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Testimony to the Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee Supporting Senate Bill 246

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Founded in 1968, the Oregon Environmental Council (OEC) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, membership-based organization. We advance innovative, collaborative solutions to Oregon's environmental challenges for today and future generations.

Oregon Environmental Council supports SB 246. The bill addresses a dire and large need: replacing or repairing the thousands of old, leaky septic tanks that are contaminating Oregon's waterways and drinking water sources. Over 30% of Oregonians dispose of sewage from their homes and businesses through the use of septic systems. EPA estimates that 10-25% of septic systems are failing. When Eugene Water and Electric Board conducted a voluntary septic tank inspection program in their drinking water source area in the McKenzie River Basin in 2009, they found that 25% of inspected systems were either in need of repair or overdue to be pumped.

Oregon currently lacks an inspection and maintenance program for existing septic systems, so they may leak or malfunction for years before anyone notices. This growing problem is having consequences for public health and the environment in communities across Oregon. There are known problems with contamination from septic systems in the LaPine area, and in coastal communities including Dunes City and Tenmile Lake. Oregon has three areas where groundwater is unsafe to drink due to high nitrate levels coming from a combination of septic systems and agricultural runoff – in the Southern Willamette Valley, Lower Umatilla Basin, and Northern Malheur County. The city of Irrigon, in Eastern Oregon near Hermiston, is threatened with having to shut down a third municipal water well due to high nitrate levels. This issue impacts rural and suburban communities across Oregon.

It is time to tackle this problem. SB 246 addresses a critical piece of the puzzle: assisting property owners with the sometimes very large expense of repairing or replacing septic systems, or connecting to a public sewer system if one is available. Cleaning up these pollution sources to benefit public health and water quality is a public benefit that is a worthy use of public investment. Using the low-interest revolving loan approach outlined in this bill would establish a program that could eventually support itself when loan payments restore the fund and can be re-issued, similar to the existing Clean Water and Safe Drinking Water Revolving Loan Funds.

DEQ is working with cities, counties, and other partners to ensure that the program is well-designed and meets local needs. This is a long overdue idea, and we urge you to support SB 246.