

Date: June 1, 2022

To: House Committee on Environment and Natural Resources  
Representative Pam Marsh, Chair  
Representative Zach Hudson, Vice-Chair  
Representative David Brock Smith, Vice-Chair  
Committee Members

From: Susan Watkins & Arnie Hollander  
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RE: Support for Funding Oregon's Wildlife Habitat Conservation and Management Program to Protect and Enhance Oregon's White Oak Communities

As small landowners deeply invested in protecting our natural heritage and native species, we urge you to fully fund the Department of Fish and Wildlife's Wildlife Habitat Conservation and Management Program (WHCMP).

(Note: Susan is a Master Woodland Manager trained by forestry experts from Oregon State University; she served two terms on the board of Forestry's Committee for Family Forestlands, including a year as Acting Chair, and is a member of the Board of the Yamhill County Small Woodlands Association.)

We acquired our 55-acre property, located just outside McMinnville in Yamhill County, in 1992 after the previous owner had cut and chipped 90% of the white oak woodland that had covered it for well over a century.

*Photo #1 was taken just after we purchased our property.*

Like many landowners, we were looking for an income stream when we purchased the property, and so we planted 16,000 Christmas trees and 10,000 Douglas-fir forest trees on the hillsides that had been stripped of their native oak. To help make our Christmas tree and timber operations viable, we obtained an agricultural deferral on the Christmas tree acres and a forest deferral on the forested acres. These deferrals reduced our tax bill while assuring Yamhill County that we would properly maintain our forest and Christmas trees.

*Photo #2 shows young Christmas trees planted in the meadow across from our house in 2005. This is a second rotation.*

By the time the Great Recession ended our Christmas tree business, we had fallen in love with the mature white oak that remained on our property. We had grown to much appreciate the aesthetic, environmental, and wildlife benefits of the remaining oak trees. During the years we worked our land, we also learned about the loss of wildlife habitat, birds, deer and elk, and pollinators, that accompanied the dramatic reduction of oak woodlands and meadows in the Willamette Valley. After visiting oak preservation projects in our area, we decided to turn about three of our by then former Christmas tree acres into an oak savannah and to convert another six acres of mixed fir and oak into oak woodlands -- almost 20% of our land.

*Photo #3 is illustrative of the work we did to protect the oak in these woodland areas, removing competing fir, cherry, and maple, as well as a carpet of non-native grasses and weeds.*

To our delight, when we removed the last Christmas trees from the meadow, we found over a hundred little oaks hidden in their skirts; to our dismay, non-native weeds quickly overran the area. To recreate native oak habitat, we had to remove these non-natives and buy and sow large quantities of seed for native grasses, forbs, and wildflowers. This "preparatory" work typically takes two years, to ensure that most weeds are removed. Follow-up maintenance goes on forever.

*Photo #4 shows the meadow across from our house as it looks today: a welcoming wildlife habitat dotted with lupine, mallow, native grass, and oak.*

Restoring oak woodland to conditions that existed in the Willamette Valley for centuries has been both environmentally and culturally rewarding. Development and conversion to row crops, orchards, vineyards, and, yes, to fir forests have reduced iconic Oregon white oak woodlands and savannahs to less than 10% of their extensive historical range. Without more efforts like ours, the Valley stands to lose its connections to its ecological and tribal cultural past.

But restoration projects like ours are costly in both dollars and time. Restoration is not a "one and done" deal; we must plant and weed every year. In the early years of our project, we were fortunate to qualify for cost sharing through the federal NRCS and local programs and to have savings available to fund expenses that incentive payments didn't cover. But the expenses don't end just because the cost-share contract wraps up. Not only are we continuing to incur costs for seed and supplies and labor, we also have

another on-going price to pay: In converting our Christmas tree and forest acres to native habitat, we lost our forest and agricultural deferrals on those acres, increasing our annual tax bill.

Our work benefits us, of course, as we enjoy the presence of diverse wildlife. But there is also a public benefit to restoring these lands for which we receive no economic return. The WHCMP recognizes that benefit in the same way that agricultural and forest deferrals recognize the benefits to the community that trees and crops provide.

Yamhill County voted in early 2020 to rejoin the WHCMP, and we have already submitted our paper work. Fully funding the WHCMP would help offset the cost of maintaining the habitat we have worked so hard to recreate and, equally important, would provide an incentive for other landowners to join us in supporting this unique Oregon habitat.

We urge you to approve this funding. Thank you.