



May 28, 2020

House Committee on Natural Resources
Brad Witt, Chair

Re: Impact of COVID-19 on Trout Unlimited Operations in Oregon

Dear Chair Witt and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony regarding the impact of COVID-19 on Trout Unlimited's operations in Oregon. My name is Chandra Ferrari and I represent Trout Unlimited (TU), a non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation of cold-water fishes, such as trout and salmon, and their habitats. Trout Unlimited has more than 300,000 members and supporters nationwide including over 3,000 in Oregon.

COVID-19 has certainly presented some challenges to TU's operations but in the short-term we have been able to manage the disruption relatively well. The majority of TU's staff is located in rural areas throughout Oregon (including the North Coast, Northeast, Central Oregon and Southern Oregon). In those areas, our staff typically engage in restoration and/or modernization projects in cooperation with landowners and federal and state partners. The majority of our ongoing on-the-ground projects have been able to proceed consistent with the COVID-19 safety guidelines with only a few encountering delays. This is due to the fact that they are typically occurring outdoors, in remote areas and certain tasks, such as monitoring, can be conducted by one field staff person. However, there are some immediate (and longer-term) challenges that we are confronting given COVID-19.

In the shorter-term, moving forward projects that do not as easily comply with safety guidelines is difficult. For instance, volunteer-led restoration efforts (such as Youth Corps and Veterans groups that engage in large-scale riparian planting) typically involve larger crews that work in close proximity to one another. Along with other partners, we are currently trying to assess whether and how to move such projects forward in a safe manner including ensuring we can secure sufficient protective equipment. Inevitably, required changes to such projects will likely increase the cost and timeline for implementation. Another short-term challenge is that we have had difficulty securing regulatory authorizations from state agencies given that the COVID-19 restrictions have hindered typical public comment processes. These authorizations are necessary to move our projects forward. TU strongly supports robust public comment opportunities. However, given the potential for COVID-19 restrictions to be in place for a long timeframe, we think it is important to consider how best to provide public comment opportunities in a manner that allows regulatory processes to proceed. Finally, we have had to reconsider certain opportunities given the shift in the funding landscape. Some state agencies are sweeping back previously allocated grant funds. Fortunately, OWEB has said it will honor all grants that are already approved which TU greatly appreciates. Additionally, the financial and logistical situation of many of our private partners has changed which has led to uncertainty for some of our projects.

Looking ahead, we are deeply concerned about significant cuts to natural resource agency budgets. In particular, we are concerned about cuts to the grant-funding capacity of OWEB and other natural resource agencies. TU projects almost always involve leveraging private funds and/or federal funds with a state

match. However, OWEB has currently suspended its grant-making and it is unclear what capacity it will have moving forward. If state grant funds are reduced, it will likely reduce the amount of federal and private dollars invested in the state since less match funding support would be available. The types of TU projects that OWEB (and other state agencies) fund are truly multi-benefit projects that maximize use of funds, increase the resiliency of natural landscapes and built infrastructure, increase food security and produce jobs in rural communities.

One quick example is the Salmon SuperHwy project. This is a collaboration between Trout Unlimited, state and federal partners and local partners such as the Tillamook County Creamery Association. The Salmon SuperHwy project is the single biggest combined fish conservation/economic development partnership going on the Oregon Coast. Over a five-year period, the effort has reconnected over 80 miles of habitat in the Tillamook/Nestucca watershed while creating 129 jobs and upgrading Tillamook County's transportation infrastructure to accommodate increased flows and reduce flooding and risk of road failure which benefits the local dairy, agriculture, and forest products industries. This collaboration has secured a 3-year award for federal funding. However, to access the funds, a state match must be secured. At this time, it is not clear that we will be able to secure state funding for this project.

TU understands that there are significant budget shortfalls that must be managed. However, we recommend protecting the grant-funding capacity of natural resource agencies to the extent feasible. In times of shortage, it is particularly important that we are able to leverage available funding to the maximum extent possible toward projects that support state priorities such as building ecological and infrastructure resiliency, increasing food security and creating jobs. Additionally, TU is working with partners to identify mechanisms to access federal funds in the event of state funding limitations. Possibilities include a reduction of state match requirements or more flexible requirements for what constitutes a match. It would be beneficial if the State would also support such policies.

TU appreciates the efforts of the Committee to seek input on this topic from a variety of stakeholders and is happy to engage in any further discussions.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify,



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Attachment: Salmon SuperHwy 2019 Annual Report