

To: House Interim Committee On Environment and Natural Resources

From: Jason Faucera

Date: 6/1/2022

RE: Wildlife Habitat Conservation and Management Program

Madam Chair, Members of the Committee,

Wildlife Habitat Conservation and Management Program (WHCMP) and other incentive programs provide a critical pathway to conserve and restore critical habitats on private lands in Oregon as outlined on the Oregon Conservation Strategy by allowing landowners to receive tax incentives for managing their land for wildlife. However, WHCMP is currently unavailable in parts of the state because of program administrative burdens and capacity constraints at Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), who administers the program.

Significant portions of remaining critical habitats, such as Oregon white oak woodland and prairie habitats, reside on private lands. Once lost, it can take centuries for oak habitats to reach current functioning levels. These habitats provide significant economic, social, and environmental benefits to Oregon communities. They are a large part of the scenic and natural abundance that makes Oregon unique.

Landowners are willing to protect and restore these habitats, but there are limited resources to do so. Incentives can help lessen the financial burden of managing for these habitats that in most cases offer little or no financial return for the landowner.

Landowners that want to transition to wildlife management from forestry or agricultural management are at risk of losing tax deferral status and being assessed back taxes. There is a disincentive to managing for some habitats, like oak woodland and prairie, in that they are not compatible with existing deferral programs. WHCMP is a solution that allows these projects to happen without penalizing landowners for transitioning to wildlife management.

Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) and Oregon Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) have been collaborating since 2017 to solve the issue of capacity in an effort to make the program available to new enrollees. SWCDs have provided field staff resources to directly assist landowners in developing the required conservation plans for enrollment, as well as providing technical help during plan implementation. We've also developed a pilot program with ODFW to conduct the required monitoring to maintain deferrals. ODFW for their part has continued to work to find ways to get the program up and running again. **These programs are critical to SWCD and other conservation organizations' success in restoring and protecting critical habitats.**

Ultimately, programs like the WHCMP are critical to Oregon Conservation Strategy habitats on private lands, and without them, we will continue to lose ground to development, and conversion to uses incompatible with wildlife. Once converted, some habitats like oak habitats won't be seen again on those properties in our lifetimes.

It is my hope that bringing this issue to the committee will help illustrate the importance of WHCMP and other tools for habitat protection so that when solutions are presented for consideration, the impact of these programs for positive outcomes are clear. We need these programs to be able to protect the natural character of Oregon and the communities that depend on them.

Sincerely,

Jason Faucera

Land Management Program Manager

Clackamas Soil and Water Conservation District