern to many in the conservation community. Regional priorities are set by Regional Advisory Committees (RACs), which are made up largely of business and elected officials. Despite the fact that many regional priorities involve Oregon's waters, lands, forests and species, conservation interests do not have a seat on the RACs. As such, "regional priorities" are determined based on the economic desires of a small and select group of economic interests in any given region. Making this even more troublesome is that, despite assurances in the 2014 legislative session that the program would offer a robust public notice and comment process, Regional Solutions only provides a seven day public notice/comment period on RAC decisions that could have profound impacts on Oregon's natural resources.

Under the existing Regional Solutions program as set out in HB 4015(2014), Natural Resource agencies must already provide staff to regional "teams" when RAC demands, and all natural resource agencies must work to "fulfill" the regional priorities that this group of economic and business interests sets, regardless of agency mission. Under the existing program, private interest are already having undue

influence over state natural resource agency autonomy, workload and priorities. SB 201 will add to an already existing problem. Basically, it will allow Regional Solutions to dictate how state agencies make their regulatory decisions and mandate that they work to advance high priority projects advanced by a narrow group of economic interests, regardless of agency mission.

Conclusion: We urge the Committee to reject SB 201. At its core, this bill is seeking to usurp the autonomy of natural resource agencies to fulfill their independent missions that serve to protect the broad interests of all Oregonians for the sake of “economic development” as defined by a narrow group of private and elected officials.

Contacts:

Kimberley Priestley, 503-295-4039 x 3, kjp@waterwatch.org

Jonathan Manton, 541-729-2923, jonathan@sawneeservices.com