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Testimony in Support of SB 1550-A: Commercial Fish Tracking

House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources

Submitted by: Gway Kirchner, Marine Fisheries Project Director, The Nature Conservancy

Dear Chair Clem, Vice-Chairs McLain and Sprenger, and members of the committee:

My name is Gway Kirchner and I am the Marine Fisheries Project Director for The Nature Conservancy (the Conservancy). Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of SB 1550-A, Commercial Fish Tracking. We appreciate Rep. Brock Smith's sponsorship of this bill and his ongoing support for Oregon's fisheries and critical marine issues.

The Nature Conservancy is a global, science-based and non-partisan conservation organization. Our mission is to protect the lands and waters on which all life depends. The organization was incorporated in Oregon in 1961, and today we have over 50,000 supporters statewide with members in every county in Oregon. Our staff, based in communities across the state, work collaboratively with tribes, government agencies, elected officials, private landowners, businesses, and natural resource stakeholders to develop innovative solutions to the major challenges facing people and nature.

As you know, Oregon's marine fisheries constitute a significant part of rural coastal Oregon's economy. In 2015, the Conservancy began exploring programs that could improve the health and sustainability of fisheries in Oregon through a substantial outreach and planning process. We had conversations with approximately 100 Oregonians that are passionate about fisheries (sport and commercial fishermen, processors, fish buyers, port commissioners, gear manufacturers and distributors, and others) and developed over 380 project ideas that would improve state and federally managed fisheries. Based on those ideas, we have begun to form partnerships and projects that can boost Oregon's vital marine habitats and improve the fishery stocks Oregonians rely upon.

As part of our work on marine fisheries in Oregon, I want to express our support for SB 1550-A. We see this bill as a positive step forward in developing full traceability for Oregon's fish harvests.

Seafood traceability is an important tool needed to ensure a strong future for Oregon's marine fisheries. Consumers are becoming more aware of the source of their seafood. They want assurance that the industry they are supporting is sustainable and of the highest quality. They want to connect with the story of how their fish was caught and by whom. They also want to be sure their fish is safe to eat. This has become especially important in the last few years as Domoic Acid has impacted the Dungeness crab fishery.

To accomplish these goals and help Oregon seafood meet the highest standards of sustainability and quality, managers, the seafood industry, marketers, and consumers need to be able to track fish harvest from the vessel to the plate. Oregon does not currently have a system in place that provides traceability through the entire chain of custody for seafood to the consumer. While we recognize the complexity of the issue, this is a frontier that Oregon will need to consider in the future to meet those high standards.

In the meantime, we see SB 1550-A as an important first step. Different agencies have authority over different parts of the supply chain. These agencies need the ability to share information to ensure seafood safety for public health. This bill will allow the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Oregon Department of Agriculture to share information to provide market chain tracking, where data exists. We also support the application of the bill to all fish species. This is insightful, reducing the need to return to the legislature when future needs arise.

Lastly, while electronic record keeping is partially addressed and allowed for by this bill, the Conservancy believes that additional tools exist – such as electronic logbooks and electronic fish tickets – that, if implemented for all commercial fisheries in Oregon, could provide close to real-time information. This type of timely information would be valuable to address human health needs, like domoic acid contamination; provide improvements to fishery management and monitoring; and increase the potential for Oregon to fully trace its seafood in ways that can meet consumer demands. We are interested in working with partners in a collaborative manner to develop these tools and associated policies.

In closing, we support the passage of SB 1550-A, and urge you to vote yes on it.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.