

## Testimony on SB 5511

Co-Chairs Devlin and Rayfield, Members of the Committee:

My name is Les Helgeson and I have resided along the Nestucca River in Tillamook County for 30 years. I have previously been active in several conservation organizations advocating for conservation of native fish and their habitats.

At one time I advocated strongly for the Department of Fish & Wildlife, especially conservation efforts but today the Department increasingly devotes a disproportionate amount of resources to maintaining antiquated fish propagation programs that serve a limited constituency. Indeed, every legislative session we see fee increases and cuts to conservation programs that disproportionately end up supporting those limited special interests.

Clearly what is needed is a restructuring of the Department along with its budget. While some elements of the bill before you accomplish such a goal it falls far short of what is needed.

Arguably, it is difficult to separate components of SB 247 and SB 5511. But clearly, the chronic "budget buster" for ODFW has been the extreme cost of its fish propagation programs at the expense of conservation. Standard practice over the years has been to "backfill" the agency's budget which has done little more than hide the obvious.

Of course, the legislature has previously funded plans to reverse the decline in hunter/angler participation yet the decline continues. It has been 10 years since I have done any angling and my interest in hunting has been diminished, as well. Both of my adult children have foregone hunting and fishing, as well.

Management has been dysfunctional at best due in large part to the Department's ongoing disregard for an Attorney General Opinion issued in 1997 (essentially stating that one cannot expect maximum recreational benefits without considering conservation first and foremost). Alternatively, the Department continues to "split the baby" resulting in a lose/lose dilemma.

To make matters worse, now Director Curt Melcher displayed a stunning sense of false hope and reality at the agency's public budget meeting in Tillamook last summer. This contradiction has not been lost on the public at large. Despite court decisions and independent scientific assessments, Coastal Coho, for example, have not recovered as we were so jubilantly told. Indeed conservationists were blamed for lack of opportunity due to lawsuits filed by them and, unbelievably, the federal forest plan was blamed for declines in wildlife despite a substantial increase in allegedly habitat creating forest practices on private and state lands.

A similar scenario illustrates the public's lack of trust in the agency. Depending on which meeting one attended regarding the recently adopted "Coastal Multi-Species Conservation Plan", a different story was told about the "split baby syndrome". In rural Tillamook we were told that angling opportunities would increase, yet in urban Salem opportunity was de-

emphasized and conservation benefits were highlighted. It is unfortunate that the agency cannot realize they are fooling no-one but themselves while attempting to “have their cake and eat it too”.

It is therefore difficult to support any additional general fund dollars being appropriated to an agency that arguably provides relatively few net tangible benefits to the general public.

While I support the many species recovery efforts implemented throughout our state, they have been less than effective while we ignore the fact that limiting factors such as our Forest and Agricultural practices are out of step with the times. Increasing general fund dollars for what is really the sake of saving fish propagation facilities therefore makes little sense at this time.

An additional problem I would like to address is the chronic underfunding of Oregon State Police who are essential to maintaining our valuable fish and wildlife resources. I can assure you from experience that an inordinate amount of OSP time is spent patrolling fisheries associated with fish propagation facilities. Indeed, the first few years we resided here on the river were remarkable; in that with our cooperation providing cover for officers on our property, officers averaged 2 dozen snagging citations on adjoining public land *per year* at this *one location*.

Again, I find it difficult to support “backfilling” and thus substituting general funds in lieu of license dollars to support OSP. License fees should instead be finally increased proportionately.

In conclusion, I recommend the subcommittee take no action on SB 5511 until SB 247 is finalized. While technically related to that bill, I would recommend the legislature create a hatchery harvest tag in order to pay for shortcomings the agency has requested you appropriate general fund dollars for. It is unfair to ask all anglers and hunters to pay for such expensive and environmentally harmful programs all the while shortchanging OSP in the process. Guides, in particular, need finally pay their fair share as well.

It would be instructive for the committee to assess the cost of hatchery production statewide and divide that by the number of anglers and guides who benefit from such expenditure and assess the cost of production on specific users accordingly. You may thus avoid excessive general license and hunting tag fees so as to stem the exodus of participants while finally establishing a clear conservation mandate and relatively stable budget for this troubled agency.