



COQUILLE INDIAN TRIBE

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Oregon House of Representatives
Agriculture, Land Use & Water Committee
Testimony by Brenda Meade, Coquille Indian Tribe

Jan. 12, 2022

Dai s'la! (Greetings, friends!)

Thank you, Chair Helm, for the opportunity to speak this afternoon with the Agriculture, Land Use and Water Committee. My name is Brenda Meade, and I am chair of the Coquille Indian Tribe, headquartered in Southwestern Oregon.

I have a script to follow today, but I can't promise not to wander and just speak from my heart. This committee and its work are near and dear to me and our tribal members. Our Chief Donald Ivy, who passed on recently, constantly reminded us of the importance of clean air and clean water. I hope my words today honor his spirit and the value that he placed on these critical resources.

As sovereign nations, Oregon's nine federally recognized tribes enjoy a unique relationship with our state. Oregon tribes have a recognized government-to-government relationship that is long-tested, respected and bound in legislation. It is a relationship of consultation, collaboration and partnership. For many tribes across America, this kind of relationship with state government is only a dream.

Our cooperative relationship serves both Oregon and its tribes. Each Oregon tribe has a special understanding and historic knowledge of managing important resources, especially our lands and waters.

My tribe's traditional lands border the Pacific Ocean and some of the most beautiful watersheds in the world. Since time immemorial, we have managed our lands and waters to ensure that they are healthy for all plants, fish and animals, including people. Our management is guided by the idea that resources are not mere commodities. They are instead a legacy that we pass down.

Sometimes this means that we must burn a little bit of the land to ensure that a forest grows back and remains healthy. When we use our resources, our elders counsel us to "take only what we need and leave some for the others."

Clean and abundant water is the lifeblood of my tribe's culture. From inland streams to the mouth of the river, the water houses our salmon cousins, provides us transportation, sustains our people, supports our cultural practices and gives life to every creature.

Sadly, our water situation is not perfect – and in some cases it's extremely concerning. For example:

Our Coquille River is in a dire condition. Pollution has gone unchecked for years. At least one sewage treatment plant is not meeting guidelines for effluent. Water temperatures have risen for many reasons. It is a perfect storm.

These factors, combined with a huge influx of invasive non-native species, have devastated our Coquille River fall Chinook salmon run. In 2010 – barely a decade ago -- more than 30,000 adult wild fish returned to spawn in the river. This return plummeted to fewer than 300 in 2019. That's a 99 percent decline in just 10 years. Extinction is a true possibility.

Our tribe has declared a state of emergency for the river. We are committed to addressing this crisis in cooperation with the state, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and a coalition of engaged community partners. Only together do we have a chance to save this culturally and traditionally invaluable resource.

Our recent experience with the Coquille River has demonstrated that co-management of our lands, water and wildlife resources gives us the best chance to conserve and preserve what makes Oregon so special. This state and her people will be best-served by an Oregon Water Plan that emphasizes and promotes tribal co-management.

Regarding the Oregon 100-year Water Plan –

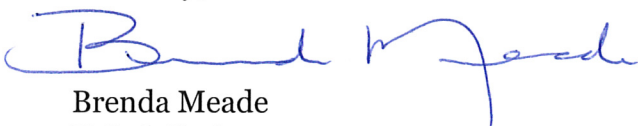
The nine tribes in Oregon do not always agree on everything. Getting all nine of us to sign on to anything is a rare event. But we are unanimous in saying that our involvement in this planning effort is vital.

The tribes have asked the state to form a Tribal-Agency Water Vision Task Force, involving all nine tribes and all nine relevant agencies. This group would help Oregon tribes understand the work of our state agencies, while helping the agencies understand the water interests and issues that are important to Oregon tribes.

The tribes are stepping up. We are looking for ways to be partners in this project now, so that later we can support the decisions and efforts that have to be made for our homelands.

Thank you again for this opportunity to share.

Sincerely,



Brenda Meade
Tribal Chair