



March 7, 2015

Chair Edwards and Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources Members

Re: SB 544

As the executive director of The Wetlands Conservancy, a thirty four year old non-profit with a mission of conserving Oregon's wetlands, I urge you to **not pass SB 544** out of committee.

Wetlands are vital to the health of our environment in so many ways. Like kidneys, **they absorb, filter and recirculate our water**. In addition, they provide **critical fish and wildlife habitat** to so many of the iconic species we identify with Oregon. In the face of destructive floods, they serve as **natural buffers helping to protect our communities**. With the heightened awareness around limited water resources, **their role in cleaning and recharging our water supply** has become even more essential. Conservation and enhancement of wetlands and streams are quickly rising to the top as the most successful and cost efficient best management practices to address water quantity and quality issues. In Oregon, restoration of these critical resources is implemented through both regulatory and voluntary private landowner and community efforts. **SB 544 will eliminate the shield of liability** for property owners who choose to engage in restoration on their lands as ways to improve water retention and water quality or improve fish and wildlife habitat on their own properties, which in turn provides enhancements and improvements to the larger watershed. In all corners of Oregon, unusual partnerships (private landowners, ranchers, farmers, conservation fish and wildlife, timber interests, local government and agencies) are forming in support of and to implement creative wetland and stream restoration and enhancement. **SB544 will serve as a disincentive and barrier** to voluntary involvement in these improvements.

Oregon law ORS 496.270 provides immunity from liability for damages resulting from habitat or water quality improvement projects on private land. This law was specifically designed to encourage voluntary fish and wildlife habitat improvement. **By removing this shield**, private landowners are far less likely to engage in voluntary conservation. **Please do not pass this bill out of your committee**. I hope each of you get a chance to visit some of the private landowner restoration and enhancement projects happening all over Oregon. They are an inspiration to all.

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