



SB 5542 Oregon Water Resources Department Budget

Testimony of WaterWatch of Oregon Submitted to the Joint Ways and Means Sub-Committee on Natural Resources

April 13, 2017

Founded in 1985, WaterWatch is a non-profit river conservation group dedicated to the protection and restoration of natural flows in Oregon's rivers. We work to ensure that enough water is protected in Oregon's rivers to sustain fish, wildlife, recreation and other public uses of Oregon's rivers, lakes and streams. We also work for balanced water laws and policies. WaterWatch has members across Oregon who care deeply about our rivers, their inhabitants and the effects of water laws and policies on these resources.

WaterWatch fully supports funding of the Oregon Water Resources Department's base budget and Packages 101(groundwater studies) and 105 (field staff)—these packages are critical to the state's ability to manage water for farmers, cities and fish into the future.

We also support funding of Packages 100 (fee schedule), 102(dam safety), and 103 (well construction); the time limited position for Place Based Planning, as articulated in Package 104 of the ARB (not the GRB); and an add back of Package 108 as requested in the ARB (but not recommended in the GRB).

Basic management of Oregon's water resources is one of the state's most critical environmental and economic challenges. Eighteen out of nineteen of Oregon's river basins are already over appropriated from the late spring to the early fall. At the same time, population growth and climate change are increasing the pressure on Oregon's waterways and aquifers. It is critical that Oregon make an adequate investment in water management and science if the state is to move forward towards addressing this challenge.

The OWRD is understaffed for the essential jobs it must perform. And while there were some add backs in the 2015-2017 budget, the WRD continues to operate with reduced capacity in key areas and under the damaging effects of multiple budget cuts during the 1990s and earlier in this decade. At the same time, water management issues are becoming more complex.

To that end, WaterWatch supports the OWRD's base budget request and also GRB requested funds above that for additional Packages that will further the water management services of the OWRD including, in particular, critical science, field and data staff/work.

OWRD Package 101---Understanding Our Water Resources: Basin Study Team: WaterWatch strongly supports the GRB's recommended 1.8 million dollars for basin studies. Conducting groundwater investigations is a priority recommended action in the state's 2012 Integrated Water Resources Strategy. The importance of, and need for, these groundwater studies was recently highlighted in the Oregonian's series "Draining Oregon".

The state has nineteen river basins, but to date, only three WRD/USGS groundwater investigations have been completed (Deschutes, Upper Klamath and Willamette). Another is currently underway in the Malheur Basin (Harney County). As more and more people turn to groundwater to meet new demands, these groundwater investigations provide invaluable information that is critical to sound management and sustainable uses of our state's water resources. Without these studies we are likely to see problems such as those faced in the Umatilla basin multiply over time.

OWRD Package 105—Enhanced Water Management in the Field: Water masters provide critical field presence needed for effective water management statewide. We cannot stress enough the importance of these positions to both water right holders and the protection of the broader public interest. However, despite increasing conflicts over water, complex water management agreements/laws and an ever increasing load of water rights to manage (over 89,000 water rights statewide), the state's watermaster pool has dropped over the years. The Integrated Water Resources Strategy identifies the need to rebuild field capacity (Action #10). Investing in these positions should be a top priority for this state. Additionally, Package 105 bolsters the hydrotech team. Data collected by hydrologic technicians is critical to management of Oregon's water resources to protect instream and out-of-stream water rights, determine water availability, forecast floods and other management functions. To that end, WaterWatch urges the Committee to fully fund Package 105.

OWRD Packages 100 (fee schedule), 103 (dam safety), 102 (well construction): WaterWatch also supports these packages which focus on maintaining current services and public safety. We are also fully support HB 2295 and HB 2296-A which relate to these Packages.

OWRD Package 104—Time Limited Place Based Planning: The WRD has embarked upon four pilot place based planning efforts in the Malheur, Mid Coast, Grande Ronde and John Day Basins. We support time limited funding for the Place Based Planning Coordinators to stay with the planning processes through completion. WRD oversight and involvement in these planning processes is critical. However, as these are pilot projects we would not support expanding this package to support further place based planning efforts in other basins. The state should wait to assess the pilots before moving forward with existing funding beyond what is needed to complete the existing four which are underway. We support as articulated in the ARB. We do not believe this position should be expanded to also evaluate and administer feasibility grants as proposed in the GRB.

OWRD Package 108—REQUESTED ADD BACK---Key Water Resources Data: Data collection and coordination is critical for effective water management. This package directly affects important water management functions including water right reporting, groundwater management and water right regulation. This package is also very important to making data

accessible to water users and the public at large. It also reestablishes the WRD's engagement the Cooperative Water Program with USGS. We urge the Committee to add back this important package as requested in the ARB but not included in the GRB.

II. OWRD 10% reduction options:

Oppose: As a general matter, the OWRD reduction options put many important science/data programs at the top of the cut list (i.e. observation wells, groundwater studies, gauging stations) while putting programs for which there is cost reimbursement authority and/or other potential means of funding near the bottom of the list (i.e. water rights/certificates/extensions). While this might save existing staff in the short run, in the long run it will short change critical data needed for the management of our water resources for all Oregonians into the future.

Support: We strongly support the GRB's proposed cut of general funds for feasibility studies—given the limited General Fund monies that that OWRD receives, we feel strongly that general funds should be targeted at OWRD Packages that provide benefits to all Oregonian's, not feasibility studies for private projects that may or may not provide any public benefits.

III. OWRD 15% reduction options: It is our understanding that the OWRD's one existing water measurement/reporting position is on the 15% cut list. Water measurement and reporting is the cornerstone of effective water management and it is critical that this position be maintained. This position has been cut in the past and the WRD has found that compliance with statutory requirements to report water use falls greatly when this position is unfilled. We would urge the Committee to retain this position.

Conclusion: In making the final decision as to what programs will be funded, we respectfully request that the Committee fund the OWRD base budget and then prioritize key water management, science, field service packages that will help serve the broader public interest in protecting and managing Oregon's Water Resources.

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