

Ways and Means Natural Resources Subcommittee

March 13, 2019

HB 5510 – Department of Fish and Wildlife

Testimony of Bruce Taylor, Intermountain West Joint Venture

My name is Bruce Taylor. I work with the Intermountain West Joint Venture, a regional bird habitat conservation partnership. I've been involved with the state's sage grouse conservation partnership, SageCon, since its inception and serve as the conservation organization representative on the SageCon Coordinating Council.

I am not able to appear before the subcommittee today but do want to register my support for SageCon partners' request for an addition of \$200,000 to the Governor's Recommended Budget for the Department of Fish and Wildlife to create an additional position to support the state's sage grouse Local Implementation Teams.

This is third of three requests our SageCon partners – including the Association of Oregon Counties, Cattlemen's Association, Farm Bureau, Oregon Business Council, The Nature Conservancy, Portland Audubon, Oregon Natural Desert Association, Oregon Hunters Association, Oregon Association of Conservation Districts, and Willamette Partnership – have submitted as part of the 2019-21 budget process. It compliments items addressed earlier this year in testimony on budgets for the Department of Land Conservation and Development (\$500,000 for SageCon coordination) and the Department of Forestry (\$450,000 for Rangeland Fire Protection Associations). Together with other funding included in agencies' base budgets, these represent the fulfillment of a suite of commitments Oregon made as part of its 2015 state sage grouse action plan.

Oregon's sage grouse action plan, and the legislature's support for a robust package of funding for implementation, was a key factor in the 2015 federal decision not to list sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act.

Although Oregon has been doing well in implementing its plan, sage grouse will be up for a five-year ESA review in little more than a year. The state's continued commitment to its plan, and the funding needed to support it, will again be a major factor.

Unfortunately, not all of the western states have been as effective in their conservation efforts as Oregon, and the impending rollback of sage grouse protections on federal lands in other states is likely to further undermine the legal basis for a no-listing determination in 2020. Although the current administration may not be inclined to pursue a listing in any case, the ultimate review will almost certainly occur in the courts.

So to reduce the risks of an ESA listing, and insulate Oregon against the negative impacts if a listing does ultimately occur, it's imperative to maintain our commitment to a strong conservation program.

The Local Implementation Team support position we are requesting funding for is one of three needed to reinvigorate and advance the work of the local stakeholder groups envisioned as the

foundation for implementation of the state's sage grouse action plan. LITs are intended to provide a vehicle to align efforts among federal, state, local and private partners and develop long-term plans and priorities to guide investment in on-the-ground conservation actions. Combined investment by these partners has exceeded \$60 million since 2015.

LITs were originally established for the four BLM districts (Prineville, Lakeview, Burns, Vale), plus the Baker area. Despite their central role in the state's plan, most of these groups have been moribund since 2012, due largely to ODFW's lack of staff capacity to support them.

SageCon partners have stepped in to help fill this gap with one new position (for the Baker LIT) to be funded starting in 2019 by the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, and another position initiated by my organization, the Intermountain West Joint Venture, under an agreement with the federal Bureau of Land Management and matching funds provided by ODFW. That position was recently advertised and should be filled later this spring.

The SageCon partners' funding request would allow ODFW to staff the remaining two LITs (Burns and Lakeview). The coordinator would re-engage local stakeholders, organize and manage regular meetings, conduct outreach to the local community, and work with the LITs to develop long-term implementation plans to reduce threats to sage grouse.

With partners spending \$15 million a year or more on sage grouse conservation here in Oregon, an additional investment \$100,000 a year to ensure that all five Local Implementation Teams can be effective in aligning and coordinating on-the-ground conservation actions by state and federal agencies, landowners and other private partners is just good business practice. This will almost certainly be one of the more important factors to be addressed in next year's federal review of Oregon's implementation of its sage grouse action plan.

We hope you and your colleagues on the Ways and Means Committee will join us in supporting an addition of \$200,000 to ODFW's budget for Local Implementation Team support.

2019-21 Funding Needs

For Sage Grouse, Fire Protection, and Rangeland Health

AN INTEGRATED INVESTMENT STRATEGY FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES IN EASTERN OREGON

Oregon narrowly averted a collision with the Endangered Species Act in 2015 when the federal government opted not to list sage grouse as a threatened species.

The state earned the reprieve from new federal regulations with a comprehensive plan to reverse the bird's decline and a robust package of initial funding approved by the 2015 Legislature.

But the impact of Oregon's conservation investments goes well beyond sage grouse.

The biggest threats to sage grouse – increasingly large wildfires and invasion of rangelands by juniper and non-native annual grasses – also pose threats to the livestock industry and rural communities. Cattle ranchers have a saying these days: “What’s good for the bird is good for the herd,” and by extension, the social and economic health of communities across a wide swath of rural Oregon.

With the ESA status of sage grouse up for federal review again in 2020, Oregon's conservation commitments will face renewed scrutiny.

Funding for the state's Sage Grouse Action Plan will be an important factor in evaluation of the Oregon's conservation efforts. The 2019 Legislature's budget decisions could have profound implications for the economy and ecological health of southeastern Oregon.



How the State's Action Plan is Funded

State, federal, and private partners have all provided funding for implementation of the state's sage grouse action plan, including millions of dollars for on-the-ground work to improve habitat for sage grouse and substantial federal contributions to the costs of the SageCon partnership.

Although the state's funding for implementation of the sage grouse plan is spread across more than a half-dozen agency budgets, a 2015 executive order requires development of a coordinated package of spending requests. Because issues around sage grouse and rangeland health are often deeply inter-related and span multiple jurisdictions, these budget requests need to be viewed as an investment package, rather than a menu of spending options.

Association of Oregon Counties
Audubon Society of Portland
Intermountain West Joint Venture
Oregon Association of Conservation Districts
Oregon Business Council
Oregon Cattlemen's Association
Oregon Farm Bureau
Oregon Hunters Association
Oregon Natural Desert Association
The Nature Conservancy
Willamette Partnership
... on behalf of

SageCon



Oregon's sage grouse conservation partnership

SAGECON FUNDING PRIORITIES

Top priorities for additional General Fund support in the 2019-21 biennium include:



DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY

Rangeland fire protection associations

RFPA firefighter training and equipment (including personal protection equipment, radios); equipment maintenance; state match (\$50,000) to leverage federal funds for State-Federal-RFPA liaison position.

Volunteers organized by local RFPAs provide the first line of defense against wildfires in many areas. Fires, and the weeds that invade rangelands after a fire, are the two biggest threats to sage grouse and rangeland health. Improved equipment, training and coordination with BLM have dramatically improved initial response to fires in recent years.

DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

Sage grouse local implementation teams

Coordinator position (1 FTE) for Burns/Lakeview LITs.

Local Implementation Teams (LITs) are the primary vehicle for implementing the Oregon Sage Grouse Action Plan at the local level. Most of these groups have been moribund since 2012, primarily due to lack of ODFW field-based capacity for coordination and facilitation. SageCon partners have secured funding to support coordinators for the Baker, Prineville and Vale LITs in 2019; an additional position is needed for the Burns and Lakeview groups.



DEPARTMENT OF LAND CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

SageCon facilitation and support

(In Governor's Recommended Budget)

State's share of costs for Oregon Consensus and Oregon Solutions programs' support for collaborative sage grouse conservation through the SageCon Partnership.

Oregon and its federal partners share the costs of supporting the SageCon Partnership, a national model for successful collaboration. Funding includes coordination, technical support, and facilitation for SageCon Coordinating Council, Staff Implementation Team, All-County / SWCD CCAA Coordinating Committee. Effective coordination among SageCon's large and diverse set of stakeholders allows partners to align their efforts for maximum efficiency and effectiveness.