



February 26, 2015

Representative Brad Witt, Chair
House Interim Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources
c/o Beth Patrino, Committee Administrator
beth.patрино@state.or.us

Dear Representative Witt and fellow Committee Members,

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on House Bills 2808, 2997, and HB 2998. The Oregon Natural Desert Association (ONDA) is an Oregon non-profit, public interest, conservation organization of more than 4,500 members and supporters. ONDA exists to protect, defend, and restore the health of Oregon's native deserts. ONDA has a long history of monitoring ecological conditions and wilderness values throughout eastern Oregon. ONDA actively participates in Bureau of Land Management and other Oregon desert-related proceedings and decisions concerning land management in eastern Oregon, including juniper management.

Over the past several years, ONDA has been working with a diverse set of stakeholders through the Western Juniper Alliance (WJA) in hopes of collaborating on juniper management efforts that improve wildlife habitat and minimize adverse impacts. ONDA supports juniper removal where the purpose is focused on ecosystem restoration, but recognizes that it must be done carefully, especially in areas of sensitive wildlife habitat. There is confusion surrounding Western Juniper and it is worth reminding the committee that juniper is a species that is native to eastern Oregon and is known to provide important habitat for a variety of wildlife.¹

Western juniper is known to have fluctuated in abundance over thousands of years.² However, in recent years, juniper expansion into sagebrush-dominant ecosystems has been an increasing concern. Since 1930, western juniper has expanded four-fold in Oregon, from 1.5 million acres to 6.4 million acres. As juniper expands, it can suppress native shrub, grass and forb species that wildlife such as sage-grouse, mule deer, bighorn sheep and pronghorn depend on. Juniper is also encroaching on the dry fringes of pine stands and aspen, which can impact riparian areas.

Historically, western juniper has generally been confined to rocky ridges and areas with sparse vegetation and infrequent fires. Accelerated juniper expansion began during the 1870s, with a rapid period of establishment between 1885 and 1925 - a period of wetter than average conditions, few fires, and intensive livestock grazing. Generally, the following three reasons are given as the cause of juniper expansion: 1) reduction in fire frequency caused by fire suppression and reduction in ground fuels from livestock grazing; 2) other indirect causes from livestock grazing, including the increase in shrubby nurse

¹ Monsen et al. 1998. Proceedings: Ecology and management of pinyon-juniper communities within the interior west. 1997 Sept 15-18 Provo, UT. GTR. INT-GTR-000. Ogden, UT: USDA, Forest Service, Intermountain Research Station.

² Mehringer and Wigand, 1990; Miller and Wigand, 1994; and Miller and Rose 1995.

plants and reduction in canopy competitors; and 3) favorable climatic conditions (i.e., mild wet winters and cool wet springs).³

With these facts in mind, **ONDA offers support for HB 2997 and 2998.** However, we ask the Committee to consider the following potential changes and information. As previously noted, there is widespread scientific agreement that old-growth juniper provides important habitat for a host of wildlife species. **Legislative efforts should recognize this value and prohibit harvest of old-growth juniper.** In addition, the legislation should acknowledge that old-growth juniper is a Goal 5 resource of statewide significance that must be protected.

The commercial value of Western Juniper is currently limited and the resulting wood can be difficult to process; therefore, juniper management efforts are primarily driven by ecological restoration goals. Sage-grouse, a species in decline throughout the West, avoid standing structures like junipers that may serve as perches for raptors. Therefore, juniper expansion has been identified as a threat in Oregon's recent sage-grouse plan. Although juniper has spread into and replaced some sagebrush communities in the last 140 years, USFWS observed that "[w]e are not aware of any study documenting a direct correlation between [mechanical, herbicide, cutting, or burning] treatments and increased greater sage-grouse productivity."⁵ It is "unclear whether pinyon-juniper removal has a positive long-term population-level impact for sage-grouse" and only 55.7% of all treatments are considered "effective." As such, **money allocated through this legislative effort should prioritize activities and business practices that benefit sage grouse habitat and critical conservation values. Activities related to sage grouse should be consistent with Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and/or Bureau of Land Management sage grouse management plans.**

Current research and anecdotal information also suggests that juniper treatments below 4,500 feet in elevation are more susceptible to ensuing weed invasion. Therefore fire and soil disturbance should be applied with particular caution at such sites. Past experience has shown that annual invasive grasses such as cheatgrass can dominate such sites. The tendency then is to seed these areas with non-natives such as crested wheatgrass, siberian wheatgrass, range alfalfa, or forage kochia. These species provide livestock forage but have little to no benefit for sagebrush-dependent wildlife species, including sage-grouse. As such, **treatments should follow state and federal guidance to avoid impacts to sensitive plants and wildlife and the spread of invasive species.**

Although juniper has expanded beyond its historic range and provides a current harvest opportunity, **juniper is a finite and slow-growing resource and long-term harvest plans must be balanced with this fact.** The collection and transport of juniper must be carefully regulated to avoid impacting roadless areas and spreading invasive species. Removing and processing juniper near existing roads and public access is preferred, and methods of transport through sensitive habitats must be assessed to minimize impacts.⁶ Analyses similar to the methods described by the "Western Juniper Commercialization Feasibility Study for the Prineville Area"⁷ provide a strong model for assessing and supporting future economic feasibility.

³ Burkhardt and Tisdale 1976, Young and Evans 1981, Eddleman 1987, Miller and Rose 1995

⁵ 75 Fed. Reg. at 13,938

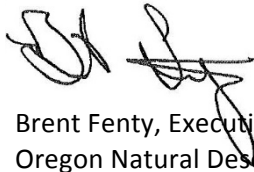
⁶ Belsky, J.A. 1996. Viewpoint: Western Juniper Expansion: Is It a Threat to Arid Northwestern Ecosystems? Journal of Range Management. Vol 49, No 1. Pp 53-59.

⁷ http://juniper.oregonstate.edu/coic/Final_Report.pdf

Regretfully, **ONDA opposes HB 2808 as drafted**. We simply feel that the bill is too broadly written to provide confidence that it will be implemented in a way that addresses the above-stated concerns. Likewise, we feel that the purposes of HB 2808 are sufficiently addressed through HB 2997 and HB 2998.

As with all natural resource management questions ONDA strongly supports scientifically credible evaluation of juniper management projects to ensure robust project design and to inform future efforts with the best available information. Collaboration among the diverse stakeholders represented by the Western Juniper Alliance can continue to improve our common understanding of these ecosystems and inform how we can best manage them to benefit ecological function and human needs. ONDA supports the concept of enhancing local economies through appropriately designed ecosystem restoration activities. Ecosystem restoration can provide immediate financial and economic benefit as well as long-term ecological sustainability that can help improve economic success and stability for Oregon's high desert communities. Thank you, again, for the opportunity to provide these perspectives regarding juniper management.

Sincerely,



Brent Fenty, Executive Director
Oregon Natural Desert Association (ONDA)
50 SW Bond St, Suite 4
Bend, OR 97702
bfenty@onda.org
541-330-2638

Cc:

Rep. Wayne Krieger, Vice-Chair
Rep. Susan McLain, Vice-Chair
Rep. Greg Barreto
Rep. Sal Escquivel
Rep. Lew Frederick
Rep. Chris Gorsek
Rep. Caddy McKeown
Rep. Gail Whitsett