



April 8, 2015

Senator Chris Edwards, Chair  
Senate Committee on Environment & Natural Resources  
Oregon State Legislature

### **Opposition to SB 544**

Land trusts, soil and water conservation districts, and watershed councils work with willing landowners to accomplish voluntary conservation and restoration across Oregon. The Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts (COLT), Oregon Association of Conservation Districts (OACD), and Network of Oregon Watershed Councils (NOWC) together represent 160 conservation organizations that work together to conserve Oregon's natural heritage. Our three organizations oppose SB 544, which would limit liability protections for landowners who voluntarily participate in habitat or watershed improvement projects. If passed, we believe SB 544 will impair private, voluntary conservation, harming landowners and communities.

#### ***Undermining Voluntary, Non-regulatory Conservation***

Land trusts, districts, and councils work with private landowners to arrange restoration projects, conservation easements, and acquisitions that maintain working farms and ranches, protect water quality and wildlife habitat, and preserve open lands in Oregon. We rely on relationships with landowners to accomplish restoration. SB 544 would limit liability protections for landowners who voluntarily participate in habitat or watershed improvement projects. These liability protections are an important tool for working with landowners to accomplish restoration on private land. These protections are designed to encourage operators, timber owners, and landowners to voluntarily improve fish and wildlife habitat, and thus relieve regulatory pressure.

The loss of liability protections would significantly impact our members' ability to build the relationships necessary to achieve important restoration objectives that address statewide resource needs. By removing these protections, landowners are far less likely to engage in voluntary conservation projects in cooperation with the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board and the Department of Fish and Wildlife.

## ***Addressing the Problem***

It seems unnecessary to erect these barriers in the way of landowners, as well as land trusts, districts, and councils, who are working to provide public benefits through their stewardship efforts. Many of the issues underlying SB 544 are best addressed at the local level, not with a statewide legislative mandate. We would rather see improved communication and collaboration between landowners to build the relationships needed for conservation and restoration projects that have broad statewide impact. COLT, OACD, and NOWC support a broad-based conversation and study to better understand the underlying problems faced by rural counties. We would gladly be partners in this discussion.

We appreciate your time and consideration,



Kelley Beamer, Executive Director, Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts

*The Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts (COLT) serves and strengthens the land trust community in Oregon. COLT's 19 member land trusts work with voluntary private land owners to protect water quality and wildlife habitat, preserve open lands, maintain working farms and retain the values that make Oregon such an attractive place to live. COLT focuses on improving and advancing land conservation in the state through increased land trust capacity and coverage, engagement of stakeholders, defending and developing new and larger sources of funding, and supportive policies.*



Jerry Nicolescu, Executive Director, Oregon Association of Conservation Districts

*The Oregon Association of Conservation Districts represents, supports, and strengthens Oregon's 45 member Conservation Districts through member services, program development, training, leadership development, public education, and government relations.*



Ryan Gordon, Executive Director, Network of Oregon Watershed Councils

*The Network of Oregon Watershed Councils is dedicated to supporting the work of nearly 90 watershed councils throughout the state by increasing council capacity, improving key relationships, and promoting public awareness of watersheds and watershed councils.*

