



Testimony before the House Committee on Natural Resources
April 4, 2019

John J. Audley
Rural Economic Initiative, Oregon Business Council

Regarding: HB 3132

My name is John Audley, and I serve as the director of the Oregon Business Council's Rural Economic Initiative. Begun in 2015 as an outgrowth of the annual Oregon Business Plan, we partner with rural economic and political leaders to create prosperous and resilient business activity through-out the state. One of our longstanding areas of interest is water quality and management. Our first report on Oregon's water challenges was published in 2002, and ever since we've regularly reported on Oregon's water challenges.¹ Prompted by the Umatilla county's efforts to harvest water from the Columbia River during high flow seasons to stimulate economic activity and recharge its aquifer, we participated in water storage policy development that led to SB 839.² In 2017-2018, we sponsored an economic analysis of water values in Harney County, and a similar study of the North Santiam River.³

On behalf of the Oregon Business Council, I wish to express our support for HB 3132, a bill to authorize the creation of a voluntary stream restoration and habitat improvement projects program in southeastern Oregon through the construction of environmental restoration weirs.

In 2018, Martin, Doyle, director of the Water Policy Program at the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions at Duke University, and head of the annual Aspen Institutes Aspen-Nicholas Water Forum, wrote this about a rock-weir project at Silvies Valley Ranch in eastern Oregon:

. . . building a series of rock weirs across the gullies, spacing them along the valley just often enough to form artificial beaver ponds and meadows . . . has worked . . . Fish are now present in the restored Flat Creek, but the grass is the most impressive. . . the rock

¹ Use this link to see the Leadership Summit's 2018 presentation on water:

<https://vimeo.com/video/VMlmgT7S4nY/bobby%20cochran:%20can%20we%20meet%20investment%20demand%20for%20water%20resources?>

² For more information, see the Northeast Oregon Water Association at <https://www.northeastoregonwater.org>.

³ To view these reports, go to the Harney County Watershed Council's website: <http://hcwatershedcouncil.com>.

And the North Santiam Watershed Council's website: <http://northsantiam.org>. For information on our involvement in north central Oregon, see the Northeast Oregon Water Association's website <https://www.northeastoregonwater.org/projects>.

weirs slow down the flow enough to saturate the soils, and the groundwater is backed up so that it flows very slowly, just beneath the surface of the silty floodplain soil . . .⁴

Ongoing studies support Professor Doyle's observation. Preliminary studies by the Oregon Water Resources Department taken from Harney County Basin wells show that, while groundwater levels in the Basin's south are declining, some shallow wells in the northern Basin are increasing.⁵ In our opinion, the change in groundwater levels is directly attributed to the restoration work underway on Silvies Valley Ranch.

Harney County and three other basins; Mid-Coast Region, Lower John Day Sub-Basin, and Upper Grand-Ronde Sub-Basin, are part of a pilot project authorized by the legislature to encourage 'place-based water resource planning' to encourage local solutions to meet the State's water management priorities.⁶ We support efforts like these because they encourage local water users to work together to find solutions that meet Oregon's water management challenges, often at less expense, and always with greater public buy-in for the often-times difficult decisions regarding water use that grow out of these efforts.

In summary, HB3132 creates an important tool for landowners in southeastern Oregon to try to restore the historical function of rivers and streams by re-creating 'beaver dams' – natural structures that slow water flow, encourage recharge, and help to restore natural system health. The bill streamlines the regulatory process and sets a cap on the amount of money a landowner can spend securing permits, while requiring each project to document its effect on natural systems for ten years. Strict sideboards are designed to limit voluntary project development only to the construction of weirs, and limits these projects to waters that do not flow to the Pacific Ocean.

The Oregon Business Council believes that HB3132 will make an important contribution to rural water quality and management and should be adopted.

⁴ Martin Doyle. 2018. *The Source: How Rivers Made America and American Remade its Rivers*: New York: W.W. Norton & Company. Pages 301-302.

⁵ See information about the work of the Watershed Council and associated reports, at <http://hcwatershedcouncil.com/about-hcwc/>.

⁶ See the Oregon Water Resources Department at <https://www.oregon.gov/OWRD/programs/Planning/PlaceBasedPlanning/Pages/default.aspx>