

February 25, 2015

Chuck Gallagher, Committee Administrator
House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources

Testimony to the House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources on HB 2808

My husband, Mike Gerdes, and I are retired fish and wildlife biologists that have lived and worked in central and eastern Oregon for many decades. We have a small 40 acre property with juniper woodland mixed with native sagebrush grassland steppe outside of Prineville, Oregon. We are also avid hunters and anglers and support restoration of wildlife habitats and streams for native fish and wildlife species. We are writing to express our concern about HB2808.

Western junipers are a native species to central and eastern Oregon and occupy very dry and harsh sites. Junipers provide habitat as forage, thermal and hiding cover, and reproduction for over 100 species of wildlife including big game, songbirds, raptors, small mammals, and amphibians and reptiles. In low to mid elevation areas of central and eastern Oregon, junipers are sometimes the only tree on the landscape and may be critical to survival and reproduction of several species of mammals and birds. Because of historic and current intensive livestock grazing that has decimated native grasses and shrubs, on both private and public lands, sometimes junipers are all that is left for seeps, springs, streams and riparian areas to provide bank stability, shade and prevent serious soil erosion during high water episodes.

It is true that juniper has expanded up to 10 fold in the past 150 years. There is much concern regarding juniper expansion into native sagebrush/grassland steppe. However, much of this juniper expansion is well correlated with livestock grazing and fire suppression. Interestingly, authors in the Journal of Range Management reported juniper expansion began in the late 1800s and early 1900s, correlating with the introduction and dramatic increase of livestock grazing while fire suppression efforts started in the 1940s, well after the expansion of juniper. Livestock grazing has allowed the increase of junipers by the reduction of fine fuels (grasses and forbs), alteration of plant community structure, and reduction of competition by herbaceous species. Therefore, programs that fund large scale removal of juniper from the landscape without dealing with the underlying cause of livestock grazing is wasting public taxpayer dollars and is a Band-Aid that only addresses one issue. Further, it is well documented that juniper removal through mechanical and fire methods (the principal measures to remove juniper) without protection from livestock grazing or without the addition of seeding native grasses, leads to the expansion of really nasty non-native grasses and forbs including cheatgrass, medusahead, and knapweed. Expansion of these non-native herbaceous species has seriously degraded native sagebrush and grassland steppe habitat for all wildlife, and particularly for some obligate species.

Some federal programs (e.g. the NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative) have funded management and reduction of native juniper in areas determined to be of high value to the protection and restoration of the sage

grouse, a species proposed for listing under the federal Endangered Species Act. However, these programs have sometimes used the meat cleaver approach and done large scale removal of juniper in areas that may or may not benefit sage grouse. Funding the removal of junipers in areas that are not sage grouse “core habitat” (leks, nesting and brood rearing habitat) or areas of significant seasonal or migratory use is basically funding increased forage for domestic livestock. As noted earlier, livestock are a big part of the problem causing juniper expansion.

We also question the legislature’s wisdom of using public funds for juniper management when there are many other more important uses for public funds. If landowners choose to manage juniper on their private lands to improve forage for livestock grazing that benefits livestock operators, it should be paid for by those same landowners and livestock operators and not the general public. Any funds allocated through the legislature should be prioritized to benefit sage grouse habitat and other important conservation values and be consistent with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) Sage Grouse Management Plan. These funds should be used with oversight by ODFW staff using a more balanced approach that recognizes the value of a continuum of wildlife habitats both without and without juniper, rather than the meat cleaver approach. Any programs that fund juniper removal must include provisions to reduce or eliminate livestock grazing, require a grazing management plan, and require restoration of native grass and shrub species. Removal of juniper, without these additional provisions, is a waste of taxpayer dollars and further deteriorates the high desert country of central and eastern Oregon.

We are also concerned about Sections 2 and 3 of the bill. Harvest activities of juniper should remain under the jurisdiction of the Oregon Department of Forestry (DOF) and the Oregon Forest Practices Act. They provide a regulatory mechanism for the state to review harvest plans and some protection for riparian areas and streams. We do not support allowing the State Forester to bypass public contracting regulations and allows private negotiations that exclude the public out of the process.

Finally, there must be coordination with the DOF and ODFW if the Oregon Business Development Department and the OSU Extension Service design a program for the further expansion of juniper harvest. ODFW and DOF staff must participate to assure that all of the environmental values and issues associated with any substantive expansion of juniper harvest are adequately considered and comply with the Forest Practices Act.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on HB 2808.

Sincerely,

Amy M. Stuart and Michael G. Gerdes

Retired Fish & Wildlife Biologists and Landowners