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Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee
Senator Chris Edwards, Chair

Testimony on Senate Bill 266
“Supporting Place-Based Integrated Water Resources Planning”

Presented by: Tom Byler, Director and Racquel Rancier, Senior Policy Coordinator
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Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony in support of Senate Bill 266, a bill that would provide the Department with the authority to support areas seeking to understand and identify solutions to their water needs through voluntary, place-based integrated water resources planning.

Background

At the direction of the Legislature, the state’s first Integrated Water Resources Strategy (IWRS) was adopted by the Oregon Water Resources Commission in August 2012, creating a statewide framework for understanding and meeting Oregon’s instream and out-of-stream water needs, including water quantity, water quality, and ecosystem needs. Recommended Action 9A of the IWRS calls for undertaking a voluntary, place-based approach to water resources planning to help communities understand and meet their instream and out-of-stream water resources needs.

Place-based integrated water resources planning is a tool to help communities achieve their vision for the future, recognizing that water is the foundation for achieving that vision. Water is essential for economic growth and development, job creation, and the livelihoods of many farmers and ranchers across the state. In addition, water is necessary for fish and wildlife, recreation, and other instream purposes that are important to communities.

Given the limited nature of the resource and its importance, a holistic and cooperative approach to water resources planning can help to address water management challenges, while taking into account the unique ecological issues, economic goals, and community values for a basin. Place-based integrated water resources planning will allow areas to collaboratively identify their water resources needs, both instream and out-of-stream, and then identify solutions and projects that will help them meet those needs now and into the future. Given the often contentious nature of water resources issues, building trust and developing long-term relationships are additional benefits that can be realized through place-based strategies; these are important foundations for successful implementation of tangible water resources projects.

In 2014, the Department developed a white paper on how other states have implemented a similar approach to planning, and solicited comments from the public and stakeholders on how Oregon should implement place-based planning. After conducting numerous workshops around

the state, and receiving written comments, the Department has developed draft guidelines for areas to pilot.

Conducting a collaborative planning process that seeks to understand water needs and then identify solutions to those water needs can take several years and cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Given the water challenges currently experienced in the state, and the likelihood of future challenges, the state needs to help support communities in developing solutions. Today, the Water Resources Department is not equipped to partner with and support areas in conducting water resources planning activities.

What the Bill Does

Senate Bill 266 would allow the Department to provide grants to planning groups in order to undertake a place-based integrated approach to water resources planning to address instream and out-of-stream water needs, including water quantity, water quality, and ecosystem needs. The grants would provide communities with the initial financial capacity to cover facilitation, logistical, and technical costs associated with a place-based process. This could include costs associated with determining water needs, acquiring necessary information, identifying and understanding future scenarios, evaluating alternatives, and ultimately developing a strategy for how the community intends to address its water needs.

The bill would also allow the Department to enter into agreements, as well as provide technical assistance and information in order to partner and support communities in their efforts to undertake a place-based approach to water resources planning.

Proposed -2 Amendment

The Department worked with stakeholders to develop the proposed -2 amendment, which further outlines that place-based plans shall: (a) Be developed in collaboration with a balanced representation of interests; (b) Balance current and future instream and out-of-stream needs; (c) Develop actions that comply with existing water laws and policies; (d) Facilitate implementation of local solutions; (e) Be developed utilizing an open, transparent process that fosters public participation; (f) Be developed in consultation with the Department. In addition to other technical fixes, the amendment also removes the agencies of the federal government from entities eligible to receive grant funding and sets a sunset date of January 2, 2025. The Department supports adoption of the -2 amendment.