

April 12, 2017

Chair Holvey and the Members of the Business and Labor Committee,

I am a tenure-track assistant professor in the College of Science at Oregon State University. As per my position description, I spend approximately 45% of my time teaching, 45% of my time on research, and 10% of my time performing service to my department, my university, and my profession. My lab currently consists of one postdoctoral scholar, one lab manager, four graduate students, two research technicians, and 8 undergraduate research assistants and volunteers.

I am a marine and freshwater ecologist by training. My lab studies the complex network of connections that link the species of an ecosystem to one another. Our work is motivated by the pressing need to understand and predict how species populations respond to perturbations of their food web, be it to environmental change, conservation or management actions, or harvest. For example, much of our current work seeks to inform the implementation of “ecosystem-based” fisheries management whereby the direct consequences of harvest on a given target fishery are considered jointly with the indirect ripple effects to other fisheries and non-harvested species.

I have been in my position for five years and as such will soon be evaluated for tenure and promotion by my university’s administrators and colleagues. Having my promotion and tenure denied would be tantamount to losing my lifelong dream job; I consider myself extremely lucky to be doing what I do, particularly so because I am surrounded by a wonderful community of students and supportive colleagues and am living in the Pacific Northwest. It is thus that I submit my testimony in support of HB 3170 with trepidation, presuming my university’s administrators oppose it. I nonetheless believe that expressing my support for this bill is important enough to warrant my doing so.

As alluded to above, my lab currently includes a postdoctoral scholar and a lab manager (a.k.a. ‘faculty research assistant’). The success of my research program, and that of my students, relies on the expertise, support, and mentoring these individuals provide, as does my ability to procure funding from the National Science Foundation and other agencies and foundations. However, according to current law, my official “supervisory” role with respect to these individuals would bar me the option of joining a union. I estimate that this applies to 88% of the other professors in my department.

Without the passing of HB 3170, our collective bargaining rights would switch on/off each time our “supervisory” status changes. For me, this would occur on a very frequent basis because the grants on which postdocs and FRAs are supported have a typical lifespan of 1-4 years. (If my past five years are indicative of the future, then I will likely switch status no less than three times in the next five years.) House Bill 3170 would avoid such absurdity, including academics like myself in the list of professions for whom the simplistic designation of “supervisor” status is ill-suited.

I consider myself to be extremely fortunate in having landed my faculty position. In fact, I’m still more fortunate than just that because my wife, a paleontologist, also landed a tenure-track assistant professor position at OSU. We truly consider ourselves to have been struck by lightning,

twice! That said, there are aspects of our position as teaching and research faculty – including improvements to family leave policies, increasing research productivity through improved laboratory conditions, and further strengthening support for science and science education – which I and my colleagues are eager to help the university resolve. I see collective bargaining rights to be a key pathway for helping my university address these and other challenges.

In a nutshell, I urge you to support HB 3170 precisely because of how much I love my job, how much I love being at OSU, and for the opportunity it presents to better my communication with my administration. I wish for the option of joining a union to help find solutions to the issues that affect my personal and professional life.

Sincerely,
Mark Novak